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**Extending the School Day**

Extra time is being championed by reformers left and right.

By Ron Schachter

Increasing the hours and days that students spend in the classroom isn't exactly the newest idea for improving outcomes in struggling schools. But it may be the best one.

A handful of pioneering districts have been practicing—and paying for—that approach for better than a decade. Yet the idea of extended learning time (ELT) has taken on new urgency, thanks to growing concerns about competing in a global economy in which students in countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Japan, and China log considerably longer school days and months than their American counterparts. In recent months, President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have underscored the importance of more time in the classroom as a critical component of education reform.

"Every time the president talks about international competitiveness and the difference that more educational time makes in other countries, it helps build a movement," says Jennifer Davis, the president and CEO of the National Center on Time and Learning in Washington, D.C.

According to the center, more than 700 schools (about 75 percent of them charters and the remainder ordinary public schools) have extended their day. Davis says districts largely prefer the extended day rather than the more expensive extended-year approach. (A 2006 study by the Education Commission of the States calculated that adding just a single extra school day in California would cost almost $293 million.)

**Time Is Something We Can Control**  
"It's a trend that's really taking off," says Michael Clough, superintendent of Sheridan School District, just south of Denver. "The one variable that we can have an impact on is time. These are children who need the extra time and the opportunity." This past fall, Clough stretched the day at Sheridan's Fort Logan Elementary School to 5 p.m. three times a week.

Administrators such as Clough are joining a chorus that's been singing the praises and extolling the results of ELT for years. Seven years ago, Volusia County Schools in DeLand, Florida, launched its Plus One program, which added an extra hour to the standard 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. school day for students at 12 of the district's 50 elementary schools.

Volusia superintendent Margaret Smith explains that all Plus One schools were underperforming and eligible for Title I funding, which she used to pay an additional $8,000 a year to each teacher.

"There were not enough hours to cover the curriculum and still work with students," adds Andrew Spar, president of the 3,300-member Volusia Teachers Organization, who negotiated the salary increase. "These are schools where you need as much time as you can get to provide interventions and remediation."

Spar says teachers at the 12 schools were more than willing to expand the school day. "It's in our contract that any school can waive an aspect with approval by 80 percent of the teachers." At most of the future Plus One schools, the approval rate exceeded 90 percent.

Most important, Smith has realized a substantial return on investment. "We've seen an improvement in proficiency in reading, language arts, math, and science," she says, and adds that the performance of Plus One students on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test has improved at twice the rate of peers at Volusia's other elementary schools.

A longer school day has long been a staple for the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) national network, which has grown since 1994 to 99 open-enrollment schools for underserved populations in 20 states. At the KIPP Philadelphia Charter School, where students start two to three grade levels behind, the day begins at 7:30 a.m. and lasts until 5 p.m. (The school also holds classes on many Saturdays, and has added three weeks in August to start the school year.)

Marc Mannella, who founded the Philadelphia school in 2003, says that the extended day covers more than core subjects. "We don't have to make cuts to the breadth and scope of the curriculum we offer our kids. We give them more reading and math, but not at the expense of arts, science, and gym."

Mannella says that approach is working, noting that the students who started as fifth graders eight years ago are finishing their senior year at local high schools and that 90 percent are headed to college.

Massachusetts, meanwhile, has become the first state to embrace ELT on a large scale, and since 2005 has provided an unwavering $1,300 per child to 19 schools in nine districts for 300 additional hours in school annually. Each school participating in the Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time Initiative has made a side agreement with the local teachers union to stretch the day.

How the schools use the extra time, and how they have redesigned the school day varies. In Fall River, Kuss Middle School, which had been threatened with a state takeover, used its two extra hours daily to increase writing instruction; to add ELA and math "ramp-up" groups for students needing extra support; and to start a 20-week course for eighth graders to review content for the state achievement tests. Boston's Clarence Edwards Middle School invested its newfound time into social studies and science blocks; elective courses, from Latin dance and fashion design to swimming and oral communication, taught by a spate of community partners; and its own version of ELA and math ramp-up groups.

Both schools also provided more teacher collaboration and planning time. And both have made notable progress. Kuss has met its AYP improvement targets two years running. Edwards has reduced achievement gaps in ELA and science by 80 percent and 66 percent respectively.

**It Has to Be More Time Used Well**  
Practitioners of ELT emphasize that just adding more school time will not make a difference in student outcomes. "There has to be more time used well," says the Time and Learning center's Davis. "And the focus also needs to be on professional development and data-driven instruction."

Isabel Owen, a research associate for educational policy at the Center for American Progress—a leading advocate for extended learning—stresses that any additional time needs to be part of a comprehensive educational plan. "Our version restructures the whole schedule to include professional development and planning and more time for enrichment programs as well as academics," she says.

That approach, and three days spent observing schools in Massachusetts, prompted Sheridan superintendent Michael Clough to expand learning time at Fort Logan Elementary. "We knew, as we looked at the root causes of why our children were not succeeding, that we just didn't have enough time in the school day," he says. "We needed additional time for remediation. And science, the arts, and other enrichment programs were being squeezed out to make room for interventions in math and reading."

Clough's solution was to split the responsibilities for these programs among Fort Logan's teachers and additional after-school staff. Among the after-school partners are international education provider Sangari Active Science, which specializes in hands-on experiments; a local drumming program; and a karate club, which Clough says has the added benefit of reducing disciplinary problems.

Fort Logan's regular teachers also work longer days—for an additional $1,543 annually—but they use the time to meet collaboratively for curriculum planning and professional development. The price of the expanded day comes to $700 a year per student, says Clough.

**Do the Costs Justify the Results?**  
Still, some studies have questioned whether extended learning time yields enough bang for the buck. The National Academy of Education in Washington recently found that by its calculations, every 10 percent increase in time has resulted in just a 2 percent jump in actual learning.

Even for those who agree that ELT generates bigger returns, the larger question is how to pay for it. "There's no sugarcoating the fact that it takes resources," says the Center for American Progress's Owen, who estimates that providing 300 extra hours in learning time will increase school budgets by 6 percent to 20 percent, depending on the staffing model.

Dan Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, takes a more sober view. "Adding to learning time and spending more time on task is a key strategy, but it has run into an economic reality that's going to make it difficult to happen."

Volusia superintendent Margaret Smith suggests that fellow administrators target federal funds through programs such as Title I, Race to the Top, and innovation grants "and re-prioritize the way you use them."

"If I could, I'd have it in every school, no doubt about it," Smith says. "Our big challenge is, how do we fund these programs that do make a difference?"