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Instructional Time Trends

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For more than 30 years, Education Commission of the States has tracked instructional time and frequently receives requests for information about policies and trends. In this Education Trends report, Education Commission of the States addresses some of the more frequent questions, including the impact of instructional time on achievement, variation in school start dates, and trends in school day and year length.

> "Instructional time requirements can help ensure consistency across districts but may clash with local control of school calendars."

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Thirty-six states measure the school year in hours per year either in addition to or in place of days per year.

Most states require between 900 and 1,080 hours of instructional time per year for all grades.

Every state allows districts to choose school start dates, but many impose conditions on those dates.

Varying definitions of instructional time

Comparison of time and performance across districts and states is complicated by varying definitions of daily and yearly instructional time. In **Texas**, for example, the seven-hour instructional day includes lunch and other breaks, while **South Dakota** recently clarified that middle and high school instructional time does not include time spent passing between classes.[1] Further, while 180 days per year is a common school year length, the required 180 days may include varying numbers of in-service staff development days.

Does expanded learning time impact student achievement?

In an era of new standards reform and implementation, many states are considering how well their learning time requirements align with expectations for student achievement. However, research is mixed on whether increasing learning time ultimately improves achievement.

The National Center on Time and Learning suggests that expanded learning time is necessary for successful implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Students may require more time to meet higher expectations while teachers could need more time for planning, especially as they adjust to teaching the rigorous new standards. Past cost estimates have indicated that lengthening the school year could cost states millions of dollars per day, which suggests that leaders should carefully consider the value of changing learning time policy before moving forward.[2]

While research is mixed on whether increasing learning time improves achievement, expanding learning time policies are increasingly popular, and some expanded learning time pilot projects have demonstrated improvements. The **Massachusetts** Expanded Learning Time Initiative (ELT), for example, has successfully improved achievement by adding 300 hours to the school year. Participating schools have "gained in proficiency at double the rate of the state in [English-language arts] and math and gained at nearly five times the rate of the state in science across all grades."[3] Massachusetts 2020's report on ELT's success cautions that increases in time must work in tandem with concentrated efforts to personalize instruction, improve data use and increase teacher collaboration.

Unfortunately, much of the current instructional time research focuses on the quantity of time allocated to instruction rather than the quality of time spent during instruction, making it difficult to determine the relationship between time and achievement. Undoubtedly, shorter yet more focused instructional periods may be as effective as longer yet less productive periods, but research on *how* instructional time is used is limited.

To help close the achievement gap, **New Mexico's** K-3 Plus program extends the school year for disadvantaged K-3 students by 25 instructional days. Students in high-poverty schools can begin the school year up to two months earlier than the traditional calendar. Preliminary research indicates this strategy has been effective.

Dedicated Blocks of Instructional Time

In **Florida**, all elementary schools must offer reading instruction in a 90-minute block. The **New Mexico** Reads to Lead Initiative requires schools in participating districts to offer the same length of uninterrupted reading instruction.

2015 legislation

Instructional time is a perennial legislative topic. In the most recent legislative session alone, eight states considered bills that would have affected school start dates. **Florida** and **Iowa** passed laws that allow schools to begin earlier than in previous years. In previous years, Florida schools could begin no earlier than two weeks before Labor Day, but they can now begin as early as Aug. 10.[4] In Iowa, the earliest start date moved up to Aug. 23.[5] Previously, Iowa schools could begin no earlier than a day of the week in which Sept. 1 fell.

Seven state legislatures considered bills to add or change the hours of instructional time per year, and at least three states — **North Carolina**, **South Carolina** and **Virginia** — considered bills to give districts more control over school calendars.[6] A new **Texas** law requires daily and yearly instructional time to be counted in minutes rather than hours and days.[7] Of the many instructional time bills states considered, 14 were signed into law in 2015, according to Education Commission of the States' state policy database.

Several states considered unique policies during the most recent legislative session. For example, a **Maine** bill would have prohibited secondary schools from starting earlier than 8:30 a.m. and required 11 consecutive hours between the end of school activities in the afternoon and the beginning of school the next morning.[8] A **Rhode Island** bill would have allowed schools to conduct virtual instruction on inclement weather days and counted that instruction toward the required minimum instructional days.[9]

School day and length requirements

In general, school day and year length requirements can help ensure consistency in instruction across schools and districts. On the other hand, local control over instructional time allows schools and districts to adjust school schedules to local needs and may be more responsive to parental input. All states mandate a minimum amount of instructional time in a year but many leave school start and end date decisions to the districts.

What are the trends in school start dates?

While currently every state allows districts to choose school start dates, many impose conditions on those dates. In states where conditions are imposed, no state allows school to begin earlier than August, and most restrictions set the earliest start date at the end of August or beginning of September. Currently, only **North Carolina** mandates a date by which schools must close for the summer.[10] Although national data on school end dates is unavailable, most states in the southeastern U.S. close before June 15, according to the Southern Regional Education Board.[11]

Because districts may choose when the school year ends, changes to school year start dates may not directly impact the length of the school year. However, given state requirements setting the minimum length of the school year and the time constraints that arise from state-mandated testing dates, districts may need to lengthen school years to accommodate later start dates. Conversely, earlier start dates may lead parents to pressure districts to end the school year earlier.

Changes to school year start dates often raise concerns among parents, teachers, and school and district leadership. Teachers are often concerned with having sufficient time to address all state standards and to fully prepare students for statewide assessments. Parents, on the other hand, prefer their children have a sufficient break from the pressures of school and for school years to align with childcare and other summer program schedules. Parents and leaders express concerns with the costs associated with cooling school facilities when earlier start dates place students in classrooms in the warmer months at the end of the summer.

Earlier start dates may give students more time to prepare for tests later in the year and help prevent summer learning loss, which is especially common for disadvantaged students. Additionally, teachers may have more opportunities for training days throughout the year when school begins earlier, although some groups argue that a shorter school year gives teachers more time for continuing education and lesson planning during the longer summer.

Tourism and real estate rental industries, as well as some parent groups, prefer later start dates that may extend the available time for family vacations and other recreation. Increased in-state vacationing and recreation, they argue, can only benefit the state's economy. In **Virginia**, the state's start date legislation is even named after the Kings Dominion theme park that lobbied heavily for a later date.

While families may take advantage of a longer summer, parents may still face the same limits on vacation days and finances that they would with a shorter summer, so additional days may not have a significant economic impact. However, many parent groups argue that students have more opportunities to earn money through summer jobs during longer summers.

What are the trends in school day and year length?

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education report *A Nation at Risk* recommended adopting a seven-hour school day and a 200- to 220-day school year. In 2014, Education Commission of the States' state policy review revealed that many states require a five- to six-hour school day, and most states' minimum school day count is 180 days.

School day length

While in many states the length of the instructional day has remained the same since 1985, some trends have emerged over the past 30 years. Between 1985 and 1990, seven states added instructional day length requirements, often codifying common practice. However, between 1990 and 2014, 16 states removed their instructional day length requirements while only **Utah** and **Washington, D.C.**, added them. Removal of the day length requirement may correlate with a general trend toward mandating hours per year while giving districts the flexibility to determine how those hours are distributed.

In the past 30 years, increasing the length of the instructional day, at least for certain grades, has been only slightly more common than decreasing the length of the school day. In fact, four states increased the length for some grades while decreasing it for others over this period. For eight states, the length of the school day has remained essentially the same over the past three decades. Four states have never had a school day length policy.

School year length

In general, the trend for school year length has been to increase the minimum number of days required per year. Additionally, a general trend has emerged to replace days-per-year requirements with hours-per-year requirements. Early adopters of this policy include **Connecticut**, **Wisconsin** and **Washington**, and currently 36 states measure the school year in hours per year either in addition to or in place of days per year. Using a minimum hour rather than day requirement can give states more flexibility for creative uses of time, such as the four-day school week.

Generally, most states require between 900 and 1,080 hours per year for all grades, and many states require the same hours per year for all or nearly all grades. For example, **Kentucky** and **Louisiana** require 1,062 hours for all grade levels. Where differences occur, lower grade levels typically must meet fewer hours per year than higher grades, and many states require kindergarten to be held for substantially shorter time spans. **Arizona** holds the lowest hour mandate for elementary school with 712 hours for grades 1-3.

ENDNOTES

1 South Dakota HB1137.

2 Julie Aronson, Joy Zimmerman and Lisa Carlos, *Improving Student Achievement by Extending School: Is It Just a Matter of Time?* (San Francisco: WestEd, 1999), http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED435127.pdf.

3 Mass2020, More Time for Learning: Promising Practices and Lessons Learned (Boston: Mass2020, 2010), http://www.mass2020.org/sites/default/files/2010_mass_2020_progress_report.pdf.

4 Florida HB7069.

5 Iowa SF227.

6 North Carolina HB164; South Carolina HB3537; Virginia SB1078.

7 Texas HB2610.

8 Maine HP487.

9 Rhode Island SB366.

10 N.C.G.S.A. § 115C-84.2.

11 Asenith Dixon, Focus on the School Calendar (Atlanta: Southern Regional Education Board, 2010), 7, http://publications.sreb.org/2010/10S03_Focus_School_Cal.pdf.

OTHER ECS RESOURCES

Education Commission of the States and the National Center on Time and Learning, *Learning Time in America: Trends to Reform the American School Calendar* (Boston: National Center on Time and Learning, 2015), http://www.timeandlearning.org/sites/default/files/resources/learningtimeinamerica_2015_0.pdf.

Julie Rowland, *Number of Instructional Days/Hours in the School Year* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 2014), http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/15/05/11505.pdf.

AUTHOR

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