
Expanded Learning Time and Out-of-School Time

There is an emerging debate in the Commonwealth about the best way to provide children and youth the opportunities they need to develop as healthy, productive citizens. The challenges often seem overwhelming and the solutions often fragment into discussions of schools versus community-based organizations (CBOs) that provide a range of education, enrichment and human service activities outside of the school day. Goals are the same, but competing views of funding, standards, evaluating outcomes, and control often shape the agenda. The debate is providing an opportunity for us to think more broadly about youth development and build relationships across community assets—including schools, out-of-school time providers, youth development organizations, and public health services—to change how we nurture, educate, stimulate and engage children and youth in Massachusetts.

Education Reform? Its About Time

Over the past decade, and particularly since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, states have re-evaluated their education standards, placing a greater emphasis on academic accountability. Massachusetts has been a leader in this movement since the passage of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act in 1993. Testing has become the standard measure and in most states, including Massachusetts, the results are mixed. Over \$40 billion has been invested in MA school reform since 1993, and yet a recent study found that nearly 60% of the districts statewide had not adequately aligned their curricula with state standards. While there have been recent improvements in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test scores, the increasing dropout rate in Boston and other urban areas, and persistent gaps in achievement among minority students are alarming. Nationwide, moreover, curricula are narrowing as schools emphasize math and literacy at the expense of science, social studies and the arts. While this approach may improve test scores, there is no evidence it has any positive effect on youth development.

In a recent study by the Washington-based policy think tank Education Sector, Elena Silva writes, “Increasing numbers of school and district leaders are turning to one of the most fundamental features of the public education system: the amount of time students spend in school.” Teachers and administrators nationwide have adopted innovative strategies to make better use of the time that they have available in a standard school day and year, from block scheduling to integrated curricula. As Silva notes, “time is perhaps the most readily measured and easily understood resource in schools.” Educators, policymakers and funders are looking for new models of education reform and, increasingly, expanded learning time (ELT) is emerging as the untapped resource. Time has become the new pathway to achievement.

Charter School Model

To understand the movement toward ELT it is important to consider the charter school experience. Charter schools began in the early 1990s on the principles of parental choice, accountability and autonomy not found in traditional public schools. Since 2000, the number of charter schools nationwide has increased from about 1250 to nearly 4000. These schools operate in 40 states and serve over one million children and youth. While some critics have questioned their approach, charter schools have shown considerable success improving the academic achievement of at-risk students and they are having an effect on traditional public schools. In part, this is their mission. Charter and pilot schools inform and affect change in traditional schools in two key ways:

1. Their greater freedom allows them to operate as education laboratories where teachers and administrators can experiment with innovative ideas and techniques.
2. Traditional schools are in competition with these schools for students and have to adapt their programs to be more appealing to parents and youth.

Charter schools offer a variety of programming, from arts to academics, but according to the Center for Education Reform “perhaps the most innovative, yet simple, value provided by charter schools is increased instruction time for their students.” In 2003-2004, 82% of the charter schools operating in Massachusetts utilized a longer day than public schools, and about 50% of them operated on a longer year. Recent achievement data, moreover, reveals that in Massachusetts, nearly 75% of charter schools outperformed schools within their neighboring districts. Drawing upon these successes, Massachusetts 2020, the education foundation promoting ELT, noted in their 2005 study, *Time for a Change*, that “Leaders in these schools place a unwavering priority on expanding learning time. They find ways to stretch resources and reorganize their schools to offer that time. With or without knowing it, each of these schools has put into practice the Massachusetts Time and Learning Commission’s recommendations that ‘learning must be the constant, the fixed and unchanging goal, and time the variable that serves it.’”

Promise and Challenges of ELT

Proponents of ELT are quick to note that time is not inherently transformative. True reform involves the creation of more effective learning models and a redefinition of student success. It requires the use of research-based curricula that take into account how students learn at different times of the day, greater collaboration and autonomy for teachers, and an alignment of education resources across communities. Educators and policymakers must understand how time is currently used in schools. What is the breakdown between allocated school time, allocated class time, instructional time, and academic learning time? How much time is lost to classroom management? What would teachers and students use extra time to accomplish? How much change really occurs in the existing teaching models? Despite these challenges, advocates for ELT readily promote its multiple benefits:

- Teachers have more time to plan and prepare lessons, and more time to teach and engage in one-on-one activities with students.
- Teachers can experiment with innovative teaching methods and have more opportunity to engage in professional development.
- More time allows for a broader and deeper coverage of the curriculum and provides better support for students with diverse abilities.
- Schools can bring back enrichment activities that have been removed from schools under NCLB.
- Extending the school year can help address summer-time learning loss.
- Brought to scale, ELT can provide access to quality academic and enrichment programming to children and youth who would not generally take part in afterschool.

Many critics see ELT as part of a larger initiative to expand the government-run school system. Such a system, they argue, inhibits a family’s ability to choose what is best for their children. Often, these voices see schools as the very incubators of the problems they want to prevent and see inherent problems in extending the day of schools that are not providing students what they need to succeed. These arguments are based on the idea that families are adept at managing their own afterschool arrangements and that the private marketplace is best suited to supply families with opportunities that match their needs. Critics with more practical concerns understand that utilizing teachers in expanded day programs greatly adds to their workload and increases the potential for burnout. Students, too, are experiencing physical and mental difficulties adjusting to a longer day. *Build the Out-of-School Time Network’s* work with the Umana/Barnes extended day school in East Boston, for instance, revealed that managing behavior issues over a longer school day requires new strategies. This was particularly troubling for community-based partners who were not seen as teachers and, consequently, not treated with the same respect. Older youth, in particular, are less likely to have a positive perception of longer school days when they are used to leaving at 2PM. This will certainly be true if ELT programs don’t focus on their needs for self-directed youth development activities. Many youth who need the most help and could potentially benefit from expanded learning opportunities go to under-performing schools and it is unclear whether or not these schools could provide students with needed support.

Most advocates acknowledge that to be successful, ELT initiatives will need to be flexible and draw upon a range of options best suited to each school. Some observers argue that the most cost-effective way for states to

implement ELT is to target specific schools with the most learning needs. Such a model allows higher-performing schools to utilize “extra time” funds to provide a range of out-of-school time (OST) programming without a universal expansion of the school day or year. Others argue that schools need to be infused with the unique approach to learning found in afterschool programs. The mandatory nature and more formalized structure of schools are very different from OST programs. OST programs are voluntary and provide an opportunity for children to learn in a heterogeneous, intergenerational way. Learning opportunities in OST programs are less structured, project-based and more interdisciplinary. OST programs have more intimate connections with communities and foster healthy, positive relationships between youth and caring adults. The impact of OST programs on youth development is unquestioned. But there is a very real question about the value of bringing this approach into the school day. On the one hand a strong argument can be made for keeping the OST experience unique and separate, but there is also a need to open the education system to new models of learning.

The Massachusetts ELT Initiative

Massachusetts 2020 has been the primary advocate and Department of Education (DOE) partner for expanded learning time in Massachusetts and, increasingly, nationwide. Massachusetts 2020 began its work as a privately funded initiative to support and expand extended learning opportunities for kids through after school and summer programming. Their work raised two main questions: how do you sustain these programs economically and how do you get kids to utilize existing programs, particularly kids most at risk for academic failure? A state-funded ELT system is increasingly seen as the answer. In 2004 Massachusetts 2020 launched their Expanded Learning Initiative as a cornerstone of their advocacy work on education reform. Without their leadership the state would not have moved as far as it has in expanding the school day. Massachusetts 2020 is an active partner in the evaluation, planning and implementation of ELT. It is truly a collaborative process.

In 2005, the state released “The School Redesign: Expanding Learning Time to Support Student Success—Planning and Early Implementation Grant RFP,” under a \$6.5 million funding item in the DOE budget. Through the RFP, \$25,000 grants were given to support district planning and preparation for ELT programming. Initially, schools were required to increase the length of their day or year by 30% to be used for both academic and enrichment activities. Currently, DOE mandates that schools add no less than 300 additional hours to their school year, or approximately 25% more time. Preference was given to districts that were well positioned to implement an ELT program, especially those who already partnered with CBOs, as well as districts serving youth from lower income families (75% of grants went to districts with at least 25% of students eligible for lunch assistance). Schools, moreover, are assessed for their “readiness” to engage in ELT in part by the steps they have already taken to make their use of time more efficient. Districts are also required to get buy-in from parents and teachers to ensure a measure of community support.

In the fall of 2006, 10 schools in 5 districts received an additional \$1300/student to run ELT programs. As these schools began operating on an extended day schedule, over 80 schools in 29 districts actively engaged in ELT planning for the 2007 and 2008 school years. Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick has made ELT a central education priority as part of his “Readiness Project,” and with this support the legislature doubled funding for ELT planning and implementation grants to \$13 million in the FY2008 budget. On July 19, 2007, the DOE announced its second year ELT schools. In the fall of 2007, 18 schools serving approximately 9,000 students began operating on an expanded schedule. This represents about 1% of the state’s school-age population.

Enriching the ELT Schools Through Partnerships

While partnerships with CBOs are not required by the legislation, they are seen as vital to the health of an ELT system. It is less clear exactly how these partnerships should be structured and the role CBOs should play in broader decisions about education. The majority of the 10 schools in the first year ELT program built upon community partnerships to provide enrichment programming. These partnerships often transcend basic “afterschool” providers to include professional development training for teachers, nutrition education for children, and support groups for parents and guardians. Many first year ELT schools approached partnerships

as a vendor relationship. They had needs to fill time with enrichment activities and CBOs were hired to fill those slots. There are signs that these relationships are changing as partners are being brought in earlier in the process and schools are trying to engage CBOs in a more collaborative way. This seems more evident in Boston where a rich history of school/CBO partnerships exists, but in other parts of the state both schools and CBOs will need to develop their capacity to partner effectively. CBOs will need to assess their programs and be able to market their programs in terms of what they excel in providing. First and foremost, however, partnerships will need to be equitable and provide CBOs with fair compensation for their services.

Partners for the first year ELT schools were primarily the large, brand name providers, such as Citizen Schools, YMCA, Tenacity, Zumix, Junior Achievement, Boys & Girl Clubs and The Writers Express. With focused programs, aligned curricula, and research-based evaluation methods, these programs were seen as less of a risk for schools. Smaller, niche CBOs will have to adopt some of these approaches if they want to better position themselves to partner with schools. Partnerships, however, have their pitfalls. As part of the ELT school day, for instance, Citizen Schools were asked to grade students for the first time. For many Citizen School teachers who work hard to teach children the value of positive human relationships, teamwork, and critical thinking, the idea of grading students seemed unnatural. Some larger providers, such as the YMCA, expanded their capacity to serve more children and youth without an adequate increase in compensation. For others, linking to the formal education system may inhibit their ability to do what they do best—engage children and youth more creatively. CBOs have had to adapt their programs to the culture and rules of the schools. This approach, while understandable from the school's perspective, inhibits the benefits of afterschool's unique approach to education and youth development. To be successful and truly redesign the school day, schools will have to relax their cultural biases and open themselves to influence from OST professionals.

A New Role for Community-Based Organizations?

Recent research has focused on how schools can learn from the OST model. Flexible schedules, project-based learning, parental engagement, interdisciplinary curricula, skill building, community and culturally-sensitive programming and choice are all characteristics of quality OST programming that are seen as potential resources for schools. Much of this research focuses on brain development and the multiple ways children and youth learn. Narrow curricula and the “drill and practice” approach often found in classrooms do not work for many children. As the recently published study, *A New Day for Learning*, observed, “An optimum learning environment recognizes that the informal learning taking place outside of school affects students’ achievement in important ways ... Being offered a variety of activities, a choice of interests and time to become intensely involved in a project gives young people experiences that complement learning in the school day.” This brings up some important questions:

- What role will existing community-based providers of OST activities play in education reform?
- Are community-based providers recognized as active participants in the education system?
- Should CBOs function as mere vendors of “afterschool style” services to schools operating on an expanded schedule?
- Should OST practices just be adopted and integrated into the school day while CBOs compete to attract students in the shrinking gap of time between the end of longer schools days and end of workdays?
- Should CBOs retain their unique characteristics and programming or should they more closely align their programs with school curricula?

Despite all the research that advocates for a new learning culture informed by the experiences of the OST field, program providers and intermediaries will have to be pro-active in carving a niche in the discussions. Leaders in the field will need to move beyond providing services to engage policymakers and funders in creating new roles. These roles must include:

- helping to shape the broader public approach to educating children and youth in the state of Massachusetts;
- helping to create horizontal systems of education support that link all community assets;
- helping to establish a broader spectrum of student evaluation that moves achievement beyond tests and grades to include indicators such as social and emotional well-being, teamwork, critical thinking and creative problem solving.

Clearly, the need for high-quality OST programs for children and youth in Boston is not going away any time soon. For the 2007/2008 school year only 2000 students in the city will be enrolled in ELT schools, while nearly 50,000 will take part in various OST activities. ELT is still widely seen as a pilot program and its future is uncertain. Most ELT schools, moreover, end their day at 4 or 4:30PM and do not provide full coverage for working families. There is a huge need to improve and expand the current offerings of OST programs for children and youth in the city of Boston, particularly for older youth. Many in the field are concerned that the movement toward ELT will occur without a consideration of all the effort that has been put into creating a comprehensive system of high quality afterschool programs for Massachusetts' youth. There is a belief that funding initiatives aimed at ELT programs are seen by many state legislators as funding for afterschool. Emerging disparities between the flow of money toward ELT and the flow toward OST seem to justify this fear, and any movement to utilize OST money to fund ELT initiatives should be challenged. Education reform is needed and expanding the school day to create new ways of engaging children and youth has potential benefits. To provide the best opportunities for children in Massachusetts, we need to continue to strengthen a mixed system of school-based and out-of-school time learning opportunities that provide the most options for families.

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