

# Rethink the School Day and Year

By Holly Kuzmich

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## Key Points

- Despite warnings that the school schedule that has been around for more than 100 years is not optimal for serving students’ needs, little has changed.
- Conservatives are reticent to believe that one-size-fits-all prescriptions meet the needs of diverse student populations. They are pro-parent and pro-student, and they believe the dignity of work adds value to people’s lives. Rethinking the school schedule could address all these values.
- This can be accomplished by proactively surveying parents to understand whom schools are serving and what their specific needs are, examining state laws and regulations that sometimes make more flexible scheduling impossible, reimagining how time is used within the hours that kids are in school, and using existing funding streams, such as Title I, to support innovative school schedules.

COVID-19 is laying bare two realities in education. Over the past several decades, we have been warned that schools are not making the most of the time they have with students. Despite those warnings, little has changed. Additionally, the school calendar is not friendly to working families. As the education community plans for the upcoming school year amid a pandemic, these two issues are even more apparent. This is the moment to imagine and move toward a new vision of school that rethinks how schools use time.

The school schedule in the United States—for both the school day and school year—has been around for more than 100 years with few changes. School calendars across the country average out to approximately 180 days per year and between 6.5 and seven hours of school per day. Most school schedules provide long summer breaks, to the point that it has become a cultural norm. The tourism and summer camp industries flex their muscles to keep it that way as well.

In 1983, when *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* was released, researchers questioned instructional time in American schools compared to other countries. The report recommended districts look at modifying their traditional school schedules to increase student achievement.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-seven years later, there is little to show for it.

Meanwhile, our students are lagging academically. According to the Nation’s Report Card, only 35 percent of fourth graders were proficient in reading and only 41 percent were proficient in math on the 2019 assessment, and achievement gaps remain.<sup>2</sup> Kids not on grade level often need more instructional time. And kids often lose ground academically over the summer—often referred to as the “summer slide”—which is an even more significant issue in 2020 because of the pandemic’s effect on school this past spring.

Low-income families bear the brunt of this challenge. When students are behind, higher-income

families fill the gaps with tutors and additional classes after school and during the summer. They can also provide other extracurricular activities that support their kids' growth and development, such as music, sports, summer camps, and other enrichment opportunities.

This pandemic is also showing how the school schedule puts families in a bind. We often think of school in the context of its role in supporting kids academically and socially, but school is also child-care. Disruptions to the schedule this year because of COVID-19 have made that abundantly clear. Families with a parent who stays at home and does not work can more easily accommodate kids learning from home at least some of the time. Families with a parent working remotely at home have a harder time but can find ways to manage. But families with a single parent or two parents who work and cannot do so remotely are in a tough spot.

The pandemic is exacerbating this lack of alignment between the school schedule and the needs of kids and families, which have changed significantly over time. More parents—especially moms—are working. Today, 72 percent of moms of school-age children are employed, compared with about 50 percent in 1968, and 80 percent of working moms are employed full time. Nearly 90 percent of dads with school-age children are employed full time.<sup>3</sup> So when school ends at 3:00 p.m., working parents face a practical challenge of what to do with their kids while they are still working.

While different school districts have tweaked the schedule some over the years, those tweaks have been fairly minor. When revisions have happened to the school day or year, they've been driven by the school community, not the needs of kids and families. In looking at this issue for the past decade, I have found little information that came from asking parents what would be helpful to them.

It's time that changed. Rethinking time in school to better meet the needs of kids and parents aligns with principles that conservatives believe are important. We are reticent to believe that one-size-fits-all prescriptions meet the needs of a diverse student population. We aim to be pro-parent and pro-student and less beholden to unions, which can hamstring flexibility and innovation. We believe

in the dignity of work in adding value to people's lives and to our society.

I would make the following recommendations, knowing that we need to wait to implement most of these changes until we get through the 2020–21 school year with so many urgent challenges because of COVID-19.

As a starting point, states, districts, and charter management organizations should proactively survey parents to understand whom they are serving and what their specific needs are. Little information is available about the real needs of working parents as it relates to school schedules.

State officials should look at their state laws and regulations regarding the school year. School year calendars are sometimes restricted to particular start dates, which can make more flexible scheduling impossible.

We need to reimagine how time is used within the 6.5 to seven hours that kids are in school. That could mean different formulations than the traditional classroom, with some hybrid of direct instruction by the teacher and some work online during the school day. This would also allow for kids to work at their own pace, moving toward a competency-based system of learning rather than the traditional seat-time model. Kids could take more time in the areas they need it and move to advanced coursework when appropriate.

Schools can also rethink how they become a hub of services in the community. That means bringing more after-school and enrichment activities into the school building itself, even if those services are provided by other organizations. We can also think about using the physical plants of schools for other uses and longer in the school day and year, instead of letting them sit idle for hours and months, especially during the summer.

As state leaders identify innovative models for using school time, they can use existing funding streams to support innovative school schedules. Title I, Part A dollars from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and 21st Century Community Learning Center funding can be used for these purposes. Partnerships with local nonprofit organizations to colocate existing services in schools should be explored more fully as a way to make extended-day programs available without adding significant new costs.

These changes could go a long way in better meeting the needs of kids, especially low-income children, and of working parents. With all the pandemic is showing us in terms of new models of schools, it's an opportune time to rethink and

reimagine what could be. Big structural changes like this will be difficult and won't happen overnight. But we also shouldn't accept that the way we've been doing it for the past 100 years is getting us where we need to be as a nation.

## About the Author

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*The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of AEI or the series coordinator, Frederick M. Hess.*

## Notes

1. US National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, April 1983, <https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html>.
2. Nation's Report Card, "NAEP Report Card: Reading," <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=4>; and Nation's Report Card, "NAEP Report Card: Mathematics," <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/mathematics/nation/achievement/?grade=4>.
3. Juliana Menasce Horowitz, "Despite Challenges at Home and Work, Most Working Moms and Dads Say Being Employed Is What's Best for Them," Pew Research Center, September 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/12/despite-challenges-at-home-and-work-most-working-moms-and-dads-say-being-employed-is-whats-best-for-them/>.

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