

THE MANY BENEFITS OF MORE TIME IN SCHOOL

by Mark D. Benigni, Superintendent of Schools, Meriden, Connecticut

Today's students need to learn more, and parents and governments are pushing for America's schools to meet higher standards. Teachers and educators often feel there is not enough time in the day to come close to meeting these demands – and they are right. As the National Education Commission on Time and Learning framed the dilemma years ago, "expecting a much higher degree of learning from today's students, but providing no more time for them to absorb content and develop skills.... asks the impossible."

With so many school systems looking for reforms to improve teaching and boost achievement, expanding the amount of time students spend at school – by extending days beyond 6.5 hours or lengthening the year beyond 180 days – is a straightforward step that is already showing positive results. With backing from the Ford Foundation and technical support from the National Center on Time and Learning, schools in Colorado, Massachusetts, New York, Tennessee, and Connecticut are reengineering schedules to increase the time available for core academic and enrichment programs. I have first-hand experience with the reforms in Meriden, Connecticut.

Redesigning the Day in Meriden Schools

More than two years ago, the Meriden Public School district began collaborative discussions with the teachers' union to determine if and how learning time might be expanded for students. The opening dialogue at the Pulaski Elementary School was marked by serious engagement and a real sense of urgency. Participants agreed that, if students are to become successful, happy and engaged citizens, they need to spend more time in school than the schedule at that time allowed.

Members of the school community committed themselves to making extended school days happen. Two Meriden elementary schools, Casimir Pulaski and John Barry, now enjoy 100 additional minutes of learning time each day. This adds up to an additional 300 hours over the school year – the equivalent of just over 40 additional school days! Two more Meriden elementary schools, Roger Sherman and Israel Putnam, plan to expand the school day next year.

The longer, redesigned school day has improved academic and enrichment efforts. It allows for more personalized forms of instruction and creates space for students to have a greater voice in school programs. Teachers, too, have more time to work with colleagues and analyze data to discover how well students grasp materials and discover which students need more help. Meriden schools are confirming the expectations of the National Center on Time and Learning that "more time affords opportunities to expose students to the world outside their schools and communities, to build new skills and interests that they will pursue throughout their lives, and to offer activities that build a strong school culture ...that values and supports learning."

Documented Results at Pulaski Elementary School

Pulaski Elementary School's expanded learning time has strengthened students' writing skills in many subject areas, while allowing all students to benefit from either extra help or chances to accelerate learning, depending on individual needs. Teachers also use extra time to promote healthy living practices, social skills, familiarity with new technologies, hands-on science learning, and social studies exercises that improve the school climate.

The results show up on state-mandated assessment tests. Casimir Pulaski has become a Connecticut "School of Distinction" as its students show steady progress in meeting achievement targets in math, reading, writing, and science. Pulaski students have outperformed other Meriden students – and sometimes outperformed the state-wide average – on key tests measuring gains in reading, math, and other core subjects. The attendance records of Pulaski students now exceed the district-wide average, and a remarkable 97% of Pulaski students report that their teachers are fair, caring, and effective at motivating them to learn. Pulaski's experience shows that traditional public schools can use expanded learning time to better meet the needs of all students.

Narrowing Achievement Gaps

Connecticut students continue to perform toward the top of the nation on many standardized academic tests. Yet the state also registers America's widest gap in achievement results between top and bottom performing students. Expanding the school day helps all students, but it is also an important way to level the playing field and reduce such glaring achievement gaps. The reason why is easy to understand. Many students who struggle in school are from disadvantaged families and neighborhoods, and such students have the most to gain from spending more time at school, where they can get additional and better-tailored instruction and participate in enrichment programs like drama, art, sports, or social service projects. Extended school days – or longer school years – can help all students become better prepared for careers, citizenship, and college.

On-the-ground experience shows that schools should allocate extra time to both academics and enrichment programs, not just to one or the other. School leaders should also design new extended day programs carefully, in collaboration with parents and community members.

Growing Support in Washington for Expanded Learning Time

Expanded school time is an idea catching on not just in scattered states and districts, but also in Congress, which could spur change with new funding. In June a Senate committee passed a reauthorization of *No Child Left Behind* legislation that would, if finally enacted, allow high-poverty communities to reallocate federal funds previously used for before- and after-school programs to extend the regular school day. Schools struggling to improve achievement could also expand learning hours. House Republicans also supported expanded learning time in their version of reauthorization, but the two chambers of Congress disagree on many other provisions. If Congress remains deadlocked, the Obama Department of Education can continue to use administrative rulings to facilitate this reform. Yesterday's school day is outmoded, and Americans should now expand school time to reduce achievement gaps and give all children more opportunities to master 21st century skills. We literally have no time to lose in implementing this common-sense reform.

Read more in Mark D. Benigni, "Meriden Schools Reap Benefits from Longer Days," *The Hartford Courant*, November 11, 2013.