

Center for American Progress



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Public Education: Past and Present

The public school system as we know it today was created more than 150 years ago. Since the mid-19th century public schools have transformed themselves in many ways. They have evolved from one room schoolhouses serving a few dozen students, to large institutions serving several hundred, and the curriculum has expanded from literacy, arithmetic, penmanship, and manners to include science, history, physical education, foreign languages and the arts. But as these and other educational updates occurred, several areas were ignored, in particular the use of learning time.

For more than 20 years, calls for extending learning time have largely gone unheard. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation At Risk*, a major report outlining five recommendations including increased learning time. Eleven years later, the National Education Commission on Time and Learning released *Prisoners of Time*, another report calling for longer school days and/or school years. In 2005, 22 years after *A Nation at Risk*, the Renewing Our Schools, Securing Our Future National Task Force on Public Education released *Getting Smarter, Becoming Fairer: A Progressive Education Agenda for a Stronger Nation*, again stressing the importance of making better use of learning time.

The increased focus on opportunities for extending learning time in our public schools can be attributed to its great potential for impact. Making better use of school time holds the promise of improving student performance and closing achievement gaps. The simple truth is that American students – regardless of income, age, race, or linguistic abilities – are no longer making the grade and this could prove detrimental to our future democracy and our place in the global economy if action is not taken soon. However, students in programs of extended learning tend to make academic gains that exceed those of children in traditional learning programs. **Reorganizing the school year and providing greater learning time and opportunities**, particularly in low-performing schools and districts, can enhance the rigor, innovation and academic supports of public school education in a systematic manner designed to boost student performance.

Restructuring the school year and making extended learning opportunities readily available must be priorities at the local, state and national levels. With renewed attention to improving low-performing and high-poverty schools, the federal government can stimulate local and state efforts through demonstration projects and/or an updated Title I formula that provides additional funds to schools and districts committed to implementing programs of extended learning. A look at the benefits of these programs explain the immediate need for action.

National High School to College Pipeline (in tens)



- 71% of students graduate from high school.



- 57% of high school graduates enroll directly into college.



- 54% of college freshmen receive a bachelor's degree within six years.

- Only 34% of high school freshmen are academically prepared for college when they graduate from high school.
- 53% of all college students take at least one remedial math or English class during their college career.

Sources:

Jay P. Green and Marcus Winters, *Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991-2002* (New York, NY: The Manhattan Institute, Feb. 2005).

Committee for Economic Development, *Cracks in the Education Pipeline: A Business Leader's Guide to Higher Education Reform* (Washington, DC: May 2005).

The American Diploma Project, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts* (Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc., 2004).

Learning Time

The way learning time is currently utilized is closely tied to the economies of bygone eras. During the agrarian economy of the 1800s – cited by many as the period that gave way to our current public school system – children were required to tend to the fields during the afternoon hours and summer months, enabling them to only attend school in the morning hours and for a limited number of years. As the economy shifted to one based on manufacturing, more attention was paid to the development of expanded skill sets, giving way to the creation of high schools. But even as the process of educating America's youth became more and more formalized and widely practiced, the structure of the school day and school year largely remained the same.

Today, in what has been called the knowledge economy, students in America spend approximately six or seven hours a day in school, 180 days a year, on a calendar roughly spanning September through June. The majority of the school day is spent on teaching core content in subjects such as reading, math, science and history. Remedial support, tutoring and enrichment programs are typically offered to students during the after-school hours or summer months (although availability and the quality of such programs are inconsistent). Reminiscent of an age long gone, this structure of the school day and school year is severely outdated. Adjusting the way in which time is utilized will serve several purposes, none more important than putting a child's learning first.

Many industrialized and developing nations structure learning time differently and are seeing positive results; some utilize longer school years while others assign greater amounts of homework or teach a more intensive curriculum.¹ According to results from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), while 4th and 8th grade students in the U.S. score above international averages on math and science, they fall behind their peers from many industrialized nations. In math, American 4th graders ranked 6th out of 11 industrialized nations and 8th graders ranked 11th out of 13 OECD countries.² When compared to all countries tested by TIMSS, American students fair slightly better: 4th graders ranked 12th out of 25 industrialized and developing countries in math, while 8th graders ranked 20th out of 45 nations.³ American students were largely outranked by Asian countries including Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, as well as Belgium, the Netherlands and Latvia.⁴

A new report released in November 2005 by the American Institutes for Research compares TIMSS data with results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). It measured mathematics performance on an international scale by looking at the data of 12 countries⁵ that participated in both international assessments at grade 4, grade 8, and at age 15. Results of the comparison reveal that U.S. 4th graders ranked 8th on TIMSS, 8th graders ranked 9th on TIMSS, and 15-year-olds rank 9th on PISA.⁶

Country	Length of School Year	Country	Length of School Year
South Korea	225	England	190
Japan	223	Canada	188
Chinese Taipei	221	Singapore	180
Italy	210	United States	180
Czech Republic	197	Hong Kong, SAR	176
Russian Federation	195	Belgium (Flemish)	175
Netherlands	191	<i>International Average</i>	<i>193</i>

Reorganizing the School Year

At a minimum, the traditional school year must be restructured to reflect the knowledge-driven economy and global society of today. In its simplest form, this restructuring would maintain the current 180-day school year but arrange the year based on summative reporting periods such as semesters, trimesters or quarters.⁸ Organizing the school year in this way is pragmatic, balances learning opportunities throughout the school year, and can help families better balance the realities of work and child care. Constructing the school year around shorter segments and intersession breaks will also help to prevent summer learning loss. Schools and districts can also offer additional academic supports to students in need during the intersession breaks. This will provide them with the extra instructional time needed to catch up on subject content. To maximize the benefit to student learning, additional school days should be added to the restructured school year.

Restructured school calendars exist in several formats. The two most popular, non-traditional school calendar schedules are 45-15, 45 days of instruction followed by 15 days of vacation, and 60-20, 60 days of instruction followed by 20 days of vacation. Similar schedules used by schools across the country include: 45-10, 60-15 and 90-20 or 90-30. About 30 percent of the schools that have moved to non-traditional calendars do so primarily to combat overcrowding, while the remaining 70 percent do so for academic performance purposes.⁹

According to the National Association for Year-Round Education, more than 3,200 schools in the U.S. (enrolling more than 2.2 million children) use modified school calendars.¹⁰ Almost every state in the country – except for Alaska, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Maine – has at least one school with an adopted alternative school year, whether a public, charter or private school.¹¹ In July of 2005, Hawaii legislators passed a uniform school calendar bill to take effect during the 2006-2007 school

Summer Learning Loss

Young children can lose more than two months of reading and math skills during the summer months. More tragic is the fact that low-income children suffer the greatest summer learning losses. While additional data sets and analyses are necessary, research studies since 1978 have concluded that learning is lost during the summer months, particularly among economically disadvantaged children.

Source:

Scott Winship, Matissa Hollister, Joel Horwich, Pat Sharkey, and Christopher Wimer, *Promoting Educational Achievement & Opportunity Through Summer Scholarship* (New Vision and Center for American Progress, 2005).

year. The specific calendar chosen by Hawaii's Board of Education, with overwhelming support from parents, students and teachers, includes one week off in the fall, three weeks off in the winter, two weeks off in the spring, and a seven-week summer vacation.¹² While the new school calendar does not increase the number of days in the school year, it is thus far the largest state effort to reorganize the school calendar for student learning purposes.

Expanding Learning Time and Opportunities

In addition to restructuring the school year, learning opportunities for children in low-performing schools and districts must be expanded. To make these opportunities most effective, schools must start with a rigorous academic curriculum and highly qualified teachers in every classroom. Without these two components, more time in school is just more of the same.

Expanding learning time through the use of longer school days will enable teachers to provide students with more one-on-one time, teach in longer blocks, and utilize hands-on learning activities such as science labs to strengthen student learning. Lengthening the school day or school year also facilitates the types of innovation that enhance learning. Several schools that have extended learning time utilize peer tutoring to help

students with their academic coursework; others have established partnerships with educational institutions such as museums and zoos to provide students with enriched learning opportunities outside their school buildings. Still other schools use the longer school day or school year to provide support activities for teachers such as mentoring, lesson planning, skill development, and instructional assistance.

Expanding the school day also formalizes the after-school hours by incorporating them into the official school day and aligning content with the academic curriculum as well as student needs. Formalizing the school day in this manner also helps to circumvent attendance issues experienced all too often by traditional after and summer school programs. Furthermore, it helps to ensure the high quality of both program content and teachers by aligning them with standards, assessment, and accountability.

Data tells us that students in extended learning programs are making academic gains. With a longer school day, there is greater opportunity to incorporate academic enrichment programs as well as cultural, social, and recreational activities into the school day. Perhaps the best examples of academic success come from Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) schools, which increase learning time by 60 percent. According to a report from the Educational Policy Institute which analyzed 5th grade test scores in reading, language, and math across 24 KIPP schools, students showed significant academic gains, far exceeding normal growth rates in all three subject areas.¹³ While KIPP schools have made a substantial increase in learning time, other schools and programs have not demonstrated similar

ambitions. But whether learning time is extended by one hour per day or 30 days per year, or anything in between or beyond, providing children with greater opportunities to learn often increases their academic success.

The High School Challenge

Efforts to increase learning time at the high school level, however, present challenges. Some students, once they reach working age, take after school and weekend jobs. Many do so out of economic necessity. Consequently, requiring high school students to spend more time in school may put them at the disadvantage of having to choose between school and work. Programs of extended learning time at the high school level must be carefully crafted so that academically disadvantaged students receive the help they need while benefiting from innovative and flexible programs that enable them to earn an income. Such programs include employment components like youth apprenticeships and combine classroom instruction with paid work opportunities.

Taking Action

To implement at scale the structures and systems that support extended learning time, states must play a central role, with support from local leaders. State executives and legislators must build the political will and provide the funds necessary to support education improvement efforts, as well as take greater responsibility in turning around low-performing schools. School districts, in return, must be willing to implement and support state efforts, and all the players must be willing to put the needs of children before their own.

Admittedly, implementing large scale programs designed to enhance learning time is challenging and costly, but we are at a crucial point in time when we must reconcile what's best for children and the continued growth of our society. One state taking significant steps to put into place major reform is Massachusetts. At the urging of Massachusetts 2020, a Boston-based non-profit organization, the state legislature passed, with bipartisan support, a budget amendment in 2005 to support district planning to expand learning time for all students in some schools by 30 percent. In an unprecedented move, the legislature made available \$425,000 in new funds for grants to be administered through the state Department of Education to support the creation of district implementation plans. Of the 21 districts that applied for grants, 16 were awarded funds.¹⁴ The majority of the grants (75 percent) were awarded to districts where at least 25 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced-priced meals.¹⁵ Preference was given to districts with a large percentage of low-performing students, districts partnering with community-based organizations or institutions of higher education, and applications with the greatest promise for district-wide impact.¹⁶ While this is an important step in the right direction, the true test of the state's commitment is whether or not the legislature appropriates funds for districts to implement their plans during fiscal year 2007.

Closing the Achievement Gap

Most importantly, increasing learning time can help to close achievement gaps. Providing greater learning opportunities and personalized attention to students most in need helps them to catch up. The use of longer learning blocks and the availability of tutoring and classes during intersession breaks provide students who are behind, or at risk of falling behind, with more time to study and learn subject content.

States willing and ready to expand learning opportunities for students should begin by implementing programs of extended time in low-performing schools and districts. Currently, the pressure to turn these schools around lies largely on the schools themselves. Greater strides can be made in raising the academic achievement of students in low-performing schools through increased state assistance and action to hold district officials accountable for such gains. States should also take additional steps to ensure a more equitable distribution of money to schools in low-performing districts. If students in these schools are to catch up and excel academically, they need more learning time, highly qualified teachers, and enriched curricula and programs.

While state efforts are critical, the federal government can also play an important role. The implementation of a carefully designed and evaluated federal competitive demonstration program could serve to stimulate state initiatives designed to increase learning time. The federal government should also modify the Title I formula to provide extra funds to districts for Title I schools identified as in need of improvement that agree to increase learning time by 30 percent for all students and develop school improvement plans that outline how these funds will be used to significantly increase student achievement.

Conclusion

America's democracy and economic security have been driven by creativity and determination, and our education system has helped pave the way. In a global society, it is time to renew the commitment to our country and heed the calls to strengthen our education system by providing high quality educational experiences for all children. The hours spent in school during the K-12 years are more than just moments in time. They are the basis for future success and better lives than those of our parents. They are the building blocks for the society of tomorrow and the promise of a democracy stronger than the one we have today. Reorganizing and expanding learning time will put children first and help to create a highly educated society, ready and eager to lead us through this century and into the next.

Endnotes

¹ One point that should not be overlooked is that most countries do not have the significant achievement gaps that plague U.S. students.

² Sean Cavanagh, “U.S. Gets Better Showing on Latest International Math and Science Exam,” *Education Week*, December 14, 2004.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The 12 countries included in this study are: Australia, Belgium, Hong Kong, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Latvia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Russian Federation, and the United States.

⁶ American Institutes for Research, *Reassessing U.S. International Mathematics Performance: New Findings from the 2003 TIMSS and PISA* (Washington, DC: November 2005).

⁷ Ina Mullis et al., *Mathematics Benchmarking Report: TIMSS 1999 – 8th Grade* (Boston, MA: Boston College/ International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement, April 2001). http://timss.bc.edu/timss1999b/pdf/TB99_Math_all.pdf

⁸ National Association for Year-Round Education, *Annual Report 2005*, PowerPoint presentation by Phyllis Frank.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ National Association for Year-Round Education, *Statistical Summary 2005*. <http://www.nayre.org/STATISTICAL%20SUMMARIES%20OF%20YRE.pdf>

¹¹ National Association for Year-Round Education, *Map of YRE Schools by State, 2004-2005*. <http://www.nayre.org/SchoolsbyState.html>.

¹² Hawaii Department of Education, *BOE Highlights*, September 2005. <http://doe.k12.hi.us/periodicals/boe/boe0509.pdf>

¹³ Educational Policy Institute, *Focus on Results: An Academic Impact Analysis of the Knowledge is Power Program*, August 2005. <http://www.educationalpolicy.org/pdf/KIPP.pdf>

¹⁴ Massachusetts Department of Education, *16 Districts Awarded Expanded Learning Time Planning Grants*, Press Release, October 25, 2005. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.asp?id=2634>

¹⁵ Massachusetts 2020, “Frequently Asked Questions: Expanded Time Planning and Early Implementation Grants – School Year 2005-2006,” www.massachusetts2020.org.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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