Scheduling and Learning Time: Introduction

Center on Instruction

A recent report from the National Center on Time and Learning (NCTL) demonstrates a correlation between increased learning time and boosts in middle school and high school achievement. While the report shows positive trends, researchers acknowledge the exploratory nature of the data and emphasize the need for more definitive research in this area (Gewertz, 2009). Other research supports the effectiveness of well-designed programs that expand learning time by a minimum of 300 hours per school year (see Frazier & Morrison, 1998). However, extending learning time into before- and after-school hours can be difficult to implement effectively due to the complexity of integrating "extra" instruction with existing academic instruction during the school day (see James-Burdumy, Dynarski, & Deke, 2007).

Increased learning time, defined as increasing the length of the school day, week, or year schedule to significantly increase the total number of school hours devoted to academic and enrichment activities, is an area of high interest as states, districts, and schools strive to raise students' achievement. Many states and districts have considered various ways to increase the amount of time available to students for learning activities, including restructuring and extending the school day (and altering the school year structure), and providing full-day kindergarten and preschool programs. Schools and teachers have, for example, implemented block scheduling, reduced time spent in elective classes to create guided study halls that give students additional support, increased time spent in core academic classes, and reduced transition times both between and within classes.

Unfortunately, just increasing the amount of instructional time is not enough to achieve sufficient learning gains. Instruction provided during allocated time must be at an appropriate level and delivered in a way that is effective, efficient, meaningful, and motivating. Ultimately, the success of altering the school day to increase learning time will depend on how well teachers are trained to use the extra time.

The quality of instruction (including instructional time provided before and after school) can be enhanced by strategies that increase student time-on-task and engagement and by mastery learning techniques. Both of these strategy sets are similar in intent, and both provide students with instruction at appropriate levels, use assessment data to inform instruction, and differentiate instruction to increase student achievement. Coupling increased instructional time with quality instruction will help students become more active and motivated, with the potential to achieve greater learning gains.

Finally, adequate and structured instructional planning time is another component of developing and delivering quality instruction. Shared planning time for teams of teachers is useful for collaboratively analyzing student data, planning instruction, coordinating lesson plans, and working through common curricular "problem spots." This time can also be used to provide grade level, subject, or interdisciplinary team professional development.

References

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