

FORUM

Time Management Central to Education Reform

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In 1991, Congress created the National Education Commission on Time and Learning. The Commission filed its final report, Prisoners of Time, in April 1994 (available from GPO: stock number 065-000-00640-5). This article is a summary of the Commission's report.

Prisoners of Time

Unyielding and relentless, the management of time in a uniform six-hour day, 180-day school year is the unacknowledged design flaw in American education. Unlike universities, where students take variable amounts of time to earn a given degree, American public schools hold time constant and make learning the variable. For nine months of the year, schools open and close at fixed times (i.e., 8 a.m. and 3 p.m.) and offer six 50-minute instructional periods, regardless of whether students comprehend material. The rarely voiced rule is simple: learn what you can in the allotted time.

Paradoxically, the more schools try to allocate time fairly, the more unfair the consequences. "Pull-out programs," for example, although attractive in theory, in practice, they often replace regular classroom time rather than supplement it.

Academic time is also being used for a host of nonacademic activities, from traditional ones such as counseling, gym, study halls, homeroom, driver training, and pep rallies to "the new work of the schools"-education about personal safety, consumer affairs, AIDS, conservation and energy, and family life. As such, the school day is easily reduced to three hours of core academic instruction.

In sharp contrast, other post-industrial democracies jealously protect academic time by drawing clear distinctions between the "academic day" and the "school day." As a result, students receive twice as much instruction during high school as their American counterparts (Estimated core academic hour requirements during the final four years are: United States, 1,460; Japan, 3,170; France, 3,280; Germany, 3,528). The deficiency of academic time in the United States is rooted in state regulations requiring students to spend a minimum of only 41 percent of secondary school time on core academic subjects to earn diplomas.

American educators also lack the time needed to do their job properly. In the United States it is generally held that the only valid use of teachers' time is "in front of the class"; however, in other countries, teachers enjoy freedom and respect as professionals. For example, Japanese teachers spend only 20 hours a week teaching, German teachers 21-24 hours. Their remaining work hours are spent in preparing, grading, in-service training, and consulting with colleagues.

Reallocating time in American schools collides directly with the status quo-entrenched school practices, rules and regulations, traditions of school decision-making, and collective bargaining. Furthermore, adding school reform to the list of things schools must accomplish, without recognizing that time in the current calendar is a very limited resource, trivializes the effort. It sends a powerful message to teachers-don't take this reform business too seriously. Like everything else, squeeze it in on your own time.

Innovative Time Management Techniques

Innovative time management techniques are being implemented in schools around the country to address local needs. For example, New Stanley Elementary School in Kansas City, Kansas, an urban school with two-thirds minority enrollment, uses an **extended year, extended day model**. The school is open for 11 months a year; students attend 205 days and teachers work 226. School sessions run 10 weeks, followed by a week of teacher training and planning. Teachers and students are grouped together for three years. There are also before- and after-school programs for breakfast, day care, tutoring and enrichment, and recreation. Emerson Elementary School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has 800 students from 20 linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It operates essentially year-round using an **extended year, multitrack model**. Alternating between 12 weeks on and three weeks off, the school closes for only one three-week interval in July; during the other intervals, special remedial or enrichment classes are offered for about 150 students. The school also operates a child development center for about 40 preschool children.

Several other innovative time management techniques can also be considered.

Establish an academic day. Even within the confines of the 180-day school year, reclaiming the academic day, alone, should nearly double instructional time in core academic areas.

Keep schools open longer to meet the needs of children and communities. Nonacademic activities, compensatory programs, gifted and talented programs, and language instruction for non-native English speakers should be scheduled outside the academic day. Furthermore, the child care problem does not go away when schools close for the summer. Without extending child care and summer services, it is unlikely that the first National Education Goal, "school readiness," can be achieved.

Develop local action plans to transform schools. Larger school districts can encourage schools to experiment with alternative calendars, block scheduling, team teaching, and distance-learning.

Make grouping children by age a thing of the past. The dimensions of time in the learning process extend far beyond whether a student needs more or less time on a given task. Flexible use of time can permit more individualized, ability-appropriate instruction.

Give teachers the time they need. Teachers need professional time outside of the classroom. However, the last thing districts should encourage is sending children home to provide time for "teacher professional days."

Invest in technology. Education technology can be invaluable in individualizing instruction and managing academic time. Time must also be allotted for training educators in its use.

Conclusion

Today's school schedule must be modified to respond to changes that are reshaping American life outside school. By the year 2010, 40 percent of all children in the United States will belong to minority groups. The nation's big-city schools are already coping with a new generation of immigrant children, largely non-English-speaking, rivaling the size of the European immigrations of the 19th and early 20th centuries. If students are to achieve the National Education Goals (Goals 2000) and learn to world-class standards, we must strike the shackles of time from our schools, our teachers, and our students.