Massachusetts’ Expanded Learning Time Initiative

A familiar refrain among educators over the past several decades has been that there is simply not enough time in the day to teach students what they need to know to pass high-stakes exams in the core subjects and to teach them about subjects such as history, art, music, and health and physical education, among others. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and its sanctions for schools and districts not making sufficient progress in reading and math achievement, this refrain has grown even louder. Thus, subjects not covered in those standardized tests lost out, as did the students.

But while many people have called for extending the school day and/or school calendar, few districts, and even fewer states, have made the attempt for several reasons, principally parental resistance to changed schedules and the extra funding needed for salaries and physical plant overhead.

While a number of initiatives are moving toward extended school days, few are as far along in proving their utility as the now three-year-old Expanded Learning Time (ELT) Initiative in Massachusetts. While the roots of this effort can be found in a state commission on Time and Learning in 1995 chaired by then-state Board of Education member (and now state Secretary of Education) Paul Reville, it was not until 2005, that the state legislature authorized $500,000 to launch the program.

The pilot started with planning grants that helped districts and schools that volunteered to develop detailed proposals for how the new school day would be structured. Those that are funded receive $1,300 per pupil for every student in their school. The list of schools from each district that do apply are typically thinned by the district during the planning process before applications are made. For instance, in Boston only middle schools could apply for inclusion during the first year, and the superintendent there determined which of the schools’ plans were forwarded for consideration, according to Massachusetts 2020 President Jennifer Davis. Schools that participate in the planning and redesign process have found that it allows them to include a wide range of school and community stakeholders in a process that requires the school design team to ask fundamental questions such as, “what do our children need to succeed that they are not getting now and how do we structure a new school day to meet those needs?” This process has spurred schools to consider changes from the ground up that they were not able to consider without adding more time.

All districts that are chosen to implement must first reach labor agreements to accommodate the new demands before the state funding could even be approved. No high schools were part of the first cohort.

In each school, the time was used differently, but had to be added in three areas: 1) core academics; 2) enrichment, such as art, music, apprenticeships, technology, and physical fitness; and 3) collaborative planning and professional
development for teachers. ELT was not the sole innovation taking place at these schools. Rather, the additional time allowed the schools to develop enhanced instructional avenues to better engage their students. For example:

★ The Kuss Middle School in Fall River expanded science by two hours per week with hands-on subjects such as robotics and forensics added to the curriculum.

★ At Boston’s Edwards Middle School, math was made fun by creating small student teams to compete against each other in Math Leagues.

★ The math curriculum was expanded to include practical applications vis-à-vis personal finance lessons at Timilty Middle School students in Boston.

★ Literacy instruction got a boost at the PK-6 Jacob Hiatt Magnet School in Worcester with the addition of a daily, two-hour uninterrupted block to start the day that includes guided and more individualized reading instruction. A half-hour writing workshop follows lunch, and the day is capped with a 40-minute homework help and tutoring block.

★ In Cambridge, students in each grade level at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (JK-8) School started taking a half-hour of Mandarin Chinese every day.

**Results**

Schools participating in the ELT initiative tended to be more academically challenged than most. In the year before implementing a new day, only three made adequate yearly progress (AYP) in math, and half made AYP in English/language arts (ELA). On state exams, roughly 23 percent of students at these schools were proficient in math, 15 percent were proficient in science, and 42 percent were proficient in ELA that year. By contrast, nearly 63 percent of the rest of Massachusetts' students were at or above ELA proficiency by the end of the 2005-06 school year.

However, a report published by Massachusetts 2020 found that at the end of the first year of implementation, student achievement in the ELT schools was significantly improved in math, ELA, and science during the course of the school year as measured by state test scores.

Three more schools met AYP for math—increasing the cohort’s sample of success in that subject by 100 percent—and seven schools met AYP for ELA, up from the original five schools. The percentage of students proficient in math, science, and ELA in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exams also increased. The percentage of students who passed math increased from 22.8 percent to 30 percent; in science from 15.2 percent to 19.9 percent; and in ELA from 42.4 percent to 53.2 percent.

In addition to showing that students at these schools could succeed when more time was spent being engaged in academics, the results were instrumental in garnering political, media, and public support for expanding ELT to more schools throughout the state. There were positive editorials in newspapers in regions where ELT schools were operating, and a *State House News* poll found that 70 percent of respondents favored longer school days and 72 percent saw value in students getting a well-rounded education that went beyond the tested subject areas.

Abt Associates, an independent research and consulting firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts is conducting a larger evaluation of the ELT initiative for the state, and the U.S. Department of Education recently allocated another $3 million to expand the evaluation, which will be released in 2009. Massachusetts 2020 will also release second-year test results and analysis in December of this year.

Again, while public opinion is a motivating force behind the creation and implementation of any policy, that plan's engine runs on money. The academic results were convincing enough for the legislature, which doubled the ELT spending for the 2007-08 school year, enabling another nine schools to form the ELT’s second cohort. Enrollment at these schools, which includes the Boston Arts Academy as the program's first high school, is more than 9,150 students. And while the economy is causing education budget cuts across the nation, on July 2 the Massachusetts legislature approved funding for eight additional schools, bringing the total number of implementing schools to 26 and the number of students to be impacted in 2008-2009 to 13,500.

With the state well into its third year of the ELT pilot, Paul Reville stressed in a January *Education Week* column that the answer to improving student test performance was not in lowering standards, but in giving students more time to learn in school. The results seem to speak for themselves.

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