



Education: Learning Takes Time

Newsweek

Jan. 22, 2007 issue - It doesn't sound like much at first. Students attending a public school in urban Chicago go for 5 hours and 45 minutes daily, while the New York City school day is 65 minutes longer. Now, factor in that New York City kids attend school 12 more days than their Windy City counterparts. Add it up, and it's clear the New York kids have gained a distinct advantage—eight more weeks of instruction time a year.

Those striking inequities—and others—were highlighted by a new database produced by the National Council on Teacher Quality, a Gates Foundation-funded watchdog group. Researchers waded through phone-book-size union contracts and school-district policy booklets to come up with a portrait of how the 50 largest school districts are educating American kids (nctq.org/cb).

The dramatic disparities—for example, kids in Memphis get about five weeks less schooling than kids in Houston—have reignited enthusiasm for an old idea: close the achievement gap by making the school day longer. This week, as part of the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind, Sen. Edward Kennedy is expected to propose legislation that calls for the federal government to carve out as much as \$150 million to help schools come up with a plan for longer school days.

The idea has been around for decades. Twenty-four years ago, the landmark "A Nation at Risk" report, which charted the course for school reform, noted that public schools in the United States lagged behind most of the industrialized world when it came to the amount of time kids spent in class—by as much as 30 percent. The report called for expanding the school day and year in public schools. While some districts moved to a year-round calendar to relieve overcrowding, longer school days aimed at improving student achievement was a notion that never took hold. These days, as test scores have become the yardstick by which public schools are measured, reformers say an increase in instructional time could help give kids the boost they need to succeed.

"We've put the burden on the children to improve," says Jennifer Davis, president of Massachusetts 2020, which is setting up model extended-day programs there. "We need to give them the time and sources to do it."

They also need to do it right. Rather than slapping on an extra hour of reading and math drills, researchers say, schools should offer more science, social studies, art and music, as well as creative projects like producing newsletters (to practice writing) or building model houses (to use fractions). Not everyone embraces the idea. Some parents say kids need their downtime. Teachers worry about exhaustion, and districts are concerned about additional costs—heartier snacks, extra materials for projects, teacher salaries.

But Markus Watson, an eighth grader who attends Matthew J. Kuss Middle School in Fall River, Mass., is convinced. His school was one of 10 public schools in Massachusetts that adopted an extended-day schedule this year. When he first heard his school day would end at 4:15 instead of 2:15, his heart sank. But the extended day has made school more appealing. Yes, he's gotten more instruction in English, but he's also become a ham radio operator and played the lead role in "Macbeth." "We're learning more than we usually do from teachers," he says. "And it keeps me out of trouble." That's a lesson that is worth repeating.

—Peg Tyre

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