
Restructuring and Extending the School Day

National High School Center

Schools, districts, and states are struggling to improve education and increase student learning and achievement. Some reform ideas have focused on increasing the time students spend in school and reorganizing school schedules. Currently, the 180 six-hour-day schedule used in most schools is not based on the needs and learning styles of students, but rather on a 19th-century agrarian system (Farbman & Kaplan, 2005). Many states and districts have considered ways to change the outdated way that time is spent in school by (1) transforming school day schedules; (2) extending the school day; and (3) altering the school year structure. Ultimately, though, these reforms must not focus on simply extending the time students are in school, but on increasing the time students engage in productive, academic learning (Silva, 2005).

Transforming Time Structure During the School Day

One strategy that schools are using to increase instructional time spent on core subjects such as reading and mathematics is block scheduling. Typically, block scheduling divides the school day into four periods of 80-100 minutes, and alternates subject matter by day or semester. As a result, students are engaged in learning for longer periods of time. Block scheduling has been effective in San Diego's Blueprint for Student Success program, where double and triple length reading classes boosted student achievement enough to narrow school achievement gaps by about 15% over two years (Public Policy Institute of California, 2005). However, the success of block scheduling depends on how well teachers are trained to use the extra time effectively. Some schools also use block scheduling for a "double dosing" of core subjects. Students may attend core classes for longer time periods than their other classes during the day in order to improve achievement (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

Other strategies that schools have used to increase academic achievement are to reduce time students spend in elective classes and to create guided study halls where students can receive additional support from instructors. Student advisories, where students meet with teachers to discuss schoolwork or more general concerns, can also replace study halls. The advisory period gives teachers time to develop relationships with students thereby helping to increase student engagement in school which is a vital part of student success (Pennington, 2006).

Extending the School Day

A study of high-performing high schools in Massachusetts found that all the top performing schools had expanded school days (The Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, 2003). The most important aspect of extending the school day is to ensure that the extra time is spent in academic endeavors which engage students. Some strategies that schools have used are lengthening the time students spend in core academic classes, implementing transition programs or credit recovery classes, creating community partnerships in which students participate in internships or online or web-based classes, and offering after-school or supplemental education services (SES) for students.

For low-income or minority students, Title I SES can be particularly helpful. Poor and minority students are less likely than their more affluent peers to have education resources and learning experiences outside of school (Silva, 2007). SES, when implemented over extended periods of time and frequently monitored and evaluated, can provide opportunities to close the achievement gap between these students and their wealthier peers. SES can focus on building core academic skills, perhaps language acquisition for English language learners or credit recovery classes, areas for which there is not enough allotted time during the school day.

Extending/Altering the School Year

Research suggests that low-income students experience significant learning loss over the summer months, compared with children from higher income families who have access to travel, camps, and other enrichment activities (Pennington, 2006). Year-round schools may help to reduce the negative effects of summer learning loss; however, the structure must increase total school hours and not simply reorganize the traditional school year length over a 12-month period (Silva, 2007). Summer programs help engage students in unique ways, such

as through internships or leadership programs. The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) schools have reported increased academic achievement among their predominantly minority and urban students, using a lengthened school year and a mandatory 3-4 week summer school session (Pennington, 2006). Furthermore, many summer programs focus on helping to ease the transition from middle to high school, a critical time for students. Finally, a few high schools have employed “J terms,” a January or June term lasting approximately three weeks. The most common areas of focus for J term courses are academic recovery, multi-disciplinary projects, internships, or a combination of academic and multi-disciplinary classes. These activities are beneficial to all students, particularly low income and minority students.

Action Principles

For State

1. Help districts build capacity to address various aspects of extended learning time including: enlisting support from teachers’ unions; providing funding for extended learning time initiatives; developing resources for professional development on the effective use of additional or newly structured learning time; and monitoring extended learning time initiatives.

For District

1. Create buy-in for extended school days from parents, teachers, students, and the community.
2. Allocate and increase funds to support extended learning time.
3. Provide professional development to ensure that teachers use extra time effectively.
4. Create local partnerships with businesses, organizations, etc., to support the extended time initiative.
5. Determine how the district will monitor progress of the extended learning time initiative.

For School

1. Implement professional development to aid teachers in using extra school time effectively.
2. Determine how to restructure the school day so that the students who need the most support are given more instructional opportunities.
3. Create a plan for monitoring the progress of the extended learning time initiatives as well as for continuous improvement.

References and Resources

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