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Freedom to Learn

Doing More Time in School: An Unimaginative, Mean Proposal

Those who want more forced schooling ignore students' opinions.

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Source:

School doesn't work very well, so let's make kids do more of it! That seems to be the policy enthusiastically supported by President Obama, by his [education](#) secretary Arne Duncan, by many teachers' unions (as long as the teachers are well paid for the extra time), and by many education policy makers in and out of academia.

Kids aren't learning much in school, so let's make them start school when they are younger; let's make them stay more hours in school each day and more days each year; and let's not allow them to leave until they are at least 18 years old. Let's do all this especially to the poor kids; they are getting the least out of school now, so let's lengthen their time in school even more than we lengthen the time for others!

As I read and listen to the arguments for more forced schooling, what disturbs me most is the complete disregard for the opinions of students. Even Obama, who seems to be a good man and a kind father, dissed his daughters in a speech supporting more forced schooling. He said [\[here\]](#): "Now, I know longer school days and school years are not wildly popular—not with [my daughters] Malia and Sasha, not in my family, and probably not in yours. But the challenges of a new century demand more time in the classroom."

A few days ago I forced myself, for the sake of science, to listen to a local *Boston Public Radio* program [\[here\]](#) on the argument for a longer school day. The guests were Chris Gabrieli, co-founder of Massachusetts 2020, which helped launch the Massachusetts extended school day initiative, and Richard Stutman, president of the Boston Teachers' Union. The focus of discussion was a proposal to lengthen the school day in Boston Public Schools by *three hours*—from its current six and a half hours to nine and a half hours! If the proposal is accepted, students would start each school day at 7 a.m. and end at 4:30 p.m.

Most students in this system are bussed, so, depending on the schedule, a student might have to get on a bus at 6 a.m. and then not get home until 6 p.m. Then he or she would have two or three hours to do homework before trying to get a little [sleep](#); and then would rise at a little after 5 a.m. the next morning to get ready for another school day. On the face of it, the proposal qualifies as cruel and unusual [punishment](#)—punishment just for being a kid. But Gabrieli and Stutman are all for it. They claim that more time in school increases test scores. Hurray! Of course, test scores are the only thing that we care about when we think about kids.

the day how many would like to stay for more school, you are lucky if 10% say ‘yes.’” That was it—no more discussion of student opinion. Student opinion doesn’t matter except as a force to counter.

In looking through the academic research on the pros and cons of more time in school, I found one reference to

review article in which I found these statistics seemed to treat this as a positive evaluation of the program. The low opinion that students had of the extended school time was treated as irrelevant, and no mention was made of student opinion in the article’s final conclusions about the value of more time in school or further research that should be conducted.[1]

Time sampling research—of students from all social classes and in a wide range of schools—has shown that young people are less happy in school than in any other setting in which they regularly find themselves.[2] Some are so unhappy that they commit suicide. Large numbers become clinically depressed or anxious because of school and lack of free play.[3] There was no discussion of this on the radio program I listened to; and there is little discussion of it in any of the many articles—either in academic journals or in the popular press — that one can find dealing with the question of more time in school. The debate centers almost entirely on the issue of whether or not we can squeeze a few more points out of kids on standardized tests with more time in school, and how we can afford to pay teachers for the extra time.

The argument that more time in school increases test scores is debatable. In their systematic review of the evidence, Patell, Cooper, and Allen conclude that there is some evidence for improved test scores, but that “the research on extended school time leaves much to be desired. The research designs are weak for making causal inferences...”[4] Others have pointed out that many countries that score better than we do on international standardized tests require fewer hours of schooling per year than we do. This includes Finland—which sports the world’s highest scores—as well as such other countries as Norway, Poland, the Netherlands, Australia, and Japan.[5]

Why are we so unimaginative in our thinking about our children’s needs and how to solve them? We try to solve every problem through the school system, and that system always fails. It fails primarily because *children don’t like school*. People don’t thrive and learn well in settings that make them unhappy. This point is so obvious, yet is almost completely ignored by educational policy makers. Children who are allowed to make their own choices, in an environment where they have real choices and where those choices pertain to real life, learn far more, far more efficiently, than children who are forced to follow a curriculum that seems irrelevant to them. That has been a theme of many of the essays in this blog.

Instead of throwing more money at the school system and making children spend more time there, why don’t we try to figure out some other ways to make children’s lives better—especially the lives of poor children?

Many years ago, when I was a college student in New York City, I worked at an after-school community center in one of the poorest sections of the city. It was sponsored by the YMCA, for kids who couldn’t afford the “real Y.” It was free, and the clientele were almost entirely Puerto Rican and African American. The center was in a run-down building and there was only one full-time staff member (a sweet, gentle man from the community) and me, who was there only part-time during the after-school hours. It served roughly two hundred kids. There was a rickety old gym, games, some books, and a place where kids could do homework if they wanted to. It was all their own choice. The kids who came ranged in age from about 7 to about 18, and they often played in age-mixed groups—both indoors and on the street outside the building. Sometimes I saw older kids helping younger ones with homework, and I frequently saw older kids reading to younger ones or teaching them games. This was a stimulating environment, almost entirely run by the kids. I never saw serious bullying. Shabby as the building was, the kids took pride in *their* center, and they took good care of one another in and around it. Today, most people don’t believe that such a thing can exist. Our estimation of the abilities of kids—especially poor ones—has reached an all-time low.

about apprenticeships or internships, where they can try out possible future careers? What about opportunities and safe places for age-mixed play? Why not work toward some sort of menu of such opportunities, which kids can choose from, after school, on weekends, and in the summer? If young people, especially poor ones, don't have decent environments in which to work, play, and learn after school, then that is the problem we should solve! For less money than what the teachers' unions want for more forced schooling, we could, with a little imagination and initiative, create a rich set of options for children—options that they help design, and like, and would freely choose, where they would be happy and would thrive.

What are your thoughts on the more-time-in-school question? What after-school and summer programs would you like to see for children and teenagers in your area, and what currently prevents their existence? This blog is a forum for discussion, and your views and knowledge are valued and taken seriously, by me and by other readers. Make your thoughts and questions known in the comments section below.

As always, I prefer if you post your comments and questions here rather than send them to me by private email. By putting them here, you share with other readers, not just with me. I read all comments and try to respond to all serious questions. Of course, if you have something to say that truly applies *only* to you and me, then send me an email.

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Notes

[1] Patall, E. A., Cooper, H., & Allen, A. B. (2010). Extending the school day or school year: A systematic review of research (1985-2009). *Review of Educational Research, 80*, 401-436.

[2] Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Hunter, J. (2003). Happiness in everyday life: The uses of experience sampling. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 4*, 185-199.

[3] Gray, P. (2011). The decline of play and the rise of psychopathology in childhood and adolescence. *American Journal of Play, 3*, 443-463.

[4] Patall, E. A., Cooper, H., & Allen, A. B. (2010). Extending the school day or school year: A systematic review of research (1985-2009). *Review of Educational Research, 80*, 401-436.

[5] Patell et al. (2010). Wolfgang, B., *The Washington Times*, Dec. 13, 2011.

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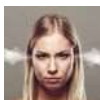


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