

Crain's Chicago Business
"When less is not more"
By Samantha Stainburn
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For the current crop of students in Chicago's public schools, the system has always been in reform mode. Mayor Richard M. Daley took control of the schools when this year's high school seniors were first-graders. How are they doing?

Not good: Fifty-eight percent of 11th-graders didn't meet academic standards in reading on the 2005 Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE), and almost three-quarters failed to make the grade in math and science. Only 30% of CPS graduates enroll at four-year colleges and, of those, less than half will graduate in six years.

Chicago students are being lapped by kids in the suburbs, who boast some of the highest test scores in the country, and by students in urban districts like Austin, Texas, and New York, who show a better grasp of math, reading and science.

What do these kids have that Chicago students don't? More time.

Chicago has one of the shortest school days in the country: 5 hours and 45 minutes. That compares with 7½ hours in Evanston Township and seven hours for Austin and some schools in New York.

To be sure, there's no automatic correlation between more hours and higher achievement, but giving Chicago students the equivalent of one day less of instruction a week is a handicap no one can afford.



*Photo Caption:
Jim O'Connor, the principal of KIPP Ascend Charter School in Chicago, says longer school days improve test scores. Photo: John R. Boehm*

At Peirce School, a high-scoring, traditional K-8 school that serves Andersonville and Edgewater, Principal Paula Rossino says her teachers extend the day unofficially.

"They don't have to be here until 8:30 a.m. but many open up their classrooms at 7:30 to let the kids do independent reading or work in a study group," she says.

Meanwhile, Chicago's charter schools, which can create their own schedules with non-unionized teachers, are showing they can achieve the seemingly impossible with extra time. KIPP Ascend Charter School on the city's Far West Side requires students to spend 9½ hours in school on weekdays and come in for four hours every other Saturday.

When its current eighth-graders arrived as fifth-graders, they were reading at the second-grade level and doing math at the third-grade level. Now they're reading at the eighth-grade level and doing math at the 11th-grade level.

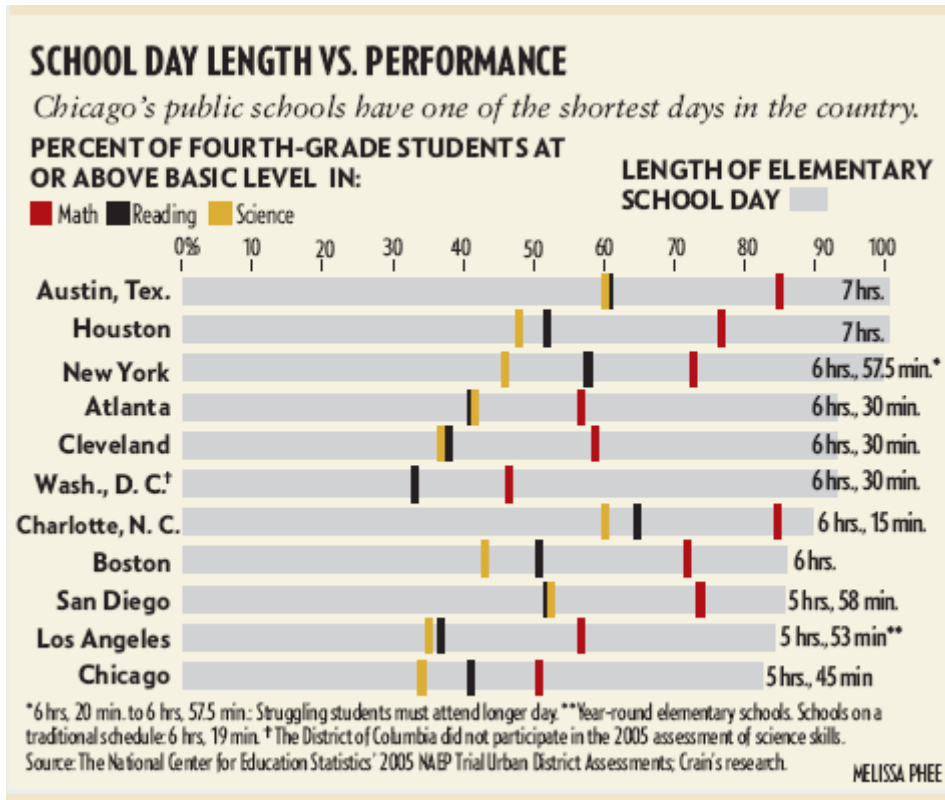
"There's no way that would have been possible without the extended day," the school's Principal Jim O'Connor says.

The Illinois Network of Charter Schools reports that in the 2004-05 academic year, Chicago's 19 charter schools taught an average of 45 minutes more each day; all outperformed neighboring traditional public schools on state tests.

Extending the school day will cost Chicago more money, but maybe not as much as the city fears. A 2005 study of eight public extended-time schools by the Massachusetts 2020 Foundation, an education reform group in Boston, found cost increases were not directly proportional to time added: When schools extended schedules by 15% to 60%, their costs went up by as little as 7% to 12%.

CPS officials say they haven't decided whether a longer school day will be a priority or even part of their negotiations in contract talks with the teachers union in 2007.

Chicago Teachers Union President Marilyn Stewart declines to discuss what it would take for the union to support a longer school day. "How can we say what conditions would need to be met for us to accept a longer school day until we see what the board has determined?" she says. "We would certainly react to their proposal in a way that would ensure our members were properly compensated for the additional time."



How to make school days last longer

Hilary Pennington is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a Washington, D.C., think tank, and co-founder of Jobs for the Future, a research and policy development organization. In "Expanding Learning Time in High Schools," a recent report for the center, she calls upon states and the federal government to promote more systematic experiments with a longer school day.

CRAIN'S: Do you think Chicago's short school day is holding students back?

MS. PENNINGTON: Yes. Look at it logically: If we decide to raise the standards and expectations for what students should achieve and we keep the time they have to do that constant, that's a problem. This is particularly true for kids who are behind grade level. I would strongly encourage Chicago to look at expanding time for learning. But that means changing how time is used in the school as well as just extending it.

What do high-performing schools do with extra time that helps kids learn?

They spend a lot more time on the core academic subjects like English and math. These schools are all over their students and don't let them fall behind, and they spend time on early diagnosis systems that might say, "The student's not on track; we've got to make an intervention now." They have mandatory tutoring.

What else do they do differently?

They do a lot of enrichment programs in the arts and sciences that often people in poor communities don't have and are cut out of shorter school days. Usually, schools provide enrichment activities with outside organizations, which gets kids access to different kinds of adults, including other teachers and parents. It's beneficial to have a lot of adults caring about the development of individual children.

The evidence that a longer school day results in higher achievement is mostly anecdotal. How can a cash-strapped school district like Chicago's justify investing in an idea that hasn't been studied on a large scale?

A longer school day was recommended in the 1983 "A Nation at Risk" report by the U.S. Department of Education's National Commission on Excellence in Education, and it's the only recommendation that has never been tried in a systematic way because it requires fundamentally transforming the structure of the school day and year. But you don't have to convert the whole system instantly. You probably need to do something like the Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time Initiative, where the state has allocated \$6.5 million to give 10 public schools \$1,300 extra per child to experiment with expanding the day by 30%, which is about two hours. Create some kind of systemic experimentation that lets you answer the question of whether it makes a difference.

How do you get teachers' unions on board with a longer school day?

Massachusetts required the teachers unions to approve the extended day at each of the schools in their experiment, and that took time (between three and 10 months, depending on the school) and conversation. The five districts that are participating are all paying their teachers more. (They've bumped salaries up by 20% to 30%.) A big issue was whether the extra time would count toward pensions. In Boston, for example, the district didn't want it to count and the union did. They ended up compromising. They said there would be mandatory participation for all teachers and they would get the time counted toward their pension, but it will be discretionary for new hires.

What other lessons can we learn from the Massachusetts extended-day experiment?

You need to provide enough planning time for the district and the schools to figure out what the different schedule is going to do for the school day. Also, having the Massachusetts 2020 Foundation, an outside organization, pushing the extended day initiative helped the process hugely. The organization did research on how high-performing schools throughout the state used extended days and how much it cost, and then they used that to do the draft legislation and the draft request for proposals. Chicago has a lot of good education reform organizations, so you might want to bring one of those into the mix. It's always good to have more neutral groups engaged.

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