



Take Your Time

Why States Should Use Education Waivers to Increase Learning Time

Isabel Owen

September 2011

Last week President Barack Obama announced that the administration plans to waive some aspects of the No Child Left Behind law. But states have to develop solid plans to improve instruction to receive a waiver. Specifically, states must adopt college- and career-ready standards for all students, focus interventions on the bottom 15 percent of low-performing schools, and develop teacher evaluation systems using student performance.

Commentators are fixated on waiving the high-profile pieces of the law such as the timeline for ensuring all students are proficient in reading and math and seeking flexibility for the highly qualified teacher targets. But a critical waiver option on expanded learning time is being overlooked in all the hoopla. Expanded learning time is a valuable tool for improving student achievement, as demonstrated by schools that have implemented this school improvement strategy. Some federal guidance is needed, though, to give states a better idea of how to use that extra time wisely.

States granted a waiver will be allowed to use funding from the 21st Century Community Learning Center program—a program that funds academic and enrichment programs for students outside of the usual school day—to expand learning time. These funds were previously limited to activities during nonschool hours, such as before and after school. As a condition of receiving a waiver, states must also improve their low-performing schools by adhering to “turnaround principles,” which include expanded learning time. State leaders resolute in turning around their lowest-performing schools would be wise to take advantage of these options.

This is not the first time the administration has suggested more time in school as a catalyst for school turnaround. The School Improvement Grant, or SIG, program provides significant federal funds to turn around struggling schools, and two of its four models require increasing learning time. A majority (94 percent) of schools receiving SIG funding are implementing either the transformation or turnaround models that increase

learning time. The same intervention models appear in Race to the Top, a competitive grant program to reward states implementing reform, and increasing learning time is also found in the Investing in Innovation grant, a grant program used to scale up innovative programs with a demonstrated record of success.

Clearly, more school time is emerging as a key intervention strategy. But there is little federal guidance on what exactly increasing learning time means, and some states may be tempted to take the easy way out.

Taken literally, increasing time could mean simply adding a few minutes to the school day or a few hours to the year. One can imagine a school extending the school day by five minutes, or decreasing the number of minutes students spend at lunch or recess. Those minutes can be designated for instruction, and bingo, the school has fulfilled the requirement of more time. But this will do little to boost student achievement.

Critics are right to point out that more time spent doing the same things will not change a school. Schools that have seen the greatest improvements in student achievement by adding time to the schedule did so by redesigning the way time is used. Teachers, administrators, and union officials joined together to rework the schedule to incorporate the additional time strategically. Extra time can be used to promote a balanced schedule that increases time for core academic classes; boosts opportunities for arts, music, and other enrichment activities; and provides teachers more time to review student data and make plans to improve their classroom work.

There are several promising examples of schools across the country showing hopeful results after redesigning the school calendar to incorporate additional time.

The Clarence Edwards Middle School in Boston uses part of the extra time for targeted instruction based on individual students' academic needs. It is now one of the highest-performing middle schools in Boston. Data-driven instruction, more time for teacher collaboration, and more time for engaging enrichment programming are the essential parts of this redesigned schedule.

Some districts, too, have deliberately worked to incorporate more time. Earlier this month while in Chicago, Education Secretary Arne Duncan praised the efforts of Mayor Rahm Emanuel to lengthen the school day in Chicago, where schools are beginning to embrace the city's new Longer Day Pioneer Program, which offers teachers a 2 percent raise in return for teaching an additional 90 minutes per day.

There has also been action at the state level. Some states, such as Washington and Connecticut, passed legislation allowing for increases in learning time, while others are examining how time is used. Former Rhode Island Gov. Donald Carcieri, for example, convened a taskforce to examine learning time throughout the state. The

legislature allocated \$100,000 for schools to redesign the school day based on the recommendations from the taskforce.

Massachusetts is a leader in this area. Since launching the Expanded Learning Time Initiative in 2005, schools across the state are showing impressive results, and not by accident.

Massachusetts's success is a result of careful planning and a firm definition of what expanded learning time means. Schools compete for an additional \$1,300 per student to add a minimum of 300 hours to the school calendar, for all students. Schools' redesign teams spend a year reworking the schedule to incorporate more time for core academics, enrichment programming, and increased time for teacher planning, collaboration, and professional development. Schools also commit to performance agreements evaluated by the Massachusetts Department of Education. If the school fails to meet its performance goals, their funding is in jeopardy.

The state-level guidance and thoughtful planning have led to dramatic outcomes.

The Matthew Kuss Middle School was one of the first schools in Massachusetts to receive funding to expand the school day, and it used that funding to lengthen each school day by 90 minutes. Once labeled a chronically underperforming school, it saw marked increases in student achievement, narrowing the gap between the number of eighth-grade students at Kuss and eighth graders in the state scoring proficient or advanced on the state assessment, from 28 points to 4 points. The Massachusetts Department of Education supported the effort by recruiting a new principal to lead the turnaround with expanded learning time at its core. Thanks to clear guidance and support from the state about how to use more time effectively, Kuss and the previously mentioned Edwards boast striking gains in student achievement.

States applying for federal waivers ought to follow the example of Massachusetts, where the state carefully crafted a definition of expanded learning time to ensure the additional time was used wisely to make a difference in the experience of both teachers and students.

And as the administration continues to highlight more time as an intervention strategy, perhaps they too can learn from Massachusetts and provide some guidance on what it means to increase learning time or establish some general parameters that would encourage states to expand time in effective ways.

Bills introduced in Congress tackle this point and include clear direction on how to expand learning time. In particular, the Time for Innovation Matters in Education Act, or TIME Act, details a firm definition of expanded learning time. It could be used as a guide for states using more time as a turnaround strategy. The TIME Act is sponsored by Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Rep. Donald Payne (D-NJ).

In addition, just as the waiver program offers flexibility for the 21st Century Community Learning Center program to include expanded learning time, so does the Improving Student Achievement and Engagement through Expanded Learning Time Act, allowing that funding to be used for expanded learning time in addition to other out-of-school time activities. The bill is sponsored by Sen. Bernard Sanders (I-VT).

Waivers are undeniably an opportunity for states to build on the best parts of No Child Left Behind and drive improvements in student achievement. Turning around the most troubled schools is crucial, and expanding learning time at those schools is one strategy that should not be overlooked as states build their waiver applications.

Because of the limited federal guidance around expanded learning time, it is easy for states to satisfy the requirement by tacking more minutes onto the end of the day or hours onto the end of the year. Instead of this timid step, however, states should consider increasing learning time as a catalyst for whole school redesign.

Isabel Owen is a Policy Analyst at American Progress.