Would a longer school day help children catch up after the pandemic?

November 2 2021, by Lisa Kim, Kathryn Asbury

COVID-induced school closures in 2020 resulted in the majority of pupils in England—at primary and secondary level—missing around 40 days of school on site. Schools around the globe were similarly affected,

though to different extents.

As recent figures from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development show, in the first 12 months of the pandemic, 1.5 billion students in 188 countries and economies weren't able to go to school, for varying lengths of time. Figures from the Netherlands and Ireland are similar to those in England. In Denmark, students missed closer to 20 days, whereas the numbers are much higher in Costa Rica (close to 180 days) and Colombia (around 150 days).

While most English schools during this time provided some form of remote education, these closures nonetheless resulted in learning losses. As a result, amid the UK government's plans for post-COVID school recovery, the Department for Education has reportedly discussed extending the school day, by possibly lifting the existing cap on the number of hours state school teachers can be asked to work.

International evidence seems to suggest that, in some instances, a longer school day may be beneficial. A report by the United Nations-led Accelerated Education Working Group has proposed multiple ways to deal with pandemic-induced learning losses. These range from extending teaching time to implementing formal catch-up programs with remedial education for struggling pupils. Extending teaching time was proposed as an appropriate strategy when pupils have missed out on up to one year of education.

Moreover, studies such as those conducted in the US and Canada and in Chile support the idea that extending instructional time could help pupils, both in the short and long term. They would benefit both academically (in terms of achieving higher test scores and higher educational attainment) and socio-economically (their future earnings would be higher).

However, a review of studies in Latin America and the Caribbean noted that, despite these benefits, there may be more cost-effective ways to attain similar results. An additional and important consideration would be the psychological cost to teachers.

Overburdened workforce

Of course, a longer school day means more teaching hours. And that raises the question of whether asking teachers to extend their working day is a reasonable request.

According to government guidelines, teachers at state schools in England can be asked to teach up to a maximum of 1,265 hours over 195 days of the year. This number does not include additional hours required for tasks, such as lesson planning, assessing, monitoring, recording, and reporting.

Data from four surveys shows that, pre-pandemic, an average full-time teacher in England worked 50 hours a week in term time and around four hours a week during the holidays. There are certainly outliers, including 10% of full-time teachers who reported working at least 30 hours per week over the summer and half-term holidays and 15 hours over the Christmas holidays. The researchers also found that the number of reported working hours had not decreased over 25 years. In fact, teachers in England have been found to work longer hours than most other countries, with lower secondary school teachers working around eight hours more per week

Our ongoing research into what being a teacher during the pandemic has been like shows teachers feel frustrated. The participants we have interviewed have relayed their distress at how the media and some sections of the public have portrayed their profession as lazy.

And the numbers bear out their frustration at that misguided impression. A survey conducted in June/July 2020 by the UK charity Education Support found that 31% of teachers and 70% of senior school leaders reported working more than 51 hours per week on average.

Since March 2020, many teachers across the globe have had to oscillate between partial school closures, partial reopenings and full reopenings. To adapt, they have had to rapidly learn new skills in order to be able to teach pupils from home.

They have also done a lot more than just teach. They have regularly called, and in some cases visited, pupils and their families to assess and meet their academic and welfare needs. Given the ongoing uncertainty of the situation, it is not surprising that we found that our teacher participants' mental health and wellbeing had declined over the course of the pandemic.

While there may be benefits to pupils in extending the school day, one must be wary of the costs this would incur to teachers' mental health and wellbeing. Students would not benefit from being taught by teachers who are stressed and burned out. For any educational recovery plan to be effective, it is important to consider teachers' needs and perspectives.

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