



## **Wholesale rethinking of expanded school year needed to make necessary change**

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As students begin summer break this year, they could have shorter respites ahead – a signal of the growing recognition that expanding the number of annual days spent on academics and enrichment is essential to prepare students to thrive in the 21st century economy. A number of states have passed laws dealing with learning time over the last couple of years.

That's the good news. The downside is most of those laws do little to fundamentally reshape how we approach learning time in America. And such a rethinking is needed if we're to dramatically move the needle on student achievement.

The typical U.S. school has fewer school days –180– than the global average of 187, as measured by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In terms of school days, our nation also lags behind other countries that outperform us on international benchmarking tests. Korea has kids engaged in learning for 220 days each year, for example, while Japan has 201 annual school days, and Finland has 189. Those countries are ranked 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, respectively, on international math assessments. The U.S., by comparison, is ranked 27<sup>th</sup>.

This demonstrates why we need to double down on increasing the number of days students spend in school. The more time kids spend engaged in an activity, the more adept they'll become at it. Academics are no different, and time on task is especially critical for economically disadvantaged students, who typically are afforded fewer learning opportunities outside of school than their higher income peers.

Recent attempts to address this challenge, while well intentioned, don't go far enough. More than 40 states passed laws dealing with learning time in 2013 and 2014, according to the National Center on Time and Learning and Education Commission of the States. Some of the new laws merely allow for more flexibility in school calendars – for example, enabling a four-day school week as long as districts stay within the minimum number of hours each school year. Others raise the minimum number of annual classroom hours or the number of hours per day that teaching occurs. Some states go further by awarding districts extra funding to expand learning time.

Some of these policies certainly will result in additional learning time for students. But in too many cases, added flexibility simply allows districts to move around when students are in school without actually adding to the number of school days or the amount of time on task. For instance, in Alabama, where a 2012 law allowed school systems to have a minimum of 1,080 hours and mandated a start and end timeframe, some districts actually cut the number of annual days from 180 to 177.

This represents the wrong direction when it comes to learning time. Schools should reduce the length of summer breaks, add other days if possible, and keep the rest of the school year intact. Consider that by adding 25 days a year to the academic calendar, it would amount to an extra year of school by the time students reach seventh grade.



To achieve this – rather than mandating minimums or legislating tweaks and additions – policymakers should simply create the autonomous conditions that allow schools to expand their own calendars, including extending the length of school day and year. That would represent a more fundamental shift in our approach to learning time – the type of shift that’s needed if we’re to propel academic change

High performing charter schools have this flexibility by nature, and many of the nation’s best charter school networks – including KIPP, MATCH, Aspire and Achievement First – have extended the length of their school years by adding Saturday classes, summer school days or both. Some states have made efforts to emulate this school-level freedom in district schools so that those who know students best – principals and teachers – can make decisions about their learning.

Indiana, for example, has a law allowing districts to create schools – Innovation Network Schools – within districts that have greater autonomy in exchange for great accountability. Our school network, the George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academy, will launch its first school of this kind in the fall, and a core component will be a longer school year, with a total of 35 extra days throughout the year.

These changes may seem dramatic. They can even come across as counter-cultural in a society that for decades has been built around the agrarian calendar. But either we add more school days and help students advance, or keep the status quo and risk their falling further behind, both nationally and globally.

The choice is simple. Let’s put the conditions in place so that every student in every school has the chance to maximize the academic year and achieve success.

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