

July 16, 2009

## Summer School for Everyone?

By Gilbert Cruz

Hello, summertime! No more pencils, no more books, no more teachers' — wait, actually, yes, there may very well be more of each of those. Sorry, kids. A vacation-crushing theory on how to improve student performance is gaining traction: more time in class. Longer days, longer year. Goodbye, summer.

It's a strategy supported by both President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan, and cities and states are experimenting with various approaches. Cincinnati, Ohio, for example, in June started giving students in the city's 13 most persistently failing public schools the option of an extra month (a "fifth quarter") of classes. And Ohio Governor Ted Strickland hopes to phase in a similar 20-day extension at all schools statewide.

Duncan, as the nation's educator in chief, has repeatedly plugged a longer school day and year. He views today's standard six-hour, 180-day calendar as way too old school, a holdover from not only 19th century agrarian society but also mid — 20th century Donna Reed — style parenting. "Our children are no longer working in the fields," Duncan says.

"And Mom isn't waiting at home at 2:30 with a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. That just doesn't happen in many American families anymore."

Educators have been eyeing more class time for decades. The landmark 1983 federal report *A Nation at Risk*, which highlighted the growing achievement gap between the U.S. and other

countries, recommended that school districts "strongly consider" a seven-hour day and a 200- to 220-day academic year, which would hew more closely to the schedules in higher-performing Europe and Asia. Although the practice has yet to go mainstream, there's a big push to add school hours in underperforming urban districts. One champion of this movement is Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy, who on July 8 introduced the Time for Innovation Matters in Education Act, which would provide federal grants for states and districts to "expand learning time in high-need, high-poverty schools."

One of the nation's most closely watched experiments along these lines is Massachusetts' Expanded Learning Time (ELT) Initiative. Launched in 2006, the program involves 26 low-performing schools that have each added approximately 1½ to 2 hours per day to their school calendar. "We're in the early innings of proving how to extend school hours responsibly and effectively," says Chris Gabrieli, chairman of Massachusetts 2020, which

helped originate the ELT idea. "But clearly, focusing on the students that are furthest behind is where it makes the most sense. Middle-class kids, they get a lot more learning time outside of school — they get tutors, they get arts programs, they get music programs, they get summer camps."

Why is that stuff so important? Because without those camps and other stimulating activities, something called summer learning loss occurs.



A girl writing on a chalkboard wearing a swimming suit.

Photo-Illustration by Saverio Truglia for TIME

Researchers estimate that low-income students can lose two months of math and reading achievement owing to a lack of reinforcement during the summer break.

Critics of extended school time point to the fact that it's expensive to keep schools open longer. In Massachusetts, for instance, ELT schools receive an additional \$1,300 per student, on top of the basic state allotment. And, some ask, if a school is low-performing, if the teachers or curriculums or parental involvement isn't up to snuff, how much good will more class time really do? "You can't just extend time in these schools by 30%," says Elena Silva, an analyst with Education Sector, an independent think tank. "That in and of itself is not going to work as a strategy to turn around schools."

That's why Massachusetts makes schools completely redesign instruction plans before they can receive ELT money. Elsewhere, high-performing charter schools, like those in the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) network, combine more class time with a rigorous curriculum and exceptionally devoted teachers. A typical KIPP school day runs from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, with four hours of class every other Saturday and three weeks of mandatory summer school. More hours and days are key, says Steve Mancini, KIPP's public affairs director. But so is everything else. "Time is just a piece of the puzzle," he says. "It's what you do with that time that matters."