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## Steve Scauzillo: More class time, more learning

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BUSY people often say, "If only there were more minutes in the day ..."

Today, teachers, administrators, education think-tankers and politicians are advocating adding time to the average school day.

Talk of adding minutes to the K-12 day - even adding days to the school year - is all the rage in academia. Education-minded LA Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has suggested it. Even Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., is proposing the idea for the No Child Left Behind revision.

It re-emerged as a topic for discussion in the '90s and before that, the '80s, and now as an old/new idea after Bill Gates' National Council on Teacher Quality last month got a hold of collective bargaining agreements of every major school district in the 50 states and started comparing. What Gates and company found was, this country is far from having a uniform education policy despite the No Child Left Behind program, which many teachers and administrators chafe under.

For example, Newsweek magazine reported Gates' data crunchers found public school students in Chicago are in class for 5 hours 45 minutes a day, while those in New York City attend school for 6 hours 50 minutes. Also, those New York City kids are in school 12 more days than their Chicago counterparts.

Pasadena Unified School District averages 6 hours 17 minutes a day for high school and 5 hours 15 minutes for elementary schools.

In Milwaukee, high schoolers learn in 7-hour days, as do students in Mesa, Arizona. In the districts I looked at, whether in California, New York, Virginia or Arizona, all adhered to the magic number of 180 instructional days per year. No local school district was surveyed (see [www.nctq.org/cb](http://www.nctq.org/cb) to create an online data report).

This kind of information is not readily available on school district Web sites, either. Why not? Are local districts shying from this debate? Or maybe what I suspect is they don't want to open up this can of worms.

Adding school minutes or days would mean new contracts and requires more dollars to compensate teachers and staff. PUSD's Assistant Superintendent George McKenna said Pasadena would be hard pressed to add days or instructional time because it doesn't have the funds.

But time is often mentioned as a potential solution to low reading, writing and math scores. "If only I had more time to work with the slower student" is a refrain heard often in education circles. "I have to rush through these concepts" is what I heard from a math teacher friend.

Newsweek ("Learning Takes Time") reported that 10 public schools in Massachusetts extended their school day by two hours; school that ended at 2:15 p.m. now ends at 4:15 p.m. One student quoted said he learned ham radio techniques and played the lead in "Macbeth." He added: "And it keeps me out of trouble."

Extending school days could reduce crime. Police call the

3 p.m. to 6 p.m. slot the burglary hours. Latch-key kids who are not in after-school programs would have something to do - something constructive, that is.

Teachers of music, art and yes, ham radio operation, could come back to public schools now that there would be time in the day to teach such electives.

Sound too good to be true?

Mike Spence, a 16-year board member at West Covina Unified, has been advocating longer school hours and calendars for his entire board career.

The district's charter school already has the longest day of WCUSD schools. All district schools adhere to a 184-day calendar year (four more days than most districts). It lengthened the school day two years ago for high schoolers and last year for middle schoolers and registers above state averages in minutes, he said.

But simply adding time won't help student performance alone. Instruction must be substantial, not frivolous.

"Sometimes it comes down to examining what you are doing with your existing minutes. You can spend a whole day doing nothing," Spence said.

At West Covina, showing a video or movie in class must be approved by the superintendent, and it must be integral to the curriculum. "I once walked into a geography class and they were showing 'Dennis The Menace.' I said 'Dennis The Menace' in geography class! Come on, people!"

Just getting the school culture - teachers, students and parents - to cut out non-academic activities such as Halloween parties and assemblies was a battle, Spence said.

Getting the set-in-its-ways California educational bureaucracy to change by adding more instructional days or hours will be a war.

Still, if they can do it in Massachusetts ...

[steve.scauzillo@sqvn.com](mailto:steve.scauzillo@sqvn.com)

Steve Scauzillo is the opinion page editor for the San Gabriel Valley Newspaper Group.

Bill Bell is on vacation.