

It's not the time spent in school, it's how it's used

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Quantity of time can't be translated into quality of learning, according to a UConn education professor.

In the past decade or more, the national debate about effective learning has centered on teacher quality. Now the discussion is turning to a second major resource in education: Time.

A new joint report from the National Center on Time & Learning and Neag's Center for Education Policy Analysis sets the baseline profile for the amount of time in the school day and school year in schools across the nation.

“What this report does is establish a national profile for how time is spent in schools,” says co-author Tammy Kolbe, an assistant research

professor who came to the Neag School of Education last fall from Florida State University. Kolbe's policy interest focuses on the cost-effectiveness of extending time in the school day and year.

Content in the report, "[Time and Learning in Schools: A National Profile](#)," is based largely on 2007-08 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) data, the only nationally representative source for identifying variations in the amount of time students spend in public, private, and charter schools. Even so, researchers say, its information is limited in describing how time in school is spent.

The joint report, written by Kolbe; Mark Partridge, a graduate student she worked with at Florida State University; and Fran O'Reilly, vice president of research at the National Center on Time & Learning, makes a strong call for much tighter federal data on how the time students spend in school is used.

"We're not advocates for more use of time, alone," O'Reilly says. "We realize there are other things – targeted instruction and leadership, instructional quality, teacher collaboration. All of those things need time."

Kolbe says the report's conclusion, in part, "was to give the feds a nudge, to say, 'Look, guys, you need better data.'"

Rethinking the school calendar

The average school day is 6.75 to 7 hours and the average school year rests right at 180 days, the report says. But the quantity of time cannot be translated into the quality of learning.

"It's what we do with those school days that is at the heart of the issue," says Casey Cobb, head of the Neag Center for Education Policy

Analysis. “There’s no sense doubling up the time if it’s not working for kids.”

Kolbe says the federal data available cannot show a causal link between time in school and student performance. “Increasing the time or extending the year, is that a strategy to boost student achievement? Right now we can’t link time to student achievement on a national level.”

Some key findings in the time and learning report, which studied schools with third and eighth grades, are:

- Despite national interest, the goal of increasing in-school time for most students is a long way off.
- In the past 10 years, the net gain in average length of school day was only about 4 minutes.
- The public school day still falls short of the typical private and charter school day.
- The 180-day school year remains the norm for public schools, with only 17 percent of them adding three to six more days a year. By contrast, nearly 10 percent of charter schools have gone to more than 187 days.
- Evidence suggests that adding time to the school year is a strategy used to serve schools with more at-risk students, predominantly in urban areas.
- Public schools without a teachers’ union are more likely to adopt an extended year or longer day than their unionized counterparts.
- Elementary students in schools with longer-than-average days not only get more instruction in core subjects, especially math, science, and social studies, but also non-core subjects such as physical education and music.

“The NCTL and Neag report is an important first step to translate the quantitative data of time in school into something that will inform analysts and policy makers’ recommendations about how to best use

time,” says Cynthia G. Brown, vice president for education policy at the Center for American Progress.

Educators and policymakers took notice of the time issue when two key reports, “A Nation at Risk” (1983) and “Prisoners of Time” (1994), recommended that American students spend more time in school.

In 2009, President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan leveraged the debate when they challenged states to use American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds to kick start school reform, including rethinking the traditional school calendar.

“We can no longer afford an academic calendar designed when America was a nation of farmers who needed their children at home plowing the land at the end of the day. The calendar may have once made sense, but today, it puts us at a competitive disadvantage,” Obama said.

Policymakers soon started making comparisons between U.S. schools and those in developed nations abroad. The new time and learning report does not address such comparisons.

Co-author O’Reilly cautions, “People are batting around all these comparisons about how much time students in other countries, especially high-performing countries, spend compared to the U.S. We need to have good numbers on that,” she says, adding that a lot has happened in federal education policy since the last time-in-school data was collected in 2007-08.

Information gaps

Kolbe says the key to thinking about more time in school is considering a redesign of the school day, with more emphasis, for example, on academic and enrichment activities along with more professional

collaboration among teachers.

“A national policy of going to 10-hour days may not make sense,” she says. “We need more research to see under what conditions it’s a promising practice, and is it cost-effective relative to other reform models.”

The TIME Act, or Time for Innovation Matters in Education Act, was introduced in the U.S. Senate in 2009 and in mid-April 2011 in the U.S. House. The bill calls for expanded learning time initiatives.

The Time and Learning report points out several gaps in the 2007-08 Schools and Staffing Survey data – for instance, that while the database identifies schools with longer than average school days or school years, it does not reveal how many days are in the school week. “Without this piece of information we cannot assess the extent to which schools make trade-offs between longer school days and shorter school weeks – a practice that has gained attention as schools struggle to operate within increasingly difficult fiscal conditions,” the report says.

“There is an urgent need to respond to these information gaps,” the report concludes, saying the lack of information stymies intelligent policy on adding time in schools, something encouraged by federal grant initiatives.

“With hundreds of public schools poised to increase learning time through federal funding, understanding the landscape and identifying opportunities for further research and evaluation is imperative,” the report states.

Kolbe, who studies how resources and policy intersect, says, “We need to keep in mind that we haven’t moved very far away from the same model for time allocation in [school](#) than what we had in 1900. It hasn’t really

changed.

“Now we’ve moved down the field quite a bit about teachers as resources, but we need to start that conversation with time.”

Provided by University of Connecticut

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