

Problem: Learning Time for Students



As states and school districts seek ways to improve student achievement across the nation, the issue of learning time has become an increasingly important consideration. American schools have historically operated on an outdated agrarian-based school calendar, which incorporates an elongated summer vacation period that can negatively impact student retention and overall achievement. In 2013-14, West Virginia school systems experienced an unprecedented loss of learning time due to statewide severe winter weather and a water crisis that closed schools for nearly half of the state's students, some for nearly ten days.

The number of actual instructional days has become a relevant consideration for more and more states. Some states are granting schools the flexibility to offer expanded learning opportunities, like Massachusetts, Washington, Connecticut, and Maryland. The latter two states allow low-performing schools to add instructional hours or other innovative school scheduling as a strategy to raise student achievement. In other states, schools are pursuing electronic lessons as an opportunity. Research supports these efforts. A 2010 study reviewed 15 empirical studies about extended school time since 1985, and determined that extending school time can be an effective way to support student learning, especially for at risk students.¹

The Education Alliance believes districts and schools need more local flexibility and accountability for dynamic approaches to learning time.

Progress Update: In 2013 Governor Earl Ray Tomblin sponsored legislation that mandates at least 180 days of actual instructional time statewide beginning with the 2014-15 school year. In December 2013, the State Board of Education approved Policy 3234 outlining the specifics and conducted two regional workshops on the preparation of school calendars. All county school systems have adopted calendars that meet the new requirements and are implementing currently.

Recommendations:

1. Increase opportunities for schools to adopt innovative models that use time to motivate and engage students with deeper learning. Encourage flexibility and innovation through collaboration with business internships, increases in virtual learning, before/after school programs, and partnerships with community-based programs.
2. Hold school systems accountable and increase local flexibility to schedule school calendars that provide high quality learning time for all students. Ensure that resources are aligned with the diverse needs of students, and flexibility over staffing and budgeting result in innovative uses of expanded learning time consistent with individual student needs.
3. Strengthen efforts to reduce truancy through increased cooperation between the school system, judicial system and the department of health and human resources. Students who are not in school cannot learn. All too often, poor attendance patterns begin in early elementary with some students missing large chunks of critical learning time in early grades followed by years of struggling to catch up.

¹ Patall, Cooper, and Allen, "Extending the School Day or School Year: A Systematic Review of Research (1985-2009)," (*Review of Educational Research*, September 2010, 80:401-436).