Extended Learning Time

More than a decade after the National Education Commission on Time and Learning released its landmark report *Prisoners of Time*, there is now a resurgence of interest in the ways schools use time. Current demands for increased academic rigor, coupled with a more realistic portrait of student achievement (or lack thereof), has created an impetus for policymakers and practitioners to rethink the traditional time structures that underpin our school system. Those who study the use of time believe it is just as true today as it was in 1994, when *Prisoners of Time* first stated that "used widely and well, time can be the academic equalizer." While more time can be beneficial for all students, experts say it is necessary for some if we are to truly meet the goal of leaving no child behind. More time is particularly critical for low-income students, who often have little opportunity for learning outside of school and who are more significantly affected by summer learning loss. In the words of the Massachusetts Time and Learning Commission (1995), “Learning must be the constant, the fixed and unchanging goal, and time the variable that serves it.”

So far, however, the traditional school schedule has remained largely unchanged, even though expectations are now significantly higher and schools are being held more accountable for student performance. Since the 1960s, a six-and-a-half hour day, five-day week, and 180-day year has been the standard for most U.S. schools. Data collected by the Council for Chief State School Officers in 2004 found that of the 45 states with a policy on the minimum days in a school year, 35 required 180 days or more and six required between 175 and 179 days. The same lack of variation extends to state policies on the length of the school day, with 34 states requiring a minimum of five or more instructional hours per day (or no fewer than 900 hours per year). Compared to their international counterparts, American students spend significantly less time in school. Policymakers often make the argument that extending learning time is necessary for economic competitiveness, citing the school calendars in Japan (240 days) and Europe (ranging from 190 to 210 days) as justification.

At the same time, researchers note that the correlation between the length of the school day/year and academic achievement is not direct—that is, more time does not necessarily lead to improved student performance. In other words, a six-and-a-half hour day does not mean that students receive six-and-a-half hours of meaningful instruction. Much of the school day is consumed with non-instructional activities, such as lunch, recess, meetings/assemblies, and breaks between classes.

A recent Education Sector report broke the school day into four broad categories of time:

- **Allocated School Time**: the crudest and most common measurement of school time, simply the amount of time students attend school.
- **Allocated Class Time**: the amount of time dedicated to instructional activities; i.e. the time in which students are in class.
- **Instructional Time**: the amount of classroom time dedicated to formal learning.
- **Academic Learning Time**: the amount of time students are actually engaged in learning.

These four types of time represent a continuum: moving from “allocated school time” to “academic learning time” provides a more sophisticated measurement that is indicative of the quality of that time. According to the Education Sector researchers, the correlation between time and student performance gets stronger the more engaged students are in learning. Simply put, it is not just a matter of adding more time, but adding time and ensuring that it is used in quality, meaningful ways that will make a difference.

Thus, if policies to extend learning time are to be successful, it is critical that they focus on how time is used rather than the overall amount of time allocated to the school day or year. In this regard, time can be viewed as a resource that educators can utilize to make learning more effective and meaningful. More time, if structured properly and used effectively, can have a direct effect on student achievement.
Extending learning time can allow for, among other things, more time on core academic subjects, support for struggling students, broader and deeper coverage of the curriculum, and opportunities for professional development and teacher collaboration.

Conducting a “time audit” to get a better sense of how time is currently being used is a helpful first step in determining both the best uses for additional time and supports that need to be put in place to ensure that policy implementation will have a positive impact on student performance.

Issues to Consider

★ Cost: There is no one answer as to how much extended time programs cost, due to variations in the type of program, the staffing model used, and the amount of time added. There is general consensus that the cost of extending the length of the school day is not proportional to the amount of time added. According to the Education Sector report, a ten percent increase in time would likely require a six to seven percent increase in cost. The primary cost is teacher compensation; however other school-related costs, such as transportation, facilities, and administration, either do not increase or do not increase significantly. By comparison, adding additional days to the academic year is significantly more expensive than adding to the school day.

★ Capacity: For an extended time initiative to be effective, the additional time cannot be filled with more of the same instruction. Many of the students most in need of additional time for learning attend the worst schools: schools that are unlikely to have the capacity to properly and fully implement reform efforts and ensure that the extra time is of high quality. Research conducted in Massachusetts found that schools that successfully implemented extended time initiatives and produced strong student outcomes also had strong leadership, a focus on professional development, used data to drive continuous improvement, had a positive school culture, and had effective family engagement. Once again, conducting a “time audit” is a good first step in determining capacity and assessing what needs must be met to make the additional time successful, particularly professional development for teachers.

★ Opposition: Supporters of extended time initiatives should recognize that there is likely to be opposition from a number of fronts, including business interests (especially the tourism and service industries), parent groups that do not want students to have more time away from families, or just people uncomfortable with change. Communication and discussions with a wide range of stakeholders are key to gaining support for increased-time initiatives.

What States Are Doing

Given the high costs of extending learning time, New Mexico is spending $2.3 million to extend the day for 2,100 children in four districts who failed state achievement tests, as opposed to a nontargeted statewide initiative. New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer has proposed making an extended school day one of the five restructuring options for failing schools, and there are similar proposals in Connecticut and the District of Columbia. Measures to lengthen the school year have been introduced in Maine and Illinois, as well as in some large districts such as Philadelphia and Chicago. On a national scale, Sen. Edward Kennedy has introduced the Teaching Fellows for Expanded Learning and After-School Act of 2007 (T-FELAS Act) as part of NCLB reauthorization. The T-FELAS Act aims to establish a new, highly trained 40,000-member National Service Corps to advance expanded learning opportunities through partnerships with school districts and community-based organizations.

Massachusetts is the leader in taking to scale an extended learning time initiative. The state has a $6.5 million competitive grant program to provide districts with the funds to expand learning time, either by extending the school day and/or the school year. The initiative awarded grants to a total of ten schools in five districts, with preference being given to districts serving a high number of low-income families and those that partnered with community-based organizations and/or colleges and universities. This past fall, each school received an extra $1,300 per student to expand learning time by 30 percent for all students in the school and to significantly reconfigure the use of time during that day.

Resources


Education Sector, On the Clock: Rethinking the Way Schools Use Time, available online at www.educationsector.org/usr_doc/OntheClock.pdf.


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