

What Can We Learn about School Transformation from Kuss Middle School?

Today, education leaders and policymakers are focused on the need to dramatically improve the nation’s lowest-performing schools. Yet, few comprehensive models exist to guide struggling schools. Kuss Middle School’s impressive record of sustained progress over the past five years is one of those rare examples of a school on the path to successful turnaround. Since 2005 Kuss has pioneered many of the school improvement strategies recently

outlined by the federal government, including increased learning time. By strategically redesigning their school day to incorporate 90 minutes of additional learning time for all students each day, Kuss has been able to improve instruction, broaden enrichment opportunities, and advance academic outcomes. The school credits more learning time as the catalyst that enabled and accelerated the other turnaround elements, including:

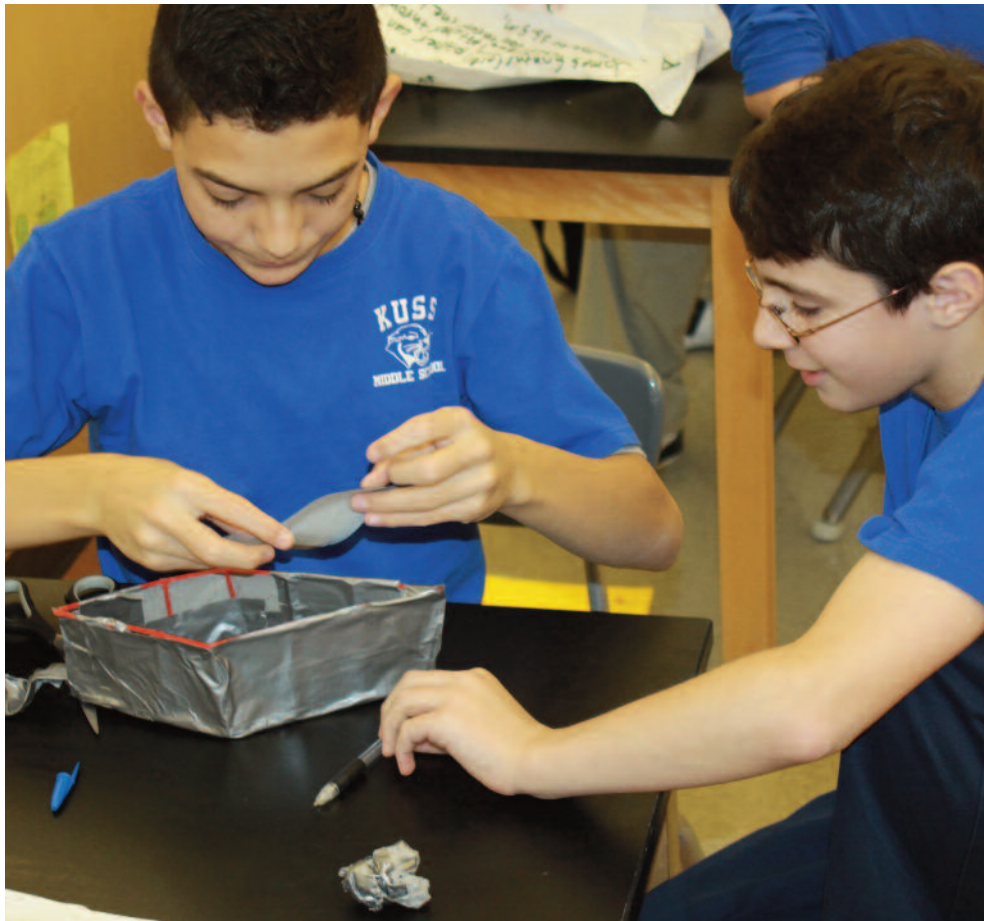
Key elements of the federal guidelines for turning around the nation’s lowest-performing schools, 2009	Key elements of Kuss Middle School’s transformation, 2005–2010
Effective School Leadership	The Massachusetts Department of Education recruited and hired an experienced principal to take over Kuss once it was deemed “Chronically Underperforming”. She led the effort to increase learning time.
Comprehensive Instructional Reform	Kuss adopted a new curriculum; established a school-wide focus on writing; and implemented a common set of best instructional practices in every classroom, used across the expanded school day.
On-going, High-Quality, Job-Embedded Professional Development	Kuss implemented quarterly peer observations for all teachers as well as professional development focused on writing strategies and other data-driven priorities. The expanded schedule includes time for data-centered collaboration for all teachers throughout the week.
Use of Data to Monitor Student Progress and Inform Instruction	Kuss instituted interim assessments in core subjects; trained staff on how to analyze and use data; and publically posted data to make progress transparent. Interim data is used to place students in new academic support and enrichment classes and monitor progress.
Develop and Increase Teacher Effectiveness	The new principal implemented a more frequent and focused system of support and evaluation for staff; as of 2010, two thirds of the faculty are new to Kuss since 2005. Most teachers work the entire expanded school day.
Provide Social—Emotional Support and Community-Oriented Services	Kuss devoted some of the additional learning time to an advisory program and integrated community partner—led health, wellness and mentoring programming into the expanded school day.

Kuss is one of more than two dozen schools that added learning time through participation in the Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time (ELT) Initiative. Launched in 2005, the Massachusetts ELT Initiative is a partnership between the National Center on Time & Learning and its state affiliate Massachusetts 2020, together with the state legislature, the governor, and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. These partners have called on schools and districts

across the state to rethink the traditional six-hour, 180-day school schedule and collaborate with teachers, union leaders, community partners, administrators, and parents to develop redesign plans. Those schools that develop the highest quality proposals are awarded \$1,300 per pupil per year to support an expanded school day and year. Today, over 10,500 students in nine districts across Massachusetts attend ELT schools.

“The gift of time has allowed our staff to create new and exciting ways for our students to learn and achieve. These new approaches have, in turn, informed classroom instruction throughout our day.”

Nancy Mullen, Kuss Principal



“More learning time has significantly increased student engagement and allowed students and staff to establish more meaningful relationships that create credibility in the classroom.”

Marc Charest, Kuss Teacher

In 2004, Kuss Middle School became the first school to be designated “Chronically Underperforming” by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, initiating a state “take over” of the school. Located in the small city of Fall River in southeastern Massachusetts, the region’s steady economic decline was reflected in the school’s tired hallways and classrooms. Student achievement was among the lowest in the state, and the school had failed to improve after years of low performance on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Student and teacher morale was low, as the school struggled with dwindling enrollment and unstable leadership.

But with the state designation of underperformance came the opportunity to transform the school. The new state-appointed principal recognized that a six-hour school day was insufficient to meet the needs of all students and reach the school’s goals without a dramatic narrowing of the curriculum, sacrificing time for science, social studies, foreign languages, the arts, and athletics. Led by a team of teachers, administrators, parents, community partners, and the local teachers’ union, the school engaged in an eight-month planning process to redesign the entire school day in order to add significantly more learning time for all students. In fall 2006, Kuss opened its doors with a brand new school schedule that included 300 more hours of learning time per year for all students, providing them with a balance of personalized academic instruction and engaging enrichment, as well as additional time for teacher collaboration to strengthen instruction.

By 2010, the school was being featured in state and national publications, including *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, and *Education Week* for its schoolwide success.

In the four years since becoming one of the pioneering schools taking part in the Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time Initiative, Kuss has made steady achievement gains, hitting their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) improvement targets for the past two academic years. A school that once struggled to fill its classrooms and attract teachers now has a waiting list, as students and their families are drawn to the school’s culture of high achievement, superior instruction, diverse enrichment offerings, and robust science programs. Now in its fifth year with an expanded school day, Kuss has defied the odds and is a model for schools seeking to leverage increased learning time as a catalyst to accelerate student achievement and provide students with a well-rounded education.

In conjunction with expanding time, Kuss has implemented a **schoolwide instructional focus on writing**, a need they identified through ongoing analysis of student data. All staff is now trained to use common techniques to integrate writing instruction and practice into all academic and enrichment classes.

Expanded Learning Time (ELT) at Kuss Middle School

Kuss has redesigned the school day to incorporate 300 additional hours of learning time per year for all students. It now offers all 650 students a customized balance of academics and enrichment, while providing more time for teachers to work together to improve instruction and better meet student needs. Redesign components include:

1. More time for core academics, personalized instruction, and individualized support. All Kuss students have daily, 90-minute blocks for English Language Arts (ELA), math, and science, and social studies is now taught daily in 45-minute blocks, with one 90-minute double block each week. In addition to core science instruction, all 6th and 7th graders participate in applied science electives, choosing from options like Design Lab, Project Go-Green, and Astronomy, while 8th graders benefit from a 20-week course to review content for the state science & technology test.

Kuss has also added small-group ELA and math “ramp-up” classes to the weekly schedule. These 45-minute classes target specific skills where students need additional support, and students are grouped with peers that have similar needs. Student groupings are flexible—as students show progress, they move to another group or out of the ramp-up class all together—and teachers use interim assessment data to carefully monitor progress. Students excelling in ELA and/or math take on more challenging enrichment courses in place of ramp-up classes.

2. More time for engaging enrichment programming where students develop interests and gain mastery in specialized subjects. All Kuss students participate in two kinds of enrichment programming during their school day: a rotation of standard specialty classes offered to all students (PE/health, art, music, and family & consumer science), and mixed-grade electives, where students chose from a menu of classes each semester. Options include

video production, martial arts, and an award-winning theater arts program. Most courses culminate in a final product, performance, or presentation, where students demonstrate what they have learned for their peers, families, and the Fall River community. Electives are taught primarily by Kuss teachers, with community partners such as the YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, and SMILES program leading specialized offerings like swimming and mentoring. Partner programming is integrated throughout the school day, instead of being tacked on to the end of the school day or after school.

3. More time for teacher collaboration to strengthen instruction. All teachers at Kuss now have time for individual planning, collaboration with colleagues, and professional development built into their expanded weekly schedule. These meetings are used primarily for analyzing assessment data to identify individual student needs, examine student work, and implement common instructional strategies that support the schoolwide writing focus. Teachers also have the opportunity to participate in and lead a number of schoolwide committees, such as the Redesign Team, which oversees the ongoing improvement of the expanded school day, and the School Climate & Culture Team, which shaped a new student support plan. Kuss has also added a number of early release days to the schedule for whole-faculty professional development devoted to research-based instructional practices, with a cross-curricular focus on writing.

Sample Student Schedule: Kuss Middle School

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Legend
7:18–8:06	Core: Science	Core: Science	Core: ELA	Core: Math	Elective: Journalism	Core Subjects: ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies.
8:08–8:52					Math Ramp-Up	
8:54–9:38	Specialty: PE/Health	ELA Ramp-Up	Core: Math	Core: Science	Core: Social Studies	
9:40–10:24	Core: Math	Science Elective: Forensics			Core: ELA	
10:28–11:12		Core: Social Studies	Specialty: Art	Math Ramp-Up		
Lunch						
11:14–12:26	Core: Social Studies	Specialty: PE	Core: Social Studies	ELA Ramp-Up	Specialty: Art	Additional Academics: Math and ELA ramp-up classes and applied science electives.
12:28–1:12	Core: ELA	Core: Math	ELA Ramp-Up	Core: ELA	Core: Science	
1:14–1:58			Math Ramp-Up			
2:00–2:44	Elective: Martial Arts	Core: ELA	Core: Science	Core: Social Studies	Core: Math	
2:46–3:30	Science Elective: Endangered Species					

*On Tuesdays and Thursdays, each block is 41 minutes long; this creates two 25-minute blocks for Advisory.

“An “expanded day” leads to expanded learning, but it is so much more than that. More time gives Kuss the opportunity to reinforce learning objectives taught during core subject instruction, disguised in an activity that my child is enthusiastic about.”

Bethany Toure, Kuss Parent

Results

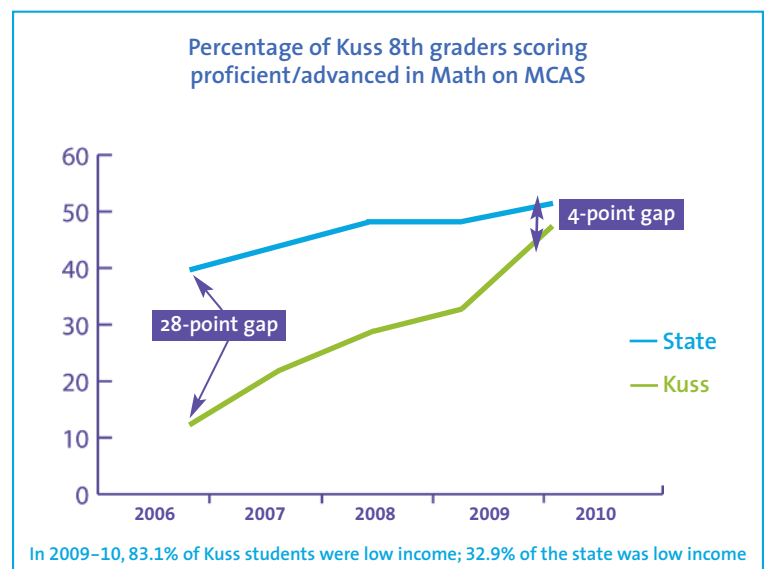
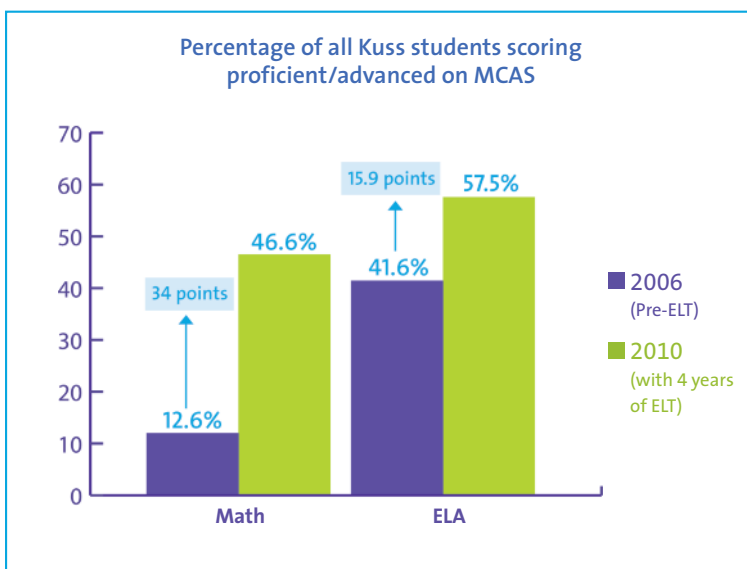
Since first adding time and embarking on their transformation, Kuss has seen dramatic improvements on a number of key academic measures. Highlights include:

- ✓ **School-wide gains in math and English Language Arts.** Between 2006 and 2010, Kuss increased the percentage of students scoring Proficient or Advanced on MCAS by 34 points in math and by 16 points in ELA, as compared with the other three middle schools in Fall River, which have seen more modest gains of 18 points in math and 10 points in ELA during the same time period.¹
- ✓ **Closing the achievement gap in math.** Kuss’s math gains have been particularly impressive, with graduating 8th graders showing tremendous results. Over the course of five years, Kuss 8th graders have all but eliminated a 28-point achievement gap with the state.
- ✓ **Enhanced writing skills.** Since first incorporating a cross-curricular focus on writing into their expanded day in 2008, the percentage of Kuss students scoring 2 or higher in MCAS open response writing has increased 24 points in ELA and 17 points in math.² The school now surpasses the state average in ELA and has narrowed the gap with the state in math.

Like all ELT schools, Kuss also looks at other measures to gauge their progress and assess the impact of expanding time, including:

- ✓ **Increased enrollment and attendance.** Enrollment at Kuss has ranged from a low of 480 before ELT to 650 for the 2010–2011 school year, making it the largest of Fall River’s middle schools. In addition to the increase in enrollment, daily attendance rates have risen to 94%, and suspension rates have decreased 10% since the 2008–2009 school year.
- ✓ **High rates of teacher satisfaction.** In 2009, Kuss teachers participated in the Tripod Project³ survey, responding to questions about their perceptions of the school. Ninety percent of Kuss teachers agreed that their school “sets high standards for academic performance” and 96% agreed teachers in their school “are a professional community of learners focused on being good teachers.”
- ✓ **Stronger partnerships.** More time has helped Kuss forge deep community partnerships, which bring additional programs and resources into the school day. Key partners include the YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, UMass, Harvard University, and the SMILES mentoring program. A number of these partners also serve Kuss students after the 3:30 pm dismissal and during the summer.

Four Years of Sustained Progress at Kuss Middle School



¹ Weighted for school size and rounded up to the nearest whole number.

² Open response writing questions of the MCAS are scored using a Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education rubric with a scale of 0–4; 2 or higher is considered “passing.”

³ The Tripod Project administers student, teacher, and parent surveys and analyzes the data to help schools measure the impact of effective teaching and student engagement.

Other Essential Components of the Successful Transformation of Kuss Middle School

- **Diverse stakeholder support.** In expanding the school day, Kuss built support among district and union leaders, community partners, families, and teachers at the school. Kuss teachers work and are compensated for the eight-hour school day, and credit the overall culture shift of the school to the full faculty's ownership of expanded learning time.
 - **Strong, distributive leadership.** One of the first interventions at Kuss the year prior to implementing ELT was to bring on a new leader with a record of success and a commitment to maximizing learning time. As principal, she has shaped a Leadership Team that shares responsibilities and accountability, ranging from teacher training and evaluation to grant writing and partnership management.
 - **An infusion of new talent.** Upon her arrival at Kuss, the new principal implemented a more focused, rigorous cycle of teacher support, observation, feedback, and evaluation.
- As a result, she simultaneously strengthened the existing faculty and hired a number of strong new teachers each year.
- **District champions.** Kuss has had the support of two consecutive superintendents who value how expanded time can be leveraged to support significant school improvement. Based on the success at Kuss and the two other ELT schools in the district, two additional Fall River schools are expanding the school day by one hour in 2011, using federal and district funds.
 - **State-of-the-art facilities.** In 2009, Kuss moved into a new building equipped with a modern auditorium, library, nine science labs, two gymnasiums, and other amenities that support their redesigned day. The new building signals to students, faculty, and families that Fall River is invested in providing a top-notch education to every Kuss student.



“Being involved in the Kuss theater program helped me find something I want for my major in college and my future career. I think more people are coming to our school because they know that there is at least one thing that will make their middle school years memorable.”

Xavielys Perez, Kuss Student

Growing Momentum for More Time

Education experts have long recognized that expanding learning time beyond the traditional 180 six-hour days should be a part of improving public education. Over the past decade, more than 850 schools across the nation—including both district and charter schools—have broken away from those schedules in an effort to provide more time for core academics and a well-rounded education, as well as more time for teachers to collaborate and improve their practice.

With the leadership of the current Administration—which has prioritized increased learning time in its pursuit to turn around the nation’s lowest-performing schools—the issue has emerged on the national agenda. This year alone, with federal funding from the American Recovery and

Reinvestment Act, an additional 750 low-performing schools are increasing learning time.

The National Center on Time & Learning (NCTL) is encouraged by the growing recognition that students, especially those living in poverty, need more time to succeed. Increased learning time is a long-term reform strategy that requires careful planning, effective leadership, and thoughtful implementation, school by school. NCTL urges states, districts, and schools considering the use of expanded time as a strategy to transform schools to consider the following lessons learned from Kuss Middle School, and other high performing expanded-time schools around the country.

Guiding Principles for Expanding Learning Time

- **Add significantly more learning time for ALL students in targeted schools** by rethinking how the entire day and year are structured to improve student achievement, increase student engagement, and provide teachers with time for collaboration and professional development.
- **Maximize the effectiveness of new and existing time** through the relentless use of data, a schoolwide effort to strengthen instruction, and an intense focus on a small number of key performance and instructional goals.
- **Capitalize on increased learning time by using data to individualize instruction and provide tiered support**, grouping students based on like-needs and frequently monitoring progress to adjust groupings, content, and instructional strategies accordingly.
- **Prioritize more time with quality teaching when allocating resources** by first determining how much additional student learning time is needed to raise the achievement of all students, then thinking strategically about how to support it through a variety of staffing and scheduling models.



“We’re still waiting for America to replace an agrarian 19th century school calendar with an information age calendar that increases learning time on a par with other countries. We’re still waiting, and we cannot wait any longer.”

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan,
September 2009

The National Center on Time & Learning (NCTL) and its state affiliate Massachusetts 2020 are dedicated to expanding learning time to eliminate the achievement gap and provide a well-rounded education for all children. Massachusetts 2020 focuses its efforts in Massachusetts and is currently leading the country's most ambitious initiative to redesign public schools by adding significantly more learning time to the school day and year. NCTL is the leading national organization focused on the impact of time on learning outcomes. NCTL conducts research and advances public policy at the federal, state, and local levels and provides direct technical assistance to a growing number of states, districts, and schools that seek to expand learning time to prepare students for success in college and careers.



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