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Time for Learning

Dr. J. Howard Johnston

The amount of time allocated for learning and the way that time is used is one of the few variables that can be influenced rather directly by school leaders. Fortunately, it is also a variable that has shown consistent links to student performance.

Now that schools are focused directly, and in some cases exclusively, on student achievement, there is a renewed interest on the ways that time can be found, allocated, organized, and modified to enhance learning opportunities for students. Ron Williamson, Professor of Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University and author of several books on scheduling, says, "Time is one of the things that principals can influence quite significantly – and the most important tool at their disposal is the daily schedule." Building a schedule, says Williamson, should not be seen just as an administrative responsibility but as an opportunity for school leaders to "intervene pretty directly in the instructional program of the school. It's the one place where 'instructional leadership' can make a real difference in the amount and quality of learning that goes on in the building." The secret, he continues, is to "treat time as a resource – just like money or personnel – that has to be allocated and managed to fulfill the school's core mission."

According to a recent Education Week article (Gerwertz, 2008), the consensus on time and learning is building, but like most things in education, the issue is somewhat more complex than it may appear at first glance. More than 30 years ago, the Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study sponsored by the State of California and the National Institutes of Education reported classroom-based research that established the link between time and learning. Since then, multiple studies have affirmed these early results and elaborated on that complex relationship. David Berliner's 1990 summary of time/learning research is an excellent summary of the work done up to that point. In it, he describes several types of time which, to differing degrees, fall under the control of school leaders and may affect student achievement outcomes:

• Allocated time is the time that the state, district, school, or teacher provides the student for instruction. For example a school may require that reading and language arts be taught 90 minutes every day… Allocated time is the time block set aside for that instruction–90 minutes a day, or 7 .5 hours a week or 300 hours a school year. Sometimes this is called scheduled time,

to distinguish it from the time actually allocated by teachers. In earlier studies, allocated time was called "opportunity to learn."

• Engaged time is usually defined as the time that students appear to be paying attention to materials or presentations that have instructional goals. A synonym for engaged time is "attention."

• Time-on-task is engaged time on particular learning tasks. The concept is not synonymous with engaged time, because it deals with engagement in planned learning experiences. A student may be deeply engaged in math homework or reading a comic book during a time period allocated to science, but that is not time on the desired task.

• Academic learning time (ALT) is that part of allocated time in a subject-matter area (physical education, science, or mathematics, for example) in which a student is engaged successfully in the activities or with the materials to which he or she is exposed, and for which those activities and materials are related to valued educational outcomes. This is a complex concept made up of a number of other concepts, such as allocated time (the amount of time provided for the task); time-on-task (engagement in tasks that are related to outcome measures or evaluation instruments in use); and success rate (the percent of engaged time that a student is experiencing a high success experience in class).

• Transition time is the non-instructional time before and after some instructional activity, such as when a teacher takes roll or gives back homework at the beginning of an instructional activity.

• Waiting time usually defined as the time that a student must wait to receive some instructional help. The time spent waiting to receive new assignments from the teacher, on a line to have the teacher check work, or waiting for the teacher's attention after raising one's hand in class are examples of waiting time.

• Pace, usually defined as the amount of content covered during some time period. For example, the number of vocabulary words covered by Christmas, or the number of mastery units covered in a semester will differ from classroom to classroom. In educational systems where standardized tests are used as outcomes, and where those tests sample items from a broad curriculum, students whose teacher exposes them to the most content ordinarily have a better chance of answering the test questions. As the pace of instruction increases, however, depth of coverage usually decreases.

All of these types of time affect student learning to some extent, so it is important for school leaders to consider all of them in planning for effective time use in their schools. To begin, principals should think about several broad initiatives to focus the school’s staff on time and how to use this valuable resource to full advantage. A large body of literature on the subject can be distilled into three big ideas:

Consider the Whole Day. Many schools described in the reports listed under Resources have found that they can provide extended services, including tutorials, academic enrichments, and other "opportunity boosters," by planning to use the entire day rather than just the hours allocated for academics. Youth-serving agencies, foundations, business partners, and other community groups have been willing to support before and after school initiatives that help kids succeed through a variety of activities. These include academic supports ranging from "homework clubs" to additional class time for struggling students, adult mentorships that help students stay focused on academic goals and school work, and community service or work related programs that help students link school to personal achievement goals. Some schools have secured support for such basics as after school transportation so that students can participate fully in many school-sponsored activities they might not otherwise be able to attend.

Protect the Academic Day. Many schools have created a core academic day at least 5-6 hours long that cannot be interrupted for any reason. Others have used block schedules, rotating schedules, or other innovations to minimize transition time and keep the focus on core subjects for extended periods of time.

Eliminate Time Wasters. Teachers and students can probably identify school practices that actually waste instructional time or contribute to a culture that does not value time as a resource. Some school leaders have created a "time task force" to monitor how schools use time and what they can do to eliminate wasteful practices. In some districts, formal time audits are used to determine if time is being used to its maximum advantage, and the results of these audits become the standards by which school management practices are evaluated. But such elaborate measures are probably not necessary at the outset; it's enough to get people talking about time and how it can be saved, allocated and used to maximize student learning.

Consider Technology. Think about the ways that technology can take over routine tasks that consume valuable academic time or actually create disruptions that must be managed before time can be used productively. Some schools have adopted "card scan" technology so that students "log in" to every class as they enter the room, thus eliminating the need for teachers to take attendance. Principals who use text messaging or other new communication technologies can make announcements or locate students without disturbing classes. Even if the principal can't imagine how technology might make time use more efficient, a gathering of students and tech-savvy teachers will generate dozens of ideas in short order. (For more on using e-communication to improve school management, see Don Bott's article on The Principals' Partnership website: http://www.principalspartnership.com/feature1008.pdf.)

John Maxwell, author of dozens of leadership books, has said that you can tell a person's values by looking at his or her calendar and check book. In short, we spend our time and money on the things that we value the most. That is good advice for schools as well. The way we spend our time and our money conveys to our staff, our students and our community exactly what we think is important and what we are willing to do to preserve and protect it. As both an individual and as the visible representative of an institution, school leaders must be completely

aware of the messages they are sending every day about what is important and what is not. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say."

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Author: J. Howard Johnston, Ph. D. Department of Secondary Education, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL. Email: hojofl@aol.com.

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