



READY THOUGHTS

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Caution: Expanded Learning Time \neq Expanded Learning

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The concept of expanded learning is gaining new traction all over the country - and that, ironically, should worry many of us who have been promoting it for years.

That's because many recent proposals would expand learning time, not necessarily expand learning opportunities. Expanding when and even where learning occurs is unlikely to produce more actual learning until we expand how we define and measure what and how students learn.

The push to expand learning time is occurring in cities both big and small: Chicago begins rolling out a 90-minute expansion of the public school day in January, while the Battle Creek (Mich.) Public Schools just adopted a high school improvement plan that adds 50 minutes to the instructional day. Nationwide, thousands of public schools have expanded their schedules or plan to do so, according to a report by Education Sector.

Why is this happening? With recent efforts to improve academic achievement producing underwhelming results in many school districts, adding more academic instruction seems like a logical next step. Done incorrectly, however, these efforts will be disappointing and dangerous.

The danger is that we will undermine more than a decade of work and investments to strengthen out-of-school time learning opportunities and to develop infrastructure to support the alignment and integration of in- and out-of-school learning.

The disappointment will come because we have no definitive data showing that more school time alone produces more learning. The key factor in learning is the quality of instruction, not the quantity. More of the same won't net significant achievement gains unless the "same" is rich enough, varied enough or relevant enough to engage students.

While the current push to expand learning time offers great opportunities, it also presents great risks.

The pressure to increase learning time in schools could lead to a decrease in overall learning time in communities. Public funding available to community-based organizations (CBOs) through programs like the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CLCs) could be redirected toward schools - where the costs per hour are two-to-three times higher than at CBOs and where there is less of a commitment to fully cover the non-school hours during which parents work. Those CBOs will have to reduce programming or even shut down. (The U.S. Department of Education has established a waiver process to give states more flexibility to meet performance standards, including the use of CLC funds to expand the school day. Read more about that here.)

The pressure to hold schools, rather than community-school partnerships, accountable for expanded learning could destabilize collaborations that are working. Effective community-school partnerships - like those supported by the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) and The After School Corp. (TASC) in New York City - acknowledge that young people need a broader menu of learning experiences and social supports than schools alone can provide. Shared responsibility for a broad set of learning goals allows these partnerships to make expanded learning a community responsibility that requires contributions from many partners.

The only way to head off the dangers is to refocus the debate. The debate should not just be about time, place or funding control; it should be about content, method and purpose. Once we agree on an important fundamental question - what do students need to learn? - reasonable options for expanding the how, where and when of learning will follow.

Generating the expanded "what" list is easy. Ask educators, families, youth and community leaders to list the skills and competencies young people need to have to be ready for college, work and life. The answers will likely span the academic, vocational, social, civic and physical domains. We use the Ready by 21 Readiness Target to illustrate this range of goals for learning and development. While schools aim for the bulls-eye of the target, community partners generally focus on the outer rings: building skills and competencies that contribute to academic achievement and to overall readiness for successful adulthood.

Thankfully, many educators have noted that extra school time will be wasted if schools just do more of the same. Jean-Claude Brizard, chief of Chicago's Public Schools, emphasizes the importance of putting balance back into the curriculum by reviving many of the "extras" that have been stripped away over the years - such as recess, art and music - because of the focus on improving math and reading scores.

These educators don't really want to expand school; they want to expand learning. That requires an all-hands-on-deck approach to define what should be learned, then to expand opportunities for learning.



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