



To Fix Education, School Hours and Money Need to Be Better Spent

By Frederick M. Hess

The recent push among policymakers and activists for a longer school day is just the latest manifestation of the “more is better” approach to school reform. But more time in school is not necessarily proven to generate better results. Successful schools with longer days have other characteristics that count toward success but that are not as hard to replicate. Moreover, without curricular or instructional reform, failing schools with longer school days will simply fail their students for several more hours per week.

More money. More teachers. More time. The oldest recipe for school improvement is “more.”

Popular today is the push to extend the school day. With champions like Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and President Barack Obama, advocates are ready to spend whatever it takes to add more time to the school day. The president recently declared that “the challenges of a new century demand more time in the classroom.”

“More” is a winning political strategy. It avoids hard choices or the need to identify waste. But excellence requires finding ways to accomplish more rather than to get more. Plus, we have already tried the “more” strategy. Largely because of a hiring binge that has boosted teacher ranks 50 percent faster than enrollment over thirty-five years, school spending has skyrocketed. After inflation, public K–12 education spending has tripled in four decades. The results? Not so great.

Adding time is expensive. National adoption of the extended-day model used by schools in the Massachusetts 2020 Expanded Learning Time Initiative would cost \$40–70 billion a year. With the same teachers, materials, and techniques in

place, it is unclear how we can be confident that this money will purchase something other than more of the same. Spent otherwise, those dollars could finance raises of \$50,000 or \$60,000 for the nation’s 1 million best teachers—doubling pay for the top third.

Now, more time certainly can be a good idea. A defining characteristic of high-performing charter schools like the KIPP Academies is a longer school day and Saturday instruction. Of course, their recipe also calls for talented and impassioned faculty, firm discipline, a powerful school culture, and students who have chosen to be there. Unfortunately, the “more time” crowd focuses only on

Key points in this *On the Issues*:

- Adopting longer school days nationwide could cost as much as \$70 billion per year—enough to double the pay of the best third of teachers.
- There is evidence that a longer day does not boost performance; at best, a longer day produces only modest improvements.
- Schools would be wiser to make use of the time they already have, much of it currently wasted on noninstructional activities.

Frederick M. Hess is a resident scholar and director of education policy studies at AEI. A version of this article appeared in *U.S. News & World Report* on April 27, 2009.

the most expensive part of that recipe, apparently hoping that the other ingredients will sort themselves out if kids sit in classes longer. In fact, research is more mixed than advocates usually acknowledge.

A 2003 *Review of Educational Research* analysis tallied dozens of studies and found no systematic evidence that additional time raised student achievement.¹ Some studies, including the 1994 National Education Commission on Time and Learning report, have found increased instructional time modestly linked with higher achievement—but that argues for making good use of time before seeking more.² Research from the National Center for Education Statistics suggests that teachers spend only about 68 percent of class time engaged in instruction; the rest is consumed by everything from paperwork to assemblies.³ But advocates find it easier to demand more time than to dirty their hands squeezing fat out of the school day.

Directly relevant here is the “small high schools” fad. In the late 1990s, reformers noticed that small high schools had surprising success with at-risk students. Billions were spent in urban districts on new, small high schools or to reconfigure high schools into smaller “schools” that shared a building. Results were disappointing. The idea was sensible enough, but it turned out that many of the new schools lacked the talented teachers, impassioned founders, autonomy, and intensive support that made the pioneering efforts successes.

So, when proponents tout preliminary results from the twenty-six schools in the multimillion dollar Extended Learning Time initiative, caution is warranted. Beyond money, these schools are getting exceptional support, coaching, and acclaim. It is hard to be sure how much the time itself really matters.

Simply locking students in mediocre schools for additional hours presumes that the proper response to chaos or tedium is more of the same. And ham-handedly extending the day can disrupt fruitful activities for millions of youths who have rewarding lives after three o'clock.

A longer day could make sense for many students and offer a respite for stretched families. Where schools know how to use the hours, where talented teachers have the ideas and energy, and where families think the student would benefit, okay. But before proposing expensive new policies, wedging kids into lousy schools for hundreds of extra hours, and imposing substantial new demands on teachers, we must ensure that schools are making good use of the time they have.

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Notes

1. Harris Cooper, Jeffrey C. Valentine, Kelly Charlton, and April Melson, “The Effects of Modified School Calendars on Student Achievement and on School and Community Attitudes,” *Review of Educational Research* 73, no. 1 (2003): 1–52.

2. Cheryl Kane, *Prisoners of Time: Research* (Washington, DC: National Education Commission on Time and Learning, September 1994), available at www.ed.gov/pubs/PrisonersOfTime/PoTRearch/index.html (accessed May 18, 2009).

3. Marianne Perie, David P. Baker, and Sharon Bobbitt, “Time Spent Teaching Core Academic Subjects in Elementary Schools: Comparisons across Community, School, Teacher, and Student Characteristics” (statistical analysis report, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, DC, February 1997), available at www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/16/77/91.pdf (accessed May 18, 2009).