# Charter Schools at the Forefront of Serving Working Families

[blurb for web] High-performing public charter schools offer school schedules that better align with the needs of working families.

By Meg Benner

April 19, 2018

When I was a first-grade teacher, I taught a bright 6-year-old named Harry. His mom was a single parent and worked at a local restaurant to support her two children. She dropped the kids off at school each morning at 8:30 a.m. and then rushed to work. When the school day ended for Harry at 3:20 p.m., his 11-year-old sister picked him up and took care of him until their mom returned home just before dinnertime.

Harry’s family’s situation is common; most school schedules are [largely disconnected](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2016/10/11/145084/workin-9-to-5-2/) from the needs of working families across the country. On average, schools dismiss students two hours or more before the end of the normal workday and are closed for an average of 29 days per year—not including summer vacation. The misalignment of school and work schedules reduces the productivity of the U.S. economy overall, but it has a [disproportionate impact](https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/30090826/working9to5_1016.pdf) on lower-income families who tend to work inflexible schedules with less paid time off. The standard school-day schedule is a holdover from cultural traditions of the [19th century](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/debunking-myth-summer-vacation), when most children were expected to return from school in the early afternoon to help support their families. This is no longer widely practiced, yet school funding levels and teacher contracts, among other factors, make it difficult for traditional public schools to significantly break from this legacy.

Working families deserve better. Recently, the Center for American Progress proposed [seven bold, progressive ideas](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/03/28/448156/7-great-education-policy-ideas-progressives-2018/) to ensure educational opportunity for all—including a recommendation that federal and state policymakers should help schools “transition to a 9-to-5 school day to better fit parents’ needs.” Parents such as Harry’s mom should not have to piece together affordable child care options to bridge the divide between their work schedules and their children’s school schedules. Some high-performing public charter schools have already demonstrated that it is possible to drastically restructure school schedules to better fit the needs of working families.

While conducting research for a 2016 CAP [report](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2016/10/11/145084/workin-9-to-5-2/) that highlighted the extent of the misalignment between work and school schedules, the authors found that public charter schools had many family-friendly alternatives to traditional school schedules. Public charter schools are not managed by school districts, so they have greater flexibility to design and budget for instructional programs that meet their missions. As a result, some charter networks with consistently [strong student outcomes](https://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/CMO%20FINAL.pdf) offer significantly longer school days and nearly year-round school in order to support working families. These nontraditional school schedules not only increase students’ learning time but also ensure that students can remain in a safe, engaging environment while their parents are hard at work.

Schools in the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), for example, have an average school day of [9.2 hours](https://www.timeandlearning.org/sites/default/files/resources/caseformorelearningtime.pdf), most of which consists of instruction. In Newark, New Jersey, [North Star Academy schools](http://www.uncommonschools.org/)—part of the Uncommon Schools charter network—add an [extra two hours](http://hechingerreport.org/wrestling-newarks-achievement-gap-finding-extra-hours-half-battle/) to the traditional school day for no additional cost. Schools within these networks have long [waitlists](http://www.nj.com/opinion/index.ssf/2015/05/beating_newarks_odds_kipp_charter_network_is_poise.html); families are likely attracted to them as much for their student outcomes as for their alignment with parents’ work schedules.

Apart from misaligned school and work schedules, school closures throughout the year can also disrupt parents’ ability to go to work. Charlotte, North Carolina, for example, closes its public schools for [eight days per year](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2016/10/11/145084/workin-9-to-5-2/) for staff development, which requires parents to use limited vacation—if their jobs offer any—to be home with their children or else find affordable child care. Without a doubt, teachers deserve this time to grow professionally, but it should not interfere with instructional hours. Some high-performing charter schools offer a different model by providing ongoing teacher development opportunities without upsetting the normal school schedule. Various schools within the [Achievement First](https://www.achievementfirst.org/) charter network, for example, stagger teaching hours—with some teachers working from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. and others working from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.—in order to provide more time for lesson planning, grading, or teacher collaboration without sacrificing instructional time. Schools within the KIPP charter network build teacher [preparation and collaboration time](http://www.newsweek.com/educators-should-embrace-extended-school-hours-74105) into longer school hours to ensure that teachers have time to prepare for their lessons.

Within the charter school sector, there is certainly significant variance in how school schedules and policies align with the needs of working families. According to [2011-2012 school year data](https://www.timeandlearning.org/sites/default/files/resources/caseformorelearningtime.pdf), while some charter networks or independent charter schools offer significantly longer school days, the average charter school day is only 18 minutes longer than the average public school day. Nonetheless, after some high-performing charter schools adopted longer schedules, a number of traditional public schools followed suit. In 2012, for example, all [Chicago Public Schools](https://timeandlearning.org/about/history) extended their normal school day by 1.25 hours; in 2017, [Boston Public Schools](https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/12/07/boston-moves-ahead-extending-school-days/qhiuwXWcf8gmtK3xu4YObO/story.html) extended the the school days of 39 elementary and middle schools.

While many charter schools and some traditional public schools are adjusting their schedules to meet the needs of working families, more progress is needed to accomodate families such as Harry’s. It’s time to prioritize school schedules and policies that align with the schedules of working families. High-performing charter schools are leading the way toward educational opportunity for all by adapting to the needs of today’s working families. Every school, whether charter or traditional, should learn from this common-sense approach.

*Meg Benner is a senior consultant at the Center for American Progress.*