A three part series from Silicon Schools Fund and Relay Graduate School of Education exploring how schools are effectively implementing flex time in order to promote student agency and productive, independent learning

Part I - Can Flex Time Support Student Agency?
By Robert Schwartz, Brian Greenberg, and Caitrin Wright

My son started sixth grade this year and it was not the typical middle school transition. His new school uses the [Summit Learning Personalized Learning Platform (PLP)](#) so he spends about an hour a day at school working independently through playlists crafted by his teachers to learn core knowledge and about another half-hour at home. He spends the rest of the day at school applying that knowledge through projects. This is a big change for our entire family. As parents, we value the autonomy and the agency he is building, but we also worry about whether he is being held accountable for using that time as effectively as he could to learn all that he needs.

Interestingly, in my professional life, I work at Silicon Schools Fund and get to see schools all over the Bay Area wrestling with a very similar challenge - *how do you foster autonomy in students while still holding them accountable for ambitious learning targets?* Nowhere is this question more apparent than during "flex time" - a portion of the school day or week where students work mostly independently, usually utilizing an online platform or program. We are seeing a growing number of schools betting on flex time with significant instructional minutes devoted in the range from 15-90 minutes per day. They believe and we hope flex time is a great structure with lots of potential to unlock student learning and motivation. The approach to flex time is varied and most struggle to balance between how loose or tight to be in order to promote agency and still hold students accountable for learning. The same hopes and worries I have for my own son's education are front and center in these schools for their teachers, administrators, and parents.

The Goldilocks' Classroom Conundrum

In a *"Not Compliant Enough Classroom,"* student engagement is spiky or non-existent. There are moments of silence, but generally loud noise levels peaking at times to the point of distraction. The classroom vacillates between 30 and 80 percent of students seemingly engaged at any one time with other students freely roaming around the room and doing other off-task behaviors. About a quarter of the students are just cranking through their work, ignoring everything around them. When asked about their goal, most students do not have any response but say they should be "doing their work."

In a *"Too Compliant Classroom*," students are almost completely quiet for the entire period. Students seem to make adequate progress (as evidenced by trackers on the wall and in their binders) – 3 percent completion of the software a week to reach a year-end goal. But when asked what their goal is, students just intone, "3 percent progress this week" and have little idea as to why they are doing the work or how it connects with the rest of their schoolwork and learning. We believe this may be a good starting point for a flex time classroom and this type of environment can be valuable at times, but will not provide the autonomy for students to have ownership over their learning.

In a *"Just Right Classroom,"* there is a steady, low din of noise with students moving between working independently, consulting with other students, and conferencing with adults. There is a balance between online and offline activities and those activities appear to be reinforcing each other. When asked what their goal is, students say something like, "I want to master a specific concept, so I'm completing these tasks to do that" or "I am behind in US History so prioritizing those tasks."

This *"Just Right Classroom"* approaches the right balance of student ownership with learner accountability as evidenced by student focus, progress, and buy-in. How do *"Just Right Classrooms"* get it right? I wonder whether it is easier to start from the *"Too Compliant Classroom"* and gradually release teacher accountability to foster student agency, or to start from the *"Not Compliant Enough Classroom"* then work to foster responsibility and accountability? There is also a larger question as to how learning is measured in any of these classrooms that we are not yet ready to address.

The Challenge Ahead: When successfully implemented, we think there is real potential in using flex time to promote student agency so much so that we have begun to form hypotheses about what makes for a successful implementation. Hypotheses include:

- A set of systems, structures, protocols, tools, and/or trackers that help students and teachers monitor progress and guide decision-making. These include systems for goal-setting and tracking, earned autonomy, and appropriate pacing
- Students capture online learning through off-line tools they refer back to regularly
- The adults in the room are purposeful in their actions and show evidence of thoughtful planning of what they are doing
- Schools are clear on the set of instructional moves the adults should be utilizing during flex time (i.e. weekly goal-setting and monitoring conversations, targeted small-group instruction, whole-class monitoring and correction, et. al.)
- Positive student-adult, adult-adult, and student-student relationships have been intentionally fostered and serve as a key lever for a strong culture where students are engaged and carry a sense of urgency in their work

Additionally, we have a number of questions that we are also curious about:

- How does the use of physical space and room layout impact class culture and student productivity?
- Does the work in flex time need to be linked directly to work in other classes or can the independent online learning be more freestanding?
- What is the appropriate noise level to allow for collaboration and freedom but not negatively impacting learning?
- Should students be able to listen to music while working?
- When and how often is it ideal for teachers to employ whole-class disruptions to the independent learning time?

<u>Going to class on flex time:</u> We have launched a deep dive into what makes flex time effective and how schools can be better supported in implementation. As we better understand what successful implementation of flex time looks like, we hope to isolate specific practices and be able to share models for implementation. We are engaged in a series of classroom observations and interviews with teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and students to learn about protocols and processes that are working or are needed, better understand how classroom culture is set and reinforced, and uncover tools/trackers being used while collecting data on implementation and student learning.

This is the first in a three-part series on flex time. The second blog will focus on what we are learning from observing flex time classrooms in action. The third post will outline how schools can be most successful in implementing flex time that strikes that right balance of promoting student agency and maximizing student learning.

<u>Defining the models:</u> We've seen three main models of flex time emerge so far:

    Playlist-driven using Summit Learning or a similar content platform, students work mostly independently on their playlists while educators monitor progress, support engagement and help students set and monitor goals.

    Teacher-driven where teachers assign students to specific learning activities for defined periods of time in stations. Students work sometimes independently, sometimes in small groups, and sometimes with an adult throughout a typical period. This frees the educators up to work with students in small groups for more intensive instruction. Students have little agency or choice in their learning path or pace

    Student-driven learning labs where adults guide students to make intelligent choices around how they should use their time. Educators in this setting generally monitor progress and engagement through whole class and individual protocols

Part II - Structure Helps Promote Student Agency
By Robert Schwartz and Jeffrey Starr

At [Silicon Schools Fund](#) we invest in schools with new approaches to education. [We recently wrote](#) that many schools are starting to create flex time periods during the day, where students work independently, often online, while teachers perform high-leverage activities such as student mentoring and small-group instruction. For flex time to work well, schools have to accomplish a tricky balance between fostering autonomy in students while still holding them accountable for ambitious learning targets.

Together with [Relay Graduate School of Education](#), we observed eight examples of flex time in schools, utilizing a data collection tool and protocol. We interviewed teachers, administrators, and students. We entered with hypotheses about what makes flex time effective and several learnings emerged including:

1. Strong structures ultimately create more student autonomy. Classrooms that start tight and more teacher-driven, gradually can turn responsibility over to students while still ensuring that time is used effectively.
2. In the best classrooms, teachers are purposeful in their planning, students are clear on the norms, and expectations are continuously reinforced.
3. Data should be transparent to teachers and students and used effectively to set goals and make instructional decisions for and by students.

To better understand what these ideas looks like in practice, we highlight below three different examples of schools that are doing flex time well. Each of these schools exhibit the learnings above in different ways.

Summit Shasta

Upon first glance Personalized Learning Time (PLT) at [Summit Shasta](#) may appear simply a high-tech study hall. Twenty-six ninth graders sit two to three students per table, laptops open and notebooks or other kinds of graphic organizers out, mostly working independently on assignments of their own choosing from a playlist on the [Summit Learning Platform](#) or a related project. A quiet hum of collaboration permeates the classroom as some students turn to a neighbor for insights into a problem they have just encountered or to chat during a brief study break. Others appear deep into their own work, earbuds protecting them from noise and distractions. This simple appearance of a glorified study hall masks a complex set of expectations, training, and decisions amongst students and teachers with decisions about what students work on based on data and planning.

During PLT a Summit teacher engages in three specific types of activities -- classroom monitoring, student mentorship, and targeted small group instruction.

Classroom Monitoring: The teacher moves quickly around the room glancing over the shoulders of students for a visual check of engagement, quietly redirecting some students when necessary. He circulates around the room between his mentoring and small group instruction sessions checking in on students he knows might be off-task. The interactions are brief and positive, often accompanied by encouragement. He connects with students efficiently because he knows each of them well.

Student Mentorship: At one point the teacher gathers a group of eight students struggling with the most recent history project. "Your important goal right now is to get your grades up in history," he tells them matter of factly. With his guidance, they spend about five minutes using a graphic organizer to create an action plan where they each (1) identify the specific content where they struggled and some resources they can use to review; (2) schedule office hours with their history teacher for tutoring; and (3) calendar when they aim to retake the assessment. With action plans in place, they return to their seats to begin their review.

Targeted Small Group Instruction: For the next 15 minutes, the teacher leads a workshop for two students from his math class. "They're preparing to retake a test so I'm tutoring them on that. When they've shown enough readiness, I'll be able to release them to do the assessment on their own." All the while, the teacher scans the room every time the pair of students work on a math problem to monitor the classroom and redirect off-task behavior.

Behind this use of flex time is a myriad of interrelated systems that communicate academic achievement and progress to the teacher so he knows precisely where each student is in relation to their own academic goals. The teacher can thus facilitate the PLT in a way that is highly data driven and responsive to student needs. Students also have the same access to their own achievement and progress data, empowering students to make informed decisions about how to best use their time. This autonomy is deeply motivating to students. The clear structures and expectations form the boundaries within which students can exercise agency responsibly.

A second interesting example of flex time can be seen at [Design Tech High School (d.tech)](.) where students self-schedule their time one day per week.

d.tech Lab Days
Wednesdays are Lab Days at d.techl. Lab Days are student-scheduled days where they plan out their entire day with the guidance of their advisory teacher. On Lab Days, students schedule a combination of lessons based on their needs (including office hours or re-teach lessons with teachers), collaborative work time for class projects with peers, and

independent or group work time to explore curiosity projects. Some students work part of the day individually and other parts collaboratively with peers in different workspaces or classrooms throughout the school. Some students spend the entire day in the Design Realization Garage where they might be working on their robotics team robot or designing and building a cardboard foosball table with friends. For students who are far behind or struggling, Lab Days are scheduled predominantly by their teachers to provide time for intervention and targeted support.

In order to ensure all students are making responsible decisions about time, students complete a "Lab Coat" during their advisory class on Tuesday, where they configure their schedule for the next day. Wednesday morning, students convene again in their advisory class where their advisor hands them back their approved (and sometimes amended) Lab Day schedules. She asks the students to complete a plan for each part of their day -- "What's your goal and how are you going to reach it?" Students review their plans with each other and head off to follow the schedule on their Lab Coat. Talking to students, it is evident that no matter where we go, about 80-85 percent of the students are engaged and working on what they are supposed to be completing at any given time -- more than what you might see in a typical professional work environment.

To really understand Lab Days at d.tech, you have to go back to the start of school in September. In September, d.tech uses a very traditional school day with students traveling to classes together on a regular bell schedule much like all other high schools in America. Autonomy is created in the classrooms over time by giving students limited, but expanding choices on how to learn material (i.e. teacher lecture, videos, articles, et. al.) and how to demonstrate what they have learned (assessments, projects, essays, et. al.). Once the admin team, in consultation with the faculty, determine students can handle the autonomy, they add a Lab Day into the weekly schedule -- with lots of structures, such as the Lab Coats, advisor guidance, and a complex Google Sheet that informs everyone where each and every student should be during each Lab Day block. Once students prove they can stay focused during this single Lab Day, they may add in a second Lab Day per week. In this way, d.tech gradually releases responsibility over to the students and helps guarantee success through well defined systems and structures.

A final example of Flex Time is the Leadership Public Schools (LPS) Navigate Math Program which is an intervention class for all ninth graders hosted on the Gooru platform.

Leadership Public Schools Navigate Math
Navigate Math is an asynchronous experience for students designed to fill gaps in math knowledge while also building student skills in agency and autonomy. The first few minutes of any Navigate Math block at LPS have all of the hallmarks of a well-managed

traditional classroom -- students immediately commence work through a practiced series of timed opening activities that are mostly teacher led, like a silent "Do Now" and a homework check. Following the homework check the class begins to morph as the teacher facilitates two more timed activities that are crucial for building students' ability to effectively direct their own learning by engaging with goal cycles and setting a daily agenda.

The structure of these opening routines is intentional and designed to gradually transition students from teacher led learning to a student led block of time where students exercise autonomy in choosing what they work on and how they demonstrate mastery. It can often take several months for students to fully learn the expectations of the curriculum, how to effectively collaborate with their peers, and how to navigate the digital platform to set goals and make decisions about how to most effectively use time and resources.

> *Goal Cycles:* On their digital dashboard, students set weekly goals that capture what they aim to accomplish for the week, and what they will need to do to meet those goals. Students create a daily agenda that clearly outlines how they will structure their time for the day, including collaboration with classmates or scheduling 1:1 appointments with the teacher.

> *Group Collaboration:* In small teams, students assume group work roles for the month. Along with the specified tasks of that role, students focus on developing specific team norms like active listening or engaging in focused academic conversations. The norms and the roles ensure that each student understands his or her own responsibilities to the group, increasing motivation through peer accountability.

By being so deliberate in how they teach students to take on self-direction, the teachers at LPS set their students up for success.Even knowing the value of student ownership, teachers are careful to not release students to self-direction without first ensuring they know how to make responsible data driven decisions, how to manage their own time, and how to maximize use of the available resources including their peers and teachers. As those habits become established, each of the routines that began as teacher led, gradually becomes student driven.

These school examples share many of the traits in common we identified up above as key ideas for successful implementation of flex time. Our biggest discovery is that each school gradually released agency for decision making to the students, starting very tight in the fall and then loosening up throughout the year as students demonstrated the necessary habits and practices. The schools invested significant time in explicitly teaching students how to

be successful working more independently and giving students the opportunity to practice under direct supervision before doing it on their own. But releasing control to the students did not mean releasing responsibility by the teachers. These schools vigilantly maintained systems and structures to monitor and check-in on how well students used their agency and ensure adequate learning was still happening.

Flex time succeeds when schools foster autonomy through systems, structures and protocols. These systems are often behind the scenes and hard to see on first glance. Visitors, to a successful flex time period see the final destination without understanding the arduous journey it took to get there. It is our hope that through the narratives of these three schools you can begin to get a peek behind the curtain of what it takes to successfully support student agency through flex time.

Part III - Behind the Curtain of Flex Time
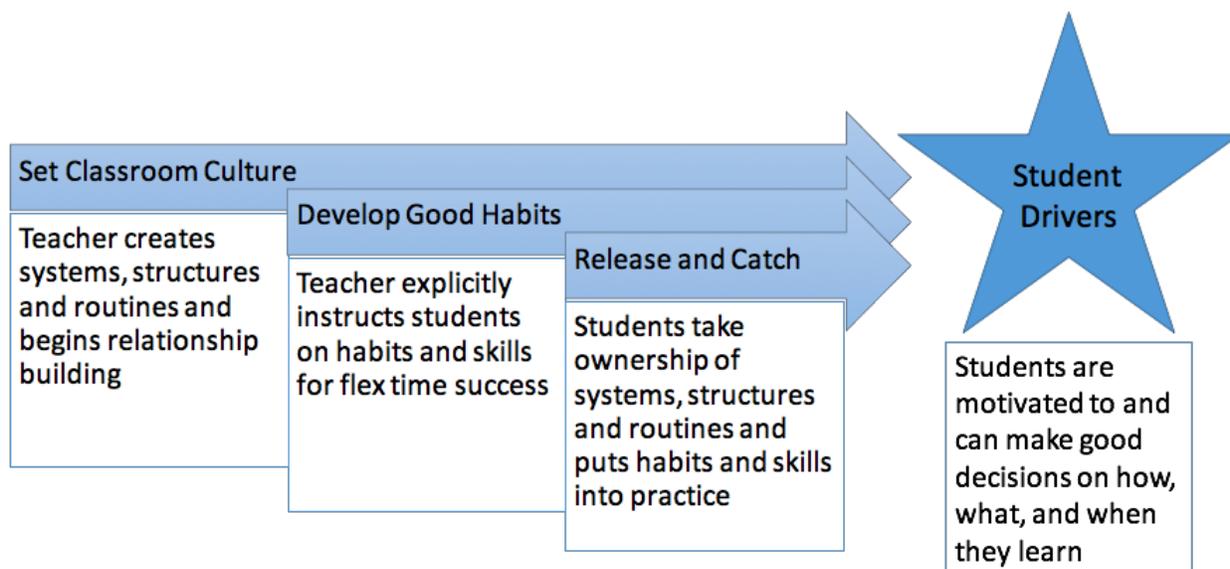By Robert Schwartz and Jeffrey Starr

With all the interest in innovative school models, many schools are creating "flex time" periods during the day for students to increase student agency. We at Silicon Schools Fund and Relay Graduate School of Education set out to understand what makes flex time periods work best and started with a deep dive studying and writing about the topic.

The idea behind flex time is that students can build the skills to work effectively on their own and that by allowing more choice and freedom, students will be more engaged in their learning. In successful schools we did observe students exhibiting agency and working quite independently, which raised the question, "*how did these classes reach this place of success?*" When talking to these schools, they suggested that it worked best to begin with more teacher-directed systems and structures and then gradually transfer responsibilities onto students as they demonstrate readiness. The school support structures begin in the foreground and gradually fade into the background.

The end result is that when educators visit these successful implementations of flex time, they often can't see the work behind the scenes that went into making the schools successful. Because the finished product is smooth and students and teachers know their roles, it can make flex time look easy. When others try to replicate, they mistakenly jump into a late-stage version of flex time, where students have lots of autonomy and forget to build up the systems that support such freedoms. This article seeks to look behind the curtain and share how successful schools designed and launched great flex time periods that ultimately slowly release students to real autonomy.

Getting to Great Flex Time

Set Classroom Culture

Teacher creates systems, structures and routines and begins relationship building

Develop Good Habits

Teacher explicitly instructs students on habits and skills for flex time success

Release and Catch

Students take ownership of systems, structures and routines and puts habits and skills into practice

Student Drivers

Students are motivated to and can make good decisions on how, what, and when they learn

We've seen schools go through four steps on their path towards great flex time. These stages are not distinct, but rather work in concert with each other. Like when a child learns to swim, she first puts her face in the water, then blows bubbles, then starts to kick, and then adds arm strokes. When done all together, she is successfully swimming. Like almost everything in education, the first step in creating flex time is setting the classroom culture.

Stage I: Set the Classroom Culture

To get to eventual freedom and agency, teachers begin with explicit classroom culture and procedures. These classrooms are much more teacher-driven at the start. Students learn how to come to attention when asked by the teacher and how to work quietly – essential elements of pretty much any effective classroom. Students also learn how to ask for help, what to do when they are stuck, and how to productively work in small groups. In this early stage, teachers are building trust and connection between student-to-teacher and student-to-student. Once the norms and procedures for a tight classroom are in place and once positive relationships fuel the culture, the classroom has the necessary ingredients to enable the coaching, feedback, and peer-to-peer collaboration to come that is necessary to move towards a more student-directed approach.

The most effective teachers we observed narrate some of this journey to students, explaining where the class is headed and how the systems they are practicing will give way to much more student autonomy. As classrooms move to more flexible time for students to manage on their own, we see some specific teacher moves working to support this autonomy:

Strong Whole Class Openings:
When a flex time period begins, the teacher can spend a few minutes setting the tone for the class, having students create a learning target, reminding students of what they are working on, and focusing on any habits or behaviors that might need a refresher. Openings provide an opportunity to set clear expectations and to practice important procedures as well as provide a strong daily culture reset to ensure students maximize their work time once they start independent work.

Effective Monitoring:
During a flex time period, great teachers make it clear to students that time is sacred and that students should use their freedom wisely. Teachers model engagement by actively circulating the room, conferring with students 1:1 or in targeted small groups, and actively keeping an eye on students to help nudge them back to productivity when needed. These teachers maintain such monitoring even while performing other tasks such as conferencing and small group instruction.

Purposeful Use of Pen and Paper:
During flex time, students often use laptops or tablets to learn content or produce products. Even when using digital mediums, we've seen teachers successfully implement a paper-based system to support the learning that is happening online. Some teachers like to have students record notes on paper (even if the material is on a screen) believing in the power of manually writing to help cement learning. Other teachers like the paper record as evidence of what students have learned and a quick way to touch base with students on progress when circulating a room. Some teachers really like students setting goals on paper and tracking their progress physically (see more below). As we give students more freedom we want to trust them to make good decisions, but we also want to implement systems to keep them engaged and accountable.

Strong Whole Class Closings:
Much like a whole class launch at the beginning of class can be powerful, we are believers in whole class conclusions. Teachers can ask students to reflect on their own productivity during the class, reinforce noteworthy effort or progress, and remind students of elements they want to keep students focused on. The learning may mostly be independent during a flex time period, but the social nature of groups makes us believers in the power of still launching and concluding briefly together as a class.

Stage II: Developing Good Habits
Once students understand the expectations and systems for independent work time, teachers can begin to teach students the habits required to successfully make the most out

of flex time. Setting clear goals, reflecting on progress, making good choices, and students monitoring their own use of time and energy are key habits to be taught and practiced.

Goal Setting and Progress Monitoring: Early on, teachers often set goals for students, usually related to progress over a set amount of time. Teachers often have students record their goals in a graphic organizer and track progress. Eventually the teacher can have students practice setting their own goals, thereby increasing buy-in. Most students are not used to daily or weekly goal setting and will need some support, which is why teachers build in time to model good goals, ensure students are accurately tracking progress, and improve students' ability to figure out what they most need to work on. Teachers often begin 1:1 check-ins (see below) by reviewing and reflecting on student goals.

Modeling and Reinforcement: Teachers need to help students learn the habits of self-directed learning like what to do when stuck, how to use a learning platform or other online resources, and what to do when distracted or when energy wanes. Teachers often focus on a single learning habit for a stretch of time until it can be consistently demonstrated by students – such as note-taking, help seeking, or studying. Leveraging the whole group opener to model ideal behavior can be effective, as well as having students reflect on how well they accomplished their focus at the end of class. During class time in a flex period, teachers watch for the desired actions, sometimes narrating examples, and offering precise praise when practiced effectively.

Stage III: Release and Catch

As students start to show more readiness for independence and small group work, educators have to do the hard step of really letting go. Like the moment when a child leaves the comfort of the swimming pool wall and ventures into the deep end, students need the chance to put everything together and figure out how to use a period of time effectively on their own. By that point (based on previous positive reinforcement and redirection), students should know exactly what is expected of them, have strategies to be successful, and have formed trusting relationships with each other and the adults in the room. The teacher works to intentionally build the stamina of students to sustain their own learning for longer periods of time. At this point, we encourage teachers to sparingly interrupt the class, instead addressing any issues with individual students to let the learners experience what it's like to have uninterrupted time to direct their own learning.

While students are working independently, teachers sometimes are left wondering, "What do I do?". We've seen too many teachers revert to wandering the room, addressing each hand that comes up. Instead, some of the best teachers realize that they are now free to

engage in some of the highest impact teaching time in the form of 1:1 check-ins and small group instruction.

1:1 Check-ins: Gradually increasing student autonomy frees teachers up for more targeted individualized support. Using data from formative assessments, observations, and student reflections, teachers start to plan 1:1 check-ins with each student at least twice per month. During these 3-10 min interactions, teachers confer with students to deepen relationships, provide coaching on specific cognitive habits, and offer brief content interventions. This is a great time to reflect on student-created goals, help students improve their ability to assess their own progress, and target support to the students who need the most support for remediation or a chance to push further for high-achieving students.

Small Group Instruction: Some of the best teaching in flex time settings comes in the form of teachers pulling targeted groups of students to sit around a kidney shaped table and get a targeted mini-lesson that is "just-in-time" to support a challenging concept or practice a difficult skill. Teachers obviously have to monitor learning to know when students are ready for such small group instruction, and lessons have to be well-planned and shorter duration to be most effective.

Destination: Student Drivers
The goal with flex time is to eventually get students to be able to make good decisions to:
· Figure out what they need to work on
· Prioritize their work
· Set clear targets
· Work efficiently and independently

Think back to the most earnest of your friends in college and how they worked when in the library independently. If this is the end state of student-driven learning, what is reasonable to expect for elementary, middle, or high school students? Likely the intermediary step is something akin to student drivers – where learners get full control of the steering wheel and gas pedal, but still have a trusted guide in the car just in case.

In this final stage of student self-driven learning, students make most of the decisions. The teacher, however, still explicitly develops classroom culture and trusting relationships with whole class, small group, and individual activities. Students may be exposed to more advanced cognitive habits and tools that promote agency and academic development.

Student-Led Goal Cycle and Daily Agenda: Goal setting during this stage becomes increasingly student driven. Students exercise increased ownership by setting ambitious goals for themselves over longer periods of time. Students identify the strategies and

resources they will need to accomplish their goals and tracking their progress towards completion. Creating a daily or weekly agenda allows students to manage their own time during the period and gives teachers an easy way to quickly know what each student should be working on.

As classrooms evolve from one stage of self-directed learning to the next, students gain more and more agency and autonomy over their learning. But to reiterate, in almost every case where this desired state of independence and freedom is reached, schools started off much more tightly controlled and gradually supported students to take on more agency. The big shift is the systems, structures, and routines that started out teacher driven and can gradually fade into the background as they are internalized by students.

We believe that flex time can both effectively help students learn content and support their development of skills that will prove powerful throughout a lifetime. As one student said recently about their flex time classroom, "I thought this time was just for doing more math, but now I am using the strategies I learned in this class in all of my other classes and I know it will help me in college."

If you are interested in learning more about flex time and are interested in piloting supports for teachers in implementing the moves necessary to be effective, please reach out to Jeff Starr at Relay Graduate School of Education (jstarr@relay.edu).