

Time for Learning

EDUCATION POLICY BRIEFING SHEET

Time: A Precious Resource for Learning

Policymakers should think of the time available for learning—in school, out of school and during the summer—as a resource, just as they consider financial support, instructional materials, and teacher expertise to be essential resources for learning. And, as with those resources, time should be allocated equitably and used as productively as possible. Additional time for learning can, under the right circumstances, improve learning outcomes.

The easiest, most established, and most straightforward way to extend student learning opportunities is to support summer schools, especially for students in high poverty areas. Summer school works—when students attend. After-school programs, often offered by a combination of school and non-school agencies, can also make a difference for students. Finally, several proposals for radically extending the entire school calendar are being explored.

Recommendation: Identify, support, and test promising policies to increase the enrollment and regular attendance of disadvantaged students in summer school programs.

Whether their purpose is to help students catch up or accelerate, or to expose them to enrichment activities, summer school programs can have a positive effect on students' subsequent performance. Programs that feature smaller class sizes, one-to-one tutoring, and individualized instruction, and that require parents to be involved, are more effective than programs lacking those features.

Summer remedial programs, in particular, are more effective if they are planned during the school year, if the lessons are closely aligned with the regular school

curriculum, and if they are staffed by regular teachers from the school. Students benefit more from summer school programs when they attend those programs for several years. Under these circumstances, participation in summer school can produce cumulative learning gains that are equivalent to 40 to 50 percent of a grade level.

There is strong evidence that although low-income parents are enthusiastic supporters of summer school and will line up to enroll their children, they will not do so if they have to pay. Thus, policymakers should find ways to support these programs financially so they can be offered free to low-income children. Free transportation and meals also increase enrollment.

Even when enrollment increases, both research and common sense tell us that, no matter what the design, students must attend summer school regularly if they are to benefit. However, that is often not the case, especially as students grow older. Experiments should be conducted to identify the program characteristics that succeed in keeping students engaged. In addition, experiments should be conducted that use a variety of incentives—financial and otherwise—that are designed to reward regular attendance. If successful in increasing regular attendance, the incentives could produce academic gains that will be well worth the costs.

Recommendation: Working together, federal and state governments, business groups, and philanthropies should fund efforts to develop and test effective models of after-school programs that can be successfully implemented in a wide variety of community settings.



Researchers have identified after-school programs and activities offered by a variety of community agencies that boost not only students' academic achievement, but also other developmental outcomes. A logical way to expand learning opportunities is thus to look to the many existing non-school organizations that provide out-of-school experiences. Correlational studies show that the level of student involvement in such programs is associated with more positive educational outcomes, but that could be due to selection bias (i.e., students who participate in these programs might be those who are already likely to do better). The findings from experimental studies likewise vary. Some programs appear to work in producing academic gains or socially desirable outcomes such as better school behavior, fewer school absences, an increased interest in further educational attainment, a stronger self-image, positive social development, and reductions in risky behavior. Others do not.

We now need a series of experimental effectiveness trials that evaluate particular programs and that also help to identify the specific program features that yield positive results. In addition to academic outcomes, enrollment, bonding to school, and persistence in the programs themselves (especially for adolescents for whom this can be a problem) should be evaluated.

It would also be productive to fund a competition that would encourage a wide variety of providers to design models based on what the best research tells us about successful programs. The winning models should be implemented and then rigorously evaluated and improved. The proven models that emerge should provide government and private funders with guidance as to how to invest their money.

Recommendation: Fund and carefully evaluate the costs and benefits of pilot programs that greatly expand schooling time.

It might seem obvious that simply lengthening the school day or school year will yield proportionately

greater student learning. The research is clear that marginally increasing in-school time without improving instruction or changing how that time is used does not improve learning. Less is known, however, about the effect of *significant* increases in instructional time, although there are several major initiatives underway taking this approach that can be studied.

The longest-established such program is the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), a national network of 45 middle schools, where students spend about 60 percent more time in school than their peers in conventional middle schools. The program includes required activities beyond the academic that are designed to build self-competence, work skills, and commitment. Evaluations of KIPP schools suggest that students who stay the four-year course do well on many counts (e.g., better performance in high school), but many students leave the program early. In addition, it is difficult to recruit and retain teachers in KIPP schools. A large evaluation study of KIPP is now underway, but full results will not be available for several years. Meanwhile, one state—Massachusetts—has launched the Massachusetts 2020 initiative, which provides funds for participating schools to lengthen the school day by at least 300 hours per year. Evaluations of these efforts should begin to be available in the next couple of years.

One way to advance understanding of radically extended and reorganized school programs would be to create a design competition (of the kind carried out by New American Schools in the early 1990s) that would select several models for implementation and experimental evaluation. Funded models would be expected to include design features that we already know work, such as improving instructional quality and extended forms of social engagement.

The National Academy of Education White Papers Project is supported through a grant provided by Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors in conjunction with its sponsorship of Strong American Schools, a nonpartisan campaign supported by The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to promote sound education policies for all Americans. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the project funder.

This briefing sheet is a product of the National Academy of Education (NAEd) White Papers Project, an initiative to connect policymakers in a new administration and Congress with the best available evidence on selected education policy issues: teacher quality; standards, assessments, and accountability; time for learning; science and mathematics education; reading and literacy; and equity and excellence in American education. The findings and preliminary recommendations outlined in this briefing sheet were selected from a larger set of recommendations developed by the relevant expert working group based on an extensive review and synthesis of existing research. Complete citations of all sources of evidence will be included in the final report of this project, which will be released and available on the NAEd website early in 2009.

The NATIONAL ACADEMY OF EDUCATION advances the highest quality education research and its use in policy formation and practice. Founded in 1965, NAEd consists of U.S. members and foreign associates who are elected on the basis of outstanding scholarship or contributions to education. Since its establishment, the academy has undertaken numerous commissions and study panels, which typically include both NAEd members and other scholars with expertise in a particular area of inquiry.