



The Hidden Cost of


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Educators, I have a request. When you are finally able to return to your classroom this fall—or whenever it’s possible—keep a tally of every time learning is disrupted by interruptions coming from outside your class. Keep note: How often do you have to pause instruction because of intercom announcements, calls to the classroom phone, and teachers, administrators and staff knocking at your door? Five, ten—even 20 times a day?

As I write, we are experiencing one of the longest disruptions to schooling in generations. We cannot

afford to interrupt learning, even briefly, when schools are back in session.

As an education professor and former teacher, I’ve spent a lot of time in K–12 classrooms. My experience teaching and observing classes has left me bewildered by the barrage of external interruptions to classroom learning I’ve witnessed in some schools. I recognize the value of an open-door culture where administrators observe teachers frequently. And yes, we need to interrupt classes to have fire drills from time to time—but what about all the other interruptions? To answer this question, I decided to study external interruptions to better understand how common they are, why they occur, and the consequences they

A photograph of a classroom with a green chalkboard. Several students' hands are raised in the air, indicating they want to speak or ask a question. The focus is on the hands and the chalkboard, with the rest of the classroom slightly blurred.

Even small interruptions erode instructional time more than you think, but schools can take action to reduce them.

Classroom Interruptions

have for teachers and students. I wanted to know: Are such interruptions a necessary, infrequent annoyance, or a widespread, detrimental feature of the school learning environment?

What Our Research Revealed

In 2017, working in partnership with the Providence Public School District in Rhode Island, my co-author Manuel Monti-Nussbaum and I sought to capture students', teachers', and administrators' perspectives about external interruptions on a districtwide survey. We also worked with a team of undergraduate research assistants to conduct more than 60 classroom observations in five

secondary schools in the Providence district and directly record the number of external interruptions.

We focused on interruptions that flowed into the classroom, rather than student behavior inside the classroom. These external interruptions were often caused by school staff or by tardy students entering class in a disruptive way. Together, our survey and observational data reveal the hidden costs of such external interruptions.

[Our study](#) (Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2020) revealed that external interruptions are a regular feature of the school day in Providence public schools. Taken all together, the classrooms we observed were interrupted about 15 times per day, with intrusions occurring

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throughout class periods and across the school day. The most common source of interruptions in middle and high schools was one that has received little attention in the research literature: students arriving to class late or returning to class in a disruptive way. Not every student who entered during the middle of class distracted their peers or interrupted instruction, but enough did to make this an obvious problem. Intercom announcements, calls to classroom phones, and “drive-bys” by other teachers, administrators, and school staff were also common distractions.

Even Small Interruptions Can Derail Learning

We found that in schools where interruptions were more frequent, teachers were more likely to report that interruptions were detrimental to learning. In schools that averaged at least 15 interruptions per day, according to teachers’ reports on our survey, more than 59 percent of teachers reported that interruptions at least somewhat interfered with instruction. And roughly half of all the interruptions in classes we observed resulted in a subsequent disruption to learning; generally, students

went off-task and a teacher had to refocus their attention before resuming the lesson.

Small interruptions and the disruptions they cause can add up to a considerable amount of lost learning time. Drawing on our detailed observation records, we estimate that approximately three and half minutes of instructional time is lost due to interruptions each hour of the school day. Teachers' estimates of time lost are even higher, at almost six and half minutes per hour. Scaling these estimates by 5.5 hours per day and 180 school days per year suggests that students lose between 10 to 20 days of instructional time over the course of the year. This is enough time to categorize every student in the district as truant or even chronically absent—all while they are in school.

Beyond lost instructional time, unnecessary intrusions undercut teachers' ability to maintain lesson momentum. These disruptions can upend lesson plans and require teachers to reteach large amounts of material. We saw how brief interruptions could snowball into prolonged distractions. A short intercom announcement about the honor roll led to a debate about which students had earned honors; a birthday wish by a visiting teacher led to a long debate among students about how old their teacher was. Evidence from psychology (Altmann & Trafton, 2004; Gillie & Broadbent, 1989) suggests that these disruptions have direct consequences for student learning; studies have found that even small interruptions negatively affect information recall and task performance.

It Doesn't Have to Be This Way

One encouraging finding from our study was that frequent interruptions aren't a *necessary*

feature of schooling. Interruptions occurred much less frequently in some schools than others, and schools have direct control over many of the most common types of interruptions. Some schools used daily assemblies and advisory periods as alternative ways to make announcements and deliver information to individual students. Administrators should consider cutting the cord of the school intercom system or only using it at a scheduled point in the day. Distracting hundreds of students to call one to the front office is educational malpractice.

Schools should also reduce classroom visits and calls to classroom phones by shifting all non-urgent communication with teachers to email or text messages. Establishing clear, schoolwide norms about when and for what purposes intercom announcements, phone calls, and classroom visits are acceptable could empower teachers to deflect these interruptions by quickly saying no to requests. Teachers might also designate a student to answer the classroom phone and place signs on their doors requesting that visitors leave a note rather than knock or pop in.

Limiting the interruptions caused by students who enter the classroom late is a thornier problem. For some school districts, student attendance is less of a concern, but for districts like Providence, it remains a major challenge. Although schools have less control over student attendance and punctuality than they do over other types of external interruptions, there are steps they can take to bolster attendance. Research suggests that more frequent communication with parents, partnering with community mentors, strengthening student-teacher relationships, and establishing regular

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classroom routines for late-arriving students can make a big difference (Gottfried & Hunt, 2019).

Several studies have found that sending personalized letters to parents updating them about their child's attendance records, emphasizing parental efficacy, and highlighting the negative incremental effects of missing school can increase attendance (Robinson et al., 2018; Rogers & Feller, 2018). Teachers' efforts to build strong relationships with their students can motivate students to attend class regularly and enter without disrupting instruction when they are late. Systems as simple as having a tray with all lesson materials available so late arrivals can easily gather materials or designating one responsible student to quietly explain to a late student what the class is doing can help latecomers more seamlessly engage with the lesson. In some schools, teachers' aides accompany tardy students to their classes and help them get oriented to the lesson.

Taking Action to Disrupt Interruptions

Ultimately, we can fix the problem of classroom interruptions—if we recognize it. External interruptions go unaddressed, in part, because principals substantially underestimate the frequency and negative effects of interruptions. In the Providence high schools we observed and surveyed, administrators estimated 58 percent fewer interruptions per day than actually occurred. Leaders should work with teachers to get a clearer picture of what's happening in classrooms and to reduce interruptions. Here are a couple of key steps to get started:

- Start an inquiry cycle at your school. Have

teachers track interruptions and compare them across classrooms and schools. Discuss this data with the school leadership team.

- After considering the data, decide as a school community what the norms around external interruptions should be. Which external interruptions are necessary, and which should be eliminated? Develop an organizational approach to reducing interruptions, tracking how well it works and adjusting accordingly.

Respecting Teachers' Time

Allowing external interruptions to go unchecked communicates an implicit disregard for the value of teachers' work and students' learning time. Now more than ever, we need to support teachers' efforts and protect instructional time. Limiting external interruptions is an actionable way to accomplish this, once we return to the classroom. [EL](#)

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