

Using the Power of Time: A Challenge to Public Education

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Time is one of, if not the most, essential element for success in all of man's endeavors. The design and construction of a majestic building, research leading to the discovery and cure of a dreaded disease, training a championship athletic team, or developing a young mind to be a leader for the future--all of man's most worthwhile endeavors are predicated on having the necessary amount of time and the will to use that time to optimum efficiency in order to achieve a successful result.

Most especially, this is true in education. Of all the resources that we can provide teachers, time is the most valued and can be used most effectively. When teachers are consulted about what they need in order to provide students with a quality education, additional time is most often requested. When teachers are asked what prevents them from succeeding with all students, time is universally cited as a reason. Yet, when educators, legislators, and others implement "educational reform," time is rarely addressed. In actuality, many reform effort changes in educational policy and law actually infringe on the precious time available to teachers for instruction.

Periodically, events in our nation have a profound and long lasting impact on public education. The Soviet launching of Sputnik significantly impacted science education, Brown v Board of Education altered the student population of our public schools, the passage of IDEA established a commitment to serve the needs of students with disabilities, and *A Nation at Risk* precipitated a myriad of reform efforts that have been thrust upon educators. However, the passage of No Child Left Behind may well eclipse any other event relative to the long term impact on public education. This federal legislation brought an increased awareness and attention to many school reform initiatives, including, but not limited to, imposing higher learning standards, increasing accountability, and maintaining high teacher quality throughout our nation's schools and classrooms. At the heart of No Child Left Behind is the required high academic achievement for all students, regardless of income, gender, race, ethnicity, or disability. The true impact of No Child Left Behind, relative to academic achievement, can be found in the word all. Historically, there was a time in education when public schools did not accommodate *all* students. As years progressed and *all* children were afforded the opportunity to be educated in a public school, *all* children were not measured and reported relative to academic achievement, whether individually or within a demographic subgroup. In addition, student assessment scores were aggregated in a manner that effectively hid the outcomes of low level performers. No Child Left Behind represents the first time in the history of public education that schools are being held accountable for every enrolled student. Analyzing this statement can easily lead us to the conclusion that No Child Left Behind represents the most difficult task ever presented to public education.

Not only is public education faced with the daunting task of educating *all* students in the NCLB legislation, but the composite makeup of *all* students is now constantly shifting. Diverse classroom enrollments are on the rise, especially in the ethnic non-English speaking population. Many of these children arrive at our doorstep, and English is not the primary language spoken in their home. In addition, public schools are serving a higher number of students with disabilities, as well as, a larger number of at-risk students who are living in poverty. Teachers are faced with multiple dilemmas for assuring that these children receive instruction that will result in high levels of student achievement.

One basic question emerges as we contemplate this monumental task that lies before public education: How do public schools accomplish the task of ensuring high academic standards and achievement for *all* students? Beginning with what we already know might be an appropriate starting point. Public education cannot seek to maintain the status quo, just vie for increased funding, or simply impose increasingly higher standards on students. Some of these tactics may well be important, but not one of them standing alone will assure that the nation will attain the goal of higher academic achievement for all students.

We cannot maintain the status quo because satisfactory achievement is not reflected in the results. Virtually every indicator of academic achievement in America indicates significant need for improvement, particularly when these measurements compare American students to those in other industrialized nations.

Simply vying for more funding for education is also not the answer. We know that, over the past 35 years, billions of dollars have poured into the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Title I program for the purpose of addressing the needs of economically disadvantaged students. However, achievement gaps still exist and have not been closed when comparing economically disadvantaged students to their peers. Now, even if we believe that money is the ultimate solution, it is not a political possibility. Local education budgets slashed by the recent economic downturn and other funding priorities that have arisen at the state and national level preclude any possibility of massive increases in funding.

The answer also does not lie with just creating higher standards and imposing additional standardized testing of students. Certainly, providing more rigorous curriculum opportunities for students and making changes in standards and curriculum can contribute to the solution. However, changes in requirements and expectations must be coupled with the requisite support and structure for teachers and students to accomplish the desired goals set before them.

Clearly, in order for public education to achieve dramatically different results, an equally dramatic change in the culture of American public education is required. The change that must take place is restructuring the use of time in public education to increase instructional time made available to our teachers and students.

The fact that American schools need to restructure the use and increase the amount of time is not a new idea. In 1983, members of the National Commission on Education published *A Nation at Risk*, and reported that “we recommend that significantly more time be devoted to learning the new basics. This will require more effective use of the existing school day, a longer school day,

or a lengthened school year”. In 1991, the National Education Commission on Time and Learning (NECTL) was established to review the relationship between time and learning in the nation’s schools. The commission recommended that educators should “re-invent schools around learning, not time”. Another recommendation stated that educators should “redesign education so that time becomes a factor supporting learning, not a boundary marking its limits.” In a 1995 report, *A Matter of Time* by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, a recommendation was made that “all Kentucky schools consider alternatives to the traditional school day and school year”. In 2005, a report, *Getting Smarter and Becoming Fairer, Renewing Our Schools, Securing Our Future: A National Task Force on Public Education* made the following recommendation. “Schools should constructively align school time with student learning, extend the school day to meet students’ needs and interests, and reorganize the school year with short intersession breaks that offer voluntary tutoring or enrichment programs.”

The fact that American children suffer from a deprivation of instructional time is clearly demonstrated when they are compared to their international counterparts. The typical American school year ranges between 175 and 180 days. Internationally, the school year ranges from 210 to 250 days. The typical American school day consumes between 6-1/2 and 7 hours. Internationally, 8 or 9 hour days is the norm. Amplifying the problem is the fact that American schools typically spend a smaller percentage of the limited time available to them on core academics than their international counterparts. Research shows that American students spend fewer hours in school than Japanese, German, and French students and that U.S. schools allocate less time to core instruction than do other industrialized nations. For example, core academic time in U.S. schools is estimated at 1,460 hours during the four years of high school compared to 3,170 hours in Japan, 3,528 hours in Germany, and 3,280 hours in France. Based on these and other findings, the National Education Commission on Teaching and Learning concluded: "Time is the missing element in the debate about the need for higher academic standards.... We have been asking the impossible of our students—that they learn as much as their foreign peers while spending only half as much time in core academic studies".

The facts are abundantly clear; American students and teachers must be provided additional instructional time. The issue is how to fiscally and politically accomplish this change.

The creation of a 200, 210, or 220 day school year may well be an ideal solution to this problem. However, in many communities, this is neither fiscally nor politically possible. From a fiscal standpoint, increasing the number of days in a school year, to any significant degree, requires a massive amount of additional funding. This funding is not currently available to American public schools, and it is not likely that it will be available in the near future. The cost of extending the school year was made evident recently in a 2005 proposal by Minnesota school superintendents to the state’s legislators. The school leaders asked that the school year in Minnesota be increased from 170 or 175 school days a year to 200 days. The estimated cost of extending the school year in Minnesota for academic improvement was \$750 million.

Nor is the creation of a significantly lengthened school year politically possible in many communities. We are all aware of the fact that the current American school calendar had its origins many years ago in the needs of a primarily agrarian society. We are also aware of the fact that the needs in existence many years ago are no longer present. However, the fact that the

original basis for the creation of the American school calendar is no longer an issue does not change the realization that in most American communities many events, opportunities, and family and business schedules are predicated on the current school calendar. Whether it be church camps or Vacation Bible Schools, Boy or Girl Scouting camps, summer baseball or soccer leagues, college and university teacher preparation programs, vacation schedules established by business and industry, the work force needs of major tourist attractions, or literally hundreds of other examples, most American communities have predicated their schedules and calendars based on the traditional American school calendar. When these issues are coupled with a natural inclination to oppose change on the part of many, a powerful lobby exists to oppose a radical change in the school calendar in most communities.

Therefore, it is incumbent on us to explore every possible solution to harnessing the power of time in communities across the nation. The solution, for many communities, is the restructuring of time currently available in the typical 180 day school calendar. A modification in our traditional calendar is fiscally possible because the additional instructional days built in to the calendar are used to target the students that most need the additional instructional time. It does not require the utilization of the entire school system workforce, and the expenditures required for the additional instructional time are much less, on a per day basis, than would be required by simply lengthening the school year. Additionally, the expenditures can be funded through a number of different grants and entitlements which would not constitute an overwhelming drain on the local school system's general fund budget. Funds from Title I, Title II, Title III, Title V, and Title VI-B can all be utilized for this purpose. Additionally, many states have funding specifically designated for instruction outside the regular school day. Also, there are many grant opportunities available to provide funding for this extra instructional time. Politically, the modification of a school calendar is possible because it does not constitute a radical change in the existing school calendar. A modified calendar can easily incorporate approximately three weeks of additional instructional time in a school year that begins in August and ends prior to Memorial Day in May.

We are certainly not arguing against school systems using a true year-round calendar to address instructional or enrollment issues. School systems having the financial means and the political climate to support a year-round calendar should be commended for their efforts. However, as previously stated, in many communities, a significant increase in the number of days in the school year may not be possible fiscally or politically. For those communities, a modified approach that allows appreciable time out of school in the summer, while providing additional instructional days via the intersessions, may be the most viable calendar model.

In the United States, public education is the foundation on which citizenship and democracy rests. In the 19th century, Horace Mann termed public schools "the great equalizer," bringing together children of varied backgrounds, teaching them literacy, moral values, and patriotism necessary for informed citizenship. According to the National Center for Education Statistics approximately ninety percent of the students in our nation attend public schools. The ideal of the public school in the United States is one of an educational system explicitly committed to the common education of the many while, at the same time, raising up in each generation those who have demonstrated the capacity for leadership. The United States must assure, now and in the future, that it is not losing its most critical economic advantage and its status as the world's

greatest talent pool of learned individuals who are developing cutting-edge innovations simply because time is not used as a resource.

Reasons abound why we must make the necessary changes to accommodate additional instructional time for our teachers and students. We must do it because common sense tells us that this is necessary. We must do it because the performance of our students indicates that this change is required. We must do it because educational research shows that this will work. We must do it because it can be done in a manner that is politically palatable to communities in our nation and is fiscally achievable. But, if we are not willing to do it for any of the important reasons stated above, let's do it because our teachers, the real "experts" on what needs to happen to provide all children with a quality education, tell us that time is the most valuable and effective resource that we can provide to them. If, for some reason, we are unwilling to follow where common sense leads us, unwilling to act on what measurements of student achievement tell us, unwilling to believe the results of educational research, then let's listen to the dedicated professionals that occupy tens of thousands of American classrooms each year. Let's provide those dedicated professionals the one tool that is most essential to success. As the late Dr. Edward Deming used to say to educational leaders, "Let's speak with one voice" to assure that more time is made available to all students and teachers.