

Opinion: 9 to 5 NJ schools?

Sunday, October 24, 2010

LAST UPDATED: FRIDAY OCTOBER 22, 2010, 6:03 PM

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THE RECORD

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SHOULD WE increase the number of hours and days students attend school each year?

The proposal has recently gained traction as educators, celebrities and a movie have embraced the concept. Before his departure last month, former state Education Commissioner Bret Schundler expressed support for extended time, saying it has the potential to increase student achievement, especially in low-income districts. He made his comments at the Robert Treat Academy, one of the most successful charter schools in the state, with both an extended school day and year. And noted Washington, D.C., Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee recently called extended school days and years vital to improving urban student achievement.

Coming soon after the release of the movie "Waiting for Superman," where Rhee is portrayed as the exemplar of the reform of large urban districts, her statement will gain wide attention. Moreover, the positive reception to the movie and support from celebrities like Oprah has brought broad public attention to the arguments of many urban educational reformers that charter schools, often with extended time, are the answer to urban educational problems and that teacher unions are the enemy of reform.

Who would pay?

Teacher unions argue that although extended time may be a worthy strategy, the question remains how the states would fund and staff schools during a time of massive teacher layoffs.

All points of view should be considered. The preponderance of educational research supports the contention that extra time is important.

First, decades of research indicate that low-income students suffer from "summer setback." They lose ground over the summer while their more affluent peers often gain ground. Although there are myriad explanations for this, including unequal access to summer enrichment programs, high-quality extended-school-year programs have the potential to ameliorate "summer setback."

Second, research on highly successful charter school networks, such as KIPP and Uncommon Schools, indicates that extra time afforded by extended school days and years is one factor explaining their students' high achievement.

Third, in many low-income communities where there are fewer opportunities for children to have meaningful organized learning and play, such as sleep-away camps and other formal summer experiences, children are often at risk of increased exposure to negative peer influences.

Fourth, the majority of nations ahead of us on international assessments have longer school days and years, with some such as Japan having between 200 and 240 days, compared to our 180 days.

The issue of extended school time is part of Governor's Christie's belief that charter school expansion is a key component of improving urban education. However, research has demonstrated that, overall, there are little, if any, differences in the performance of charter and district schools for low-income children; both sectors have their share of excellent, satisfactory and ineffective schools.

Moreover, there are many charter schools with extended time that are not successful, and many excellent, high-performing district schools, such as Abington Avenue and Ann Street Schools in Newark, which do not have extended time. This suggests that, although there are good reasons for extra time, it is neither essential to, nor the only factor in, raising student achievement.

Moreover, if ineffectively done, it is no guarantee of improved achievement in charter or other schools.

A key issue, therefore, is whether the extra educational time is high quality. Extended time in ineffective schools will do little to improve student achievement. To give students more ineffective instruction is similar to treating an illness with more ineffective medicine.

Decades of effective schools research demonstrate that a key ingredient to student success is instructional time on task, with effective schools dedicating more time to instruction than to non-instructional activities.

Becoming more effective

Effective schools may become more effective with extended time; ineffective ones may continue to be ineffective. Likewise, we know that teacher quality has a significant impact on student learning.

Therefore, students in schools with high-quality teachers will benefit more from additional time with these teachers than students in schools with fewer high-quality teachers.

Given the potential benefits, it may make sense to pursue extended time, especially in low-income communities. However, the question posed by the teachers unions about where the funding and staffing will come from is an important one.

It will cost a significant amount of money to keep schools open for extended times. Utility and other costs will increase. Summer sessions in schools without air conditioning may be a problem. Teachers and principals will have to be compensated proportionally, and, during a time of ongoing fiscal crisis and unwillingness by the governor and the public to increase taxes for such spending, it is not clear how the state and local districts will pay for these added costs. (Hawaii has already cut its school year because of the fiscal crisis.)

However, charter school advocates argue that successful charter schools already have extended time with lower funding than district schools. This claim has to be carefully evaluated, though.

Often, charter schools, especially those that are part of national networks, receive significant private philanthropic funding on top of public funding. Lower teacher salaries and fewer special education students may also account for the ability of charter schools to seemingly do more with less.

Charter schools tend to have less experienced and, therefore, lower-paid teachers than traditional public schools. Additionally, some studies indicate that the demands of extra teaching time in charter schools often result in a high turnover rate, both keeping salaries down as new, less-experienced teachers replace those with more experience, and threatening school continuity and stability.

Numerous studies have documented that charter schools enroll fewer special education students, significantly lowering their instructional costs compared to district schools.

Given the potential benefits of extra time, especially for low-income children, perhaps the state should return to one of the principles of the Abbott decisions: Poor children often require different programs and more funding than their more affluent counterparts. This was the purpose of Abbott supplemental funding.

Under SFRA, the state's new funding law, extended time could be factored into the formula so that districts with large concentrations of low-income children, whether they are urban, rural or suburban, would become eligible for supplementary state funding for this purpose.

Of course, if the state continues to underfund the entire SFRA formula, adding a new funding component will have little or no impact.

Assessing changes

The state Department of Education should consider extended school time in specific policy and fiscal recommendations so that we can assess whether it's likely to make a real difference. In making that judgment, we should keep in mind that extended time is but one part of a larger strategy to reduce the achievement gap.

Other strategies include replicating the many successful charter and district schools, as well as addressing the effects of poverty on achievement of low-income children.

Unless we can successfully improve the quality of the many low-performing charter and district schools, having students spend more time in ineffective schools will accomplish little of value.

We will continue to swim upstream against the tide, just for more time each day and year.