



# Elementary and Secondary Education Act Flexibility Waivers

Are States Using Flexibility to Expand Learning Time in Schools?

Tiffany D. Miller

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# Introduction and summary

The Center for American Progress previously examined the extent to which states applying for first-round Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA, flexibility waivers in 2012 planned to expand in-school learning time to turn around low-performing schools. Our examination specifically reviewed state plans for explicit details about how states planned to use ESEA flexibility waivers and the 21st Century Community Learning Center, or 21st CCLC, optional waiver for comprehensive school redesign to add time for student learning and teacher collaboration and planning. At the time, only 11 states—Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Tennessee—had approved applications from the U.S. Department of Education and were free from some of the most taxing parts of the No Child Left Behind law, or NCLB.<sup>1</sup> In return for this flexibility, the Department of Education asked states to develop plans addressing three areas of reform: setting college- and career-ready expectations for all students; developing differentiated recognition, accountability, and support systems; and supporting effective instruction and leadership.<sup>2</sup> Our review found that most states did not take purposeful approaches to restructuring time in school.<sup>3</sup> In fact, of the eight states that asked for flexibility in using the 21st CCLC grants, only three—Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Oklahoma—provided insight into how they planned to use this funding differently.<sup>4</sup> As of September 1, 41 states, the District of Columbia, and a group of California school districts had been approved for ESEA flexibility.<sup>5</sup> Of those with approved waivers, 24 states requested the option to use 21st CCLC program funds during the school day for in-school expanded learning time.

Expanded learning time has great potential to boost student achievement and close achievement gaps, but time alone is not a panacea. It must be well planned and part of a comprehensive reform—exactly the kind of change that “priority schools,” the lowest-performing schools in a state, need. Our current analysis reveals, however, that most states continued to submit ESEA flexibility applica-

tions that did not address how more time in school could strategically support school turnaround efforts. It should be noted that the lack of these details does not necessarily mean that states are not doing this, but it is not clear either way. It also does not necessarily mean that a robust state plan for increased learning time translates into strong execution. State plans, however, should reflect their intentions for accountability and transparency purposes. Furthermore, state plans serve as guidance for the Department of Education's monitoring process, and more detail and documentation is critical to the process.

This report provides an up-to-date review of states' ESEA flexibility plans and assesses the extent, if any, to which states have strategically thought about how expanded learning time can support school turnaround efforts. In doing so, we examined the "Principle 2: State-Developed Differentiated Recognition, Accountability, and Support" section of all state plans for submission windows one through three. Specifically, our analysis focused on the extent to which each state plan outlined its intent to either use more time as part of its strategy to turn around its lowest-performing schools or redesign the school day to reach student-achievement goals. Among states that requested flexible use of 21st CCLC funds, we looked for details about its planned use. State plans were grouped in part based on the level of detail provided in three research-based building blocks for the effective use of increased learning time for core academics, enrichment opportunities, and teacher collaboration. States that provided the most detailed information were considered "standouts." Only four state plans met these criteria: Connecticut, Colorado, New York, and Massachusetts. Six out of 42 states demonstrated a commitment to increased learning time but did not provide enough detail. The majority of states—32 out of 42—did not think strategically about how increased learning time could complement school turnaround plans and increase academic achievement.

As a result of this analysis, we propose we propose state- and local-level recommendations that will help make certain that expanded learning time is well planned and intentional. Specifically, we recommend that:

- States develop guidelines promoting high-quality expanded learning time
- States develop a guide for school districts and principals that want to implement expanded learning time

- States encourage schools that choose to expand learning time to add 300 additional hours to the standard school-year schedule, allowing more time for the three key areas: academics, enrichment programming, and teacher collaboration
- States outline how they will use their 21st CCLC funding to increase learning time.
- Districts and schools implement additional time strategically through an intentional, one-year planning period if possible
- Districts and schools use data analyses to strategically implement more time
- Districts monitor schedule redesign

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