
Increasing Time-on-Task and Student Engagement

Center on Instruction/National High School Center

Time-on-task refers to the amount of time students spend attending to school-related tasks (Prater, 1992), such as following directions and engaging in learning activities. Time-on-task is also sometimes referred to as “engaged time.” Studies indicate that up to 50% of the school day is spent on non-instructional activities in general and special education classrooms (Good, 1983; Thurlow et al., 1983), leaving ample room for improvement in the area of time management. While there is some relationship between time-on-task (or engaged time) and student achievement, simply increasing the amount of time available for instruction is not enough to achieve learning gains. Time allocated for instruction must be appropriate; that is, at the appropriate instructional level for students and delivered in a way that is effective, efficient, meaningful, and motivating to students. It is important to keep in mind that most studies have measured *allocated time* (time students are required to be in class), and only a small number of studies have attempted to measure *engaged time* (time students participate in learning activities) and *academic learning time* (time when true learning occurs) (Aronson, Zimmerman, & Carlos, 1998). However, findings from those studies tend to support a moderate relationship between engaged time and achievement and an even larger relationship between academic learning time and achievement (see Cotton & Wikelund, 1990).

Action Principles

For State

1. Enhance teacher understanding and use of strategies designed to increase student time-on-task by providing high-quality professional development concentrated on features of effective instruction, instructional management, and classroom management. Though research is inconclusive about the most effective ways to increase instructional time within the classroom, most researchers agree that improving teachers’ time management techniques is a good starting point (Hossler et al., 1988).
2. Embed specific information on time-on-task, student engagement, and academic learning time within teacher preparation programs at institutions of higher education.

For District

1. Reinforce and extend professional development provided by the SEA. This can be done through instructional coaches who work directly with teachers, model strategies taught during professional development sessions, and offer frequent feedback to teachers.

For School

1. Improve time management, increase the proportion of time spent on academic subjects, and adopt alternative academic calendars to maximize the amount of time available for student learning (Aronson, Zimmerman, & Carlos, 1998).
2. Actively engage students in learning at appropriate levels of difficulty throughout the day (Aronson, Zimmerman, & Carlos, 1998; Fisher, 2009; Prater, 1992). This applies to independent seatwork in particular, which consumes much of the academic time in classrooms, especially at the higher grade levels (Rock & Thread, 2009).
3. Monitor student performance through formative and summative assessment and use student data to inform instructional decision-making and ensure appropriate levels of instruction (Aronson, Zimmerman, & Carlos, 1998).
4. Differentiate instruction by using various grouping formats, modifying assignments, allowing students to respond in multiple ways, and using other effective instructional strategies such as reteaching and providing examples.

- Utilize classroom and behavior management strategies that reduce transition times between activities and disruptions during instructional time (Prater, 1992).

References and Resources

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