Time in Pursuit of Equity: 
Reform that Crosses Ideological Divides

BY JEANNIE OAKES

With small steps and a determined focus on equity, local leaders from California to Connecticut are expanding learning time to help to close education gaps. Partnering with community organizations and with teachers, superintendents and principals are providing well-structured and enriching learning experiences during out-of-school-time for students with limited access to them. The promising idea is that, with more and better learning time in schools and other community spaces, children who are poor and marginalized can reap the benefits from learning opportunities, supports and relationships that children in more-advantaged places enjoy routinely.

In Meriden, Connecticut, for example, Superintendent Mark Benigni and the local teachers’ union, in partnership with the YMCA and the Boys and Girls Club, added one hundred minutes of engaging, personalized, technology rich learning time every day (the equivalent of 40 additional school days) at three low-performing schools in neighborhoods that lacked activities and support for children after school. Teachers and community partners work together to review the overall curriculum and align enrichment activities with the schools’ instructional goals; community partners participate in professional learning communities alongside teachers. The results? Greater student and family engagement, decreased absenteeism, and student growth data that has exceeded district targets and state averages.

Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, Jeff Riley, led similar work as a principal and district administrator in Boston, and most recently, as the state receiver and superintendent of troubled Lawrence Public Schools. Working collaboratively with Lawrence teachers, Riley expand learning time (by 200-300 hours) by lengthening the school day in all K-8 schools and adding Saturday and vacation-week programing. A redesigned Lawrence High School offered an expanded year program, with all 9th grade students starting school early in the fall. The extra time provided additional individualized instruction in small groups of students, collaborative planning time for teachers embedded within the school day, and fun enrichment opportunities for students (e.g. arts, music, robotics) taught by specialists or community partners like the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs. Over six years, graduation rates increased dramatically as did students’ proficiency rates on the state MCAS tests.
Bridging Divides

To learn more about learning time reforms in pursuit of equity, I assembled a group of innovative practitioners (superintendents, school and district leaders) and researchers to pool their knowledge and experience. The results appear in the book *Learning Time in Pursuit of Equity* (published by Harvard Educational Press) which I co-authored with Marisa Saunders of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, Jorge Ruiz de Velasco of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford.

We learned that support for expanded learning time crosses ideological divides. “Progressives” and “reformers,” usually pitted against one another with both claiming the moral high ground and more effective strategies, have become unusual bedfellows around expanded time. Around the country school leaders, teachers’ union leaders, charter school operators, Democrats and Republicans, civil rights activists and philanthropic foundations have lifted up diverse and compelling examples, including public schools with expanded schedules, strong afterschool programs, and wraparound services.

This work has inspired surprising local innovation and remarkable partnerships. Thin union contracts and altered professional workdays and school years have been brokered through labor-management collaborations. Joint work around shared goals have built bridges across the potentially acrimonious gulf between advocates for longer school days and years and afterschool providers. Citywide partnerships have blossomed into community schools that serve families from early morning into evening.

The research evidence seems clear: More time, used well, supports learning and youth development, and the biggest benefits go to children living in poverty. It may not be “the great equalizer” of Horace Mann’s vision, but it certainly is closing gaps in opportunity and student success.

Practical Actions

Three implementation lessons also emerged from our review that school leaders and policymakers can use as they seek to expand learning time to achieve greater equity.

The first is that additional time works best when educators use it to leverage comprehensive school improvement. The second is that no one best way to expand learning time exists. School leaders must collaborate and build consensus to find approaches that match local contexts. Third, time reforms require that innovative practice and technical, structural programmatic changes be made in concert with work to shift the cultural dynamics and politics that keep inequality in place. I briefly review each below.
Take a comprehensive approach. Simply adding more time to the school schedule is not enough. Rather, additional time must be used to leverage the other foundations of equitable, high-quality schooling -- deeper learning strategies, effective teaching, adequate funding and meaningful accountability.

Time and deeper learning. Instead of being used for more of the same instruction, the additional time should create the conditions for more complex, project- and problem-based instruction, personalized learning relationships with caring adults and engaging learning experiences on and off school campuses.

Time and effective teaching. U.S. teachers have less time to collaborate on instructional plans and to learn from their colleagues than classroom teachers in countries with higher-performing schools. So, one key to better learning time is to increase the time for teachers at a school to improve their practice together. Creatively designed and executed with non-profits and community partners, time reforms can increase teachers’ time for this critical work.

Time and meaningful assessment/accountability. What is measured and reported publicly is what gets taught. So educators and policymakers must use tools and accountability metrics beyond scores on standardized tests to gauge the impact of expanded time. Without that, extra hours are likely to be used for test prep -- what few would view as equitable reform.

Time and equitable resources. Some schools with expanded time operate within the same funding levels as traditional schools. However, they are largely confined to states with high levels of funding, such as New York and Massachusetts. Most traditional schools and charters require additional resources to expand learning. The new flexibility given to districts under the Every Student Succeeds Act in the use of federal funds for school improvement could be helpful in this way. Of course, this does not change the bottom line: Time reforms require increased funding for schools with the greatest needs.

Match strategies to the local context. No one-size-fits-all-formula will work everywhere. Each school must enact more and better time in ways that fit its context. To use longer school hours, before and after school, and programs to engage students deeply, connect the curriculum to the real world and create meaningful learning relationships with adults, many schools partner with local organizations and build program content around their strengths.

The staff at local partners often are more linguistically and culturally diverse in ways consonant with students. This helps share and reinforce the full range of academic, social and emotional learning goals in out-of-school settings and in culturally responsive ways.
In California, Michigan and Texas, more and more high schools use an approach developed by Linked Learning to connect technical courses and college-prep academics in career-themed pathways. Students experience workplace learning with local industry partners, expanding high-quality learning beyond the regular school day and year and school building.

The Oakland School District in California, like a growing number of districts around the country, takes a youth-sector approach by bringing together the schools, public agencies, community-based nonprofits and family-engaged organizations. These community schools typically are open from early morning into the evening to respond with culturally appropriate resources to the needs of diverse neighborhoods. In addition to expanding learning, they use authentic family engagement strategies to build trust and student-school connections and partner with behavioral and physical health agencies to address out-of-school barriers to learning.

Using the school as an anchor, federally funded Promise Neighborhoods cultivate coherent, results-focused collaboration of all youth-serving organizations in a geographic zone. Preschool providers, parks and recreation, law enforcement and probation departments, grassroots advocacy organizations, and every other local agency work together to address the broad challenges of poverty, segregation, as well as insufficient learning opportunities.

**Foster shifts in harmful beliefs and politics.** Innovative structures and practices are not enough. Persistent inequality is sustained by prevailing cultural norms and politics. Dominant beliefs make it expected and normal for materially and culturally advantaged students to succeed and for others to fail. The politics of resource allocation nearly always bring advantaged communities better-equipped facilities, more qualified teachers and other critical learning resources. Accordingly, lessening inequality with expanded learning time requires new thinking and new politics, as well as new structures and practices.

Examples of scalable alternatives demonstrate the technical dimensions of expanded learning time. But imagining it as equitable requires public and policy discourse that challenges prevailing deficit ideas about marginalized people and neighborhoods. Making this happen requires the active engagement of powerful people, including advocates and members of the communities most burdened by current inequities. They, along with inspired school leaders like Mark Benigni and Jeff Riley, must be unflinching in their political commitment to high-quality, equitable public schools in every neighborhood as the bedrock of a healthy, diverse democracy.

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