

time & learning

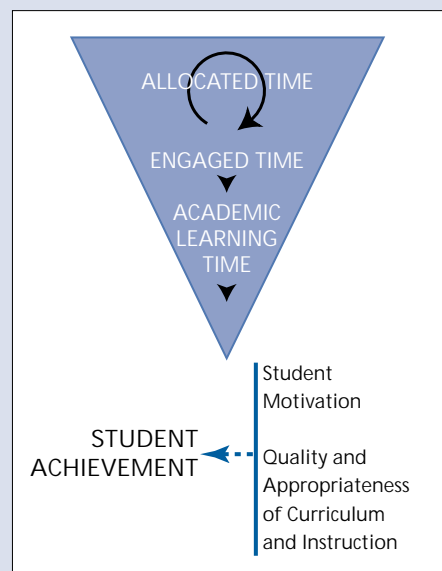
making
TIME
count

To help students achieve well under higher standards, many educators are calling for more time for teaching and learning. A longer school day or year is the most direct way to provide more time, but policymakers face the inevitable question: will better learning result? Research offers no simple answer; the relationship of time to learning is complex. One thing, however, is clear: as with money, the result of more time in school depends, above all else, on how it is spent.

Kinds of Time

The literature on time and learning, spanning at least three decades, includes empirical evidence of time's relationship to achievement. Researchers refer to a three-part continuum: *allocated time* is the total number of days or hours students are required to attend school; *engaged time* is that part of a day when students are participating in learning activities, as opposed to, say, roll call; and *academic learning time* is that part of engaged time when students are actually learning. Learning happens when the material is neither too easy nor too hard – when instructional activities are challenging, yet allow for success.

The literature reveals a fairly consistent pattern of little or no relationship between allocated time and student achievement; some relationship between engaged time and achievement; and a larger relationship between academic learning time and achievement.



Three Key Elements That Make a Difference

In rethinking time, it makes sense to consider the following key quality factors suggested by research that, in conjunction with time, contribute to student learning: 1) *improving teachers' classroom management* techniques so that less instructional time is lost to disruptions or discipline activities; 2) *ensuring appropriateness of curriculum and instruction*, for example, ensuring that content matches student readiness to learn it and teachers use a repertoire of instructional strategies that capitalize on a student's thinking; and 3) *increasing student motivation*, which happens, in part, when teachers are able to spark student interest with exciting and challenging instructional activities – big or small – as opposed to squelching interest with, for example, repetitive seatwork.

Implications

Research suggests that those designing policies related to time and learning should consider that:

- The key to increasing achievement is not necessarily more time in school but maximizing the amount of academic learning time.
- Where there is already a high proportion of academic learning time, extending the school day or year is likely to increase achievement.
- Where time is not well used, more allocated time may not, by itself, lead to substantial achievement gains.
- A critical factor in increasing quality time in schools is helping teachers and school leaders improve their capabilities. Teachers need professional development that deepens their content knowledge and broadens instructional skills, including ways to tailor instruction to differing student needs. School leaders need support to become strategic thinkers who can organize staffs and schedules to focus squarely on instruction and learning.

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State-Level Recommendations

- **Costs versus benefits.** The cost of increasing allocated time statewide is estimated at millions – or in some states tens of millions – per added day. Given the small expected achievement gains of adding even substantial amounts of time, policymakers should consider alternatives such as targeting time investments and/or making them part of a comprehensive strategy.
- **Targeting and/or flexibility.** Recognizing that standards-based education means many students need more learning time, a more cost-effective approach may be to target extra time to specific schools – or students – with the greatest learning needs. A state could also stipulate a range of options for using “extra time” funds so that local educators can tailor strategies to particular student or school needs or community circumstances.
- **Time as part of a comprehensive strategy.** Given today’s higher expectations and high stakes, decisions about increasing allocated time should be considered as one part of a comprehensive policy strategy intended to increase academic learning time. Other critical parts are:
 - **Teacher and administrator professional development** – also requiring time – to help infuse schools with the capacity to make every hour count.
 - **Support for high quality curriculum development** by districts or cross-district teams.

The state can also help by reviewing and streamlining state mandates that take time away from teaching and learning as well as by providing school districts with needed information and guidance about best practices.

District-/School-Level Recommendations

- **Time inventory/analysis.** A thorough inventory and analysis of how time is being used, coupled with examination of best-practice models, should form the basis for decisionmaking, with a laser focus on instruction and learning. Block scheduling, year-round schedules, appropriate use of homework, and summer- and after-school programs are all options for creating more potential academic learning time. Creative scheduling and staff re-deployment strategies can allow such learning supports as smaller classes for part of each day for core academics.
- **Professional and curriculum development strategies.** Focused, cohesive programs of professional development for teachers and school leaders are imperative for developing the needed knowledge and skills for making time matter. Well-planned coaching and modeling strategies can make classroom time more productive for student *and* teacher learning. Teachers working together to develop standards-based curriculum simultaneously deepen their knowledge of the subject and how to teach it.

Conclusion

More time in school could indeed have a positive impact on how much students learn. For more students to excel, and for all to meet higher academic standards, most students will likely need more time engaged in learning. But research indicates that the solution is not as simple as merely lengthening the school day or year. To improve student learning outcomes, the critical factor for policymakers to consider is the *quality of educational time*. Thus, finding ways to increase academic learning time is the path to bolstering student success.