



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Dec. 3-7, 2012

Vive La Différence: More and Better Learning Time

By UCLA IDEA

Earlier this year, the president of France proposed eliminating homework for elementary and middle school students. Yes, he would do away with that commonplace, indelible feature of schooling. President Francois Hollande offered some compelling reasons. "An education program is, by definition, a societal program," he said. "Work should be done at school, rather than at home." Hollande said that homework may be useful for students in well-off families where parents are can provide supervision and support, but it's the schools' job to teach all children.

French students do spend long hours at school, except for Wednesdays when they don't attend scheduled classes. New policy proposals also include shorter days while adding a half day to the school week, hiring more teachers, and curriculum changes.

Some education observers think Hollande is misguided, and the proposals will damage the very students it is intended to help. "Disadvantaged kids have fewer resources for learning outside school, so removing homework might actually widen the achievement gap, not narrow it," said Harris Cooper, Duke University professor. Of course, fewer resources often translate to less capacity and supervision for spending quality time on homework. Not surprisingly, Cooper's research at its broadest level shows that students who actually do more homework (rather than simply being *assigned* more) achieve more. It's hard to draw strong conclusion in the presence of so many unaccountable factors—for example, which groups of students are assigned more or less homework? What other resources do students have access to? How well are teachers trained and supported? Are there effects from students' peers or cohorts? And so forth.

In the last three decades, solid research and common-sense observations attest to substantial disparities between what rich and poor parents spend on educational enrichment programs (i.e., tutoring, music lessons, summer camps, etc.). Affluent families spend 2.5 times more today than they did in the 1970s, and seven times more than low-income families. These inequities lead to the well-reported gaps in educational achievement. But lamenting achievement "gaps" can be a backward-looking exercise if it doesn't attend to the core reasons for the gaps to appear. Forward-looking solutions must correct current inequalities that continue to impair closing those gaps.

In the United States, an initiative is underway to blend the benefits of spending more time in school, giving teachers more time for collaboration, and assuring that *all* students get more of the educational advantages that the wealthiest families routinely provide for their children. Backed by the Ford Foundation and the National Center on Time & Learning, the Time (Time for Innovation Matters in Education) Collaborative is a three-year pilot program that will add at least 300 hours of learning time to schools in five states. Almost 20,000 students in 40 schools in Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York and Tennessee will participate. The initiative engages teachers and their

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unions as key partners in designing a new kind of school day for themselves and students as well as a better match between the school day and the work lives of parents.

Luis Ubiñas, president of the Ford Foundation, which pledged \$3 million in grants as part of its More and Better Learning Time initiative, said that more time is key, but that alone is not enough. "Our goal must be to turn those hours into moments of opportunity—with expanded curricula, re-imagined school programs, internships and apprenticeships, and greater exposure to areas that are increasingly on the educational cutting block—arts, music, drama and athletics."

So it's not just about more time. And it's not just about raising standards. More school time needs to be filled with varied, enriched, and non-traditional learning opportunities known to be associated with higher performance and genuinely engaging students with becoming fully participating members of their communities: mentoring, foreign language, arts and music, sports, internships, community service, and more. That's what should be available to all students, not just those whose parents have the means to purchase these services in the private market. And that's not more of the same; that's more *and* better.

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