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# More school can mean more learning

## Vision 2015 wants to add 140 teaching hours to Del. school year

By ALISON KEPNER, *The News Journal*

Posted Monday, February 19, 2007

Tennessee and Arizona both require 180 school days a year, but a Tennessee student spends almost 63 percent more hours learning each year than an Arizona child, because of the states' minimum annual instructional hours.

Delaware law doesn't mandate how many days classes must meet, but requires students in first through 11th grade to have 1,060 instructional hours a year -- 340 more than Arizona but 110 fewer than Tennessee.

Vision 2015 -- a coalition of business, education and community leaders aiming to transform Delaware's "mediocre" school system into a world leader by 2015 -- proposes adding 140 instructional hours by extending either the school year or the school day.

"Other countries are simply putting in more time and yielding better results than we are," said Paul Herdman, president of the Rodel Foundation of Delaware, the educational nonprofit that helped pay for development of the Vision 2015 plan. "We settled on 1,200 hours because it was a stretch goal for the state. ... This would be the highest expectation in the U.S."

State officials said they still are calculating the cost, which may vary depending on whether hours are added to the day or days to the year. Daily extensions generally are cheaper.

Schools must change, said Chris Gabrieli, co-founder of Massachusetts 2020, a nonprofit that successfully advocated extended time in Massachusetts: "It's really clear that students do not have enough time in the conventional school day to get the skills that they need to succeed."



Shamir Bryant, 6, and Noemi Ortiz, 8, attend an extended school year at Thomas Edison Charter School. [\(Buy photo\)](#)

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First-grade teacher Pamela Bingham helps David Brown (left) and Jadakiss Demby with math problems at Thomas Edison Charter. [\(Buy photo\)](#)

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Adding instructional hours "is the single most promising reform I have been part of working in urban schools," said Mike Sabin, principal of Edwards Middle School in Charlestown, Mass., one of 10 schools implementing the pilot program.

"We inherit many underperforming students," Sabin said. "To accelerate the learning of students, more time is needed. To accelerate the learning of students who are not highly motivated, you have to be able to require them to stay."

Massachusetts mandates 900 annual instructional hours, and the \$6.5 million pilot program required schools to increase that by 30 percent. Next year, when many of the 84 other schools developing plans join, the requirement will shift to 25 percent. Schools receive \$1,300 per pupil to pay for teachers, programming and other costs. Sabin said his school will spend \$250 more per child, using money from grants and other fundraisers.

Nationwide, the school year ranges from 175 days in Kentucky to 190 in Michigan, according to a new online database created by the National Council on Teacher Quality.

Instructional time -- which doesn't include lunch, recess, period breaks or other nonacademic activities -- ranges from four hours daily in Arizona and California to 6 1/2 hours in Tennessee. Thirty-five states require a 180-day school year, and 34 mandate at

least five instructional hours a day, the Council of Chief State School Officers found in a 2004 survey. Delaware requires 3 1/2 hours.

**Right kind of time**

By conventional wisdom it seems clear: More time in school means more learning. Yet research shows that isn't necessarily true. Adding hours doesn't automatically boost learning. Adding the right kind of hours does.

A January report by the Washington, D.C., think tank Education Sector explored the issue. Because most schools that have added time have done so as part of a larger reform, author Elena Silva said isolating the effect of extending the day or year is difficult, but earlier studies offer insight.

"Any extended-time proposal must focus on providing the right kind of time, i.e., instructional time and academic learning time, rather than just adding hours in general," Silva said, noting that much time is lost to start-up routines, interruptions, test preparation and poor classroom management.

Schools participating in the Massachusetts program don't just have teachers lecture longer. Instead, they use the extra hours to concentrate on basics such as reading and math, add time to subjects cut in recent years such as history, provide tutoring and small-group instruction, and add enrichment activities such as dance or theater.

"Expanding learning time should not be about taking last year's schedule and adding 'X' minutes," Gabrieli said. "It should be about 'Let's take a larger period of time and redesign it.'"

Some critics say that while the extra time is good for students in failing urban districts, it prevents students in successful suburban districts -- who have access to private music lessons, SAT-prep classes and summer camps -- from being able to benefit from such enriching activities.

While most researchers agree that poor children -- those who have limited or no access to out-of-school enrichment activities -- benefit the most from the added hours, Gabrieli and others argue that in today's world all students benefit from more class time.

Vision 2015 leaders want to extend school time partly because they worry U.S. students are falling behind their international peers. In 1983, the National Commission on Education Excellence recommended lengthening the U.S. school year to between 200 and 220 days with 11-month teacher contracts. In its publication "A Nation at Risk," the federally funded group compared the 180-day U.S. school year with the 190- to 210-day calendars in Europe and the 240-day average in Japan.

Some Delaware schools have added time -- and seen results.

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Thomas Edison Charter School in Wilmington meets 205 days, from 8:15 a.m. to 4 p.m. Additional before- and after-school programs, Saturday tutoring and summer school also are available. The extra time allows 90-minute blocks of math and language arts and two 40-minute daily special periods, such as art, music, physical education and technology classes.

The time is helping close achievement gaps, Principal Charles Hughes said. About 95 percent of the school's 840 students are minority-group members, and 80 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Last year's eighth-grade test scores show success.

In 2003, 47 percent met or exceeded the state reading standard. In 2006, 95 percent did. In writing, the number went from 35 percent to 95 percent. The math increase was from 16 percent to 73 percent.

#### **A new calendar**

Maple Lane Elementary in Brandywine and Seaford Central Elementary in Seaford have "balanced calendars" that offer students shorter, more frequent vacations and additional instructional time each year.

At Maple Lane, summer vacation is shortened by three weeks, time that is reallocated throughout the school year in week-long blocks. Pupils have the option of attending school during those weeks to get help in reading or math, or to participate in enrichment activities such as karate and photography. Fund for Children's Literacy Grants of \$18,000 this year and \$20,000 next year help pay for teachers and other costs.

The balanced calendar aims to combat "summer learning loss." Students may forget what they have learned from one grade to the next when the school years are interrupted by 12 weeks of summer vacation.

The traditional summer break was based on an agricultural society, Principal Julianne Pecorella said, noting that a balanced year makes more sense for Maple Lane families today: "I don't have any kids helping in any fields. Most parents work. Most kids are in day care."

About 80 percent of students participate in the optional activities, meaning they attend school 1,202 hours. In the three years the extra time has been offered, Maple Lane has seen test scores improve. Last year, 86 percent met the state standard, up from 72 percent in 2003.

Seaford Central parent Andi Davis said she and her son, Cohen, love the balanced year.

"The parents who have children at the school are very loyal to it. Once you've done it, that's what you want to do," she said.

Through enrichment classes in the intersession, her second-grader son has learned to square dance. He has studied worms and made related crafts.

"The kids love it. They call it 'fun school,' " Davis said.

Extra time relieves the pressure on teachers, too, Gabrieli said: "How much time is spent on a topic is related to how long it takes students to get there, not related to an arbitrary bell."

Students are seeing a difference, he said.

"Children tell me, 'The teachers answer my questions now. They don't say, 'Ask me later,' 'Come after school,' or 'I'll help you later.' "

*Editor's Note: This is the second story in a continuing series examining the effectiveness of Vision 2015 ideas elsewhere. Next week's article will look at empowering principals.*

#### **ON THE WEB**

- Read a national report on rethinking schools' use of time:

[www.educationsector.org/research/research\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=442238](http://www.educationsector.org/research/research_show.htm?doc_id=442238)

- Learn more about Massachusetts' initiative: [www.mass2020.org/](http://www.mass2020.org/)

- Compare policies at districts across the country: [www.nctq.org/cb/](http://www.nctq.org/cb/)

Contact Alison Kepner at 324-2965 or [akepner@delawareonline.com](mailto:akepner@delawareonline.com).

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How do you think Delaware schools need to change to make the state a world leader in education? What