

Evaluation of the Expanded Learning Time Initiative: Year One Report, 2006-2007

Executive Summary

Ensuring that all students in the United States achieve academic proficiency is at the forefront of today's domestic policy agenda, and over the past decade there has been a heavy emphasis on standards and accountability as a way to achieve this goal. Responding to the call to action, many districts and schools are undertaking reform initiatives that challenge traditional images of public education. Providing additional instructional time—in the school day and year—is one reform initiative that holds promise to help achieve the desired goals. With additional time devoted to teaching and learning, schools may be able to attain the ultimate goal of universal proficiency.

The Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time Initiative

In 2005, the Massachusetts state legislature authorized funding for the Expanded Learning Time (ELT) Planning and Early Implementation Grant program as a way to further its longstanding commitment to improving student outcomes and reducing the achievement gap.

The ELT Planning and Early Implementation Grant program was created to “provide resources for districts to plan the innovative redesign of selected schools that will offer challenging, research-based, and varied learning experiences focused on raising student achievement.”¹ The paramount requirement was that redesigned schools must expand their days and/or year to include 30 percent more time than their previous schedules. Further, three specific objectives were set out for use of the additional time:

- provide more instructional opportunities in math, literacy, science, and other core subjects to support student achievement;
- integrate enrichment opportunities into student learning; and
- provide educators with increased opportunities to plan and to participate in professional development.²

Ten schools in five districts successfully planned for ELT and were ultimately awarded Implementation Grants to begin operating their expanded schedules in September 2006.³ The awards to individual schools ranged from \$195,000 to \$1,527,500, amounting to an additional \$1,300 per enrolled student, which represents an increase of between five and 12 percent of the districts' regular per pupil expenditures.

The Evaluation of Expanded Learning Time

The evaluation of ELT is a three-year study that is being conducted as two interrelated parts—a planning and implementation component that explores the early decision-making phases and subsequent execution of ELT programs in the funded districts and schools, and an outcomes component that examines the outcomes of ELT for districts, schools, teachers, and students. Ultimately, the implementation and

¹ Massachusetts Department of Education.

² FY2006 Planning and Early Implementation grant proposal, Massachusetts Department of Education.

³ The five districts were Boston, Cambridge, Fall River, Malden, and Worcester.

outcomes components will be linked to determine if the approaches to implementation are related to the outcomes achieved.

The Year One report presents findings in two parts. The first part addresses the planning and early implementation phases for the first cohort of Expanded Learning Time (ELT) schools (Cohort 1) and is primarily descriptive. Planning and implementation data were collected using interviews and focus groups with school and district administrators, teachers, parents, and community partners, as well as teacher and student surveys developed and administered by Massachusetts 2020.

The second part of the report presents a look at early outcomes for the first cohort of ELT schools. The outcomes component of the evaluation utilizes a matched comparison design, in which extant data for ELT schools are examined relative to their matched comparison schools. Using a well-executed matched comparison design will allow us to suggest that differences observed between ELT schools and their matched comparison schools are attributable to the ELT program in individual schools. We found that the student and teacher populations in the ELT and matched comparison schools are comparable on specific characteristics of interest over time with only minor, non-statistically significant changes in the first year of ELT, which is important for the integrity of future student achievement analyses.

Major Findings

The 10 Cohort 1 schools started out with enthusiasm, learned some important lessons along the way, and made plans to tweak and refine their initial plans to continue their participation for the 2007-08 school year. Although survey results suggest that teachers and students had high expectations in the fall and somewhat less enthusiasm in the spring, overall our interview findings suggest that despite some criticisms and unanticipated logistical issues, the early implementation of ELT has been successful. Teachers, principals, parents, and community partners continue to be supportive of the idea of expanded learning time and embrace it in concept, even if there are some challenges to work out in its execution.

Our analysis of the implementation and early outcomes data rendered the following notable findings:

- By the end of the first year of ELT implementation, schools had made the most progress in adding instructional time in core academics, which is among the initiative's paramount objectives aimed at improving student achievement. All schools were also able to create new or enhance existing enrichment offerings with the expanded day. Overall, schools had the greatest difficulty incorporating time for teacher planning, collaboration, and professional development into the expanded day.
- Schools also made strides in fostering better connections and more meaningful relationships between students and staff—particularly through the introduction or expansion of enrichment activities.
- Though schools were given great flexibility in designing their expanded programs, the 10 ELT schools developed and adopted schedules that essentially fit into one of three categories: an *integrated schedule* in which the traditional school day was reconfigured to include lengthened academic blocks, a *divided schedule* in which the traditional school day remained intact but was augmented with a distinct expanded day program, and a *mixed schedule* that included elements of both the integrated and divided schedules.

- The distinction of schools by schedule type nearly mirrors schools' grade spans: the three elementary schools adopted integrated schedules while the four middle schools adopted divided schedules; two of the three K-8 schools adopted mixed schedules. It may be that a school's grade span dictates logistical or procedural decisions and/or reduces the flexibility of the school schedule.
- All 10 Cohort 1 schools reported that the level of funding limits their programs, especially with regard to staffing.
- Districts were required to obtain letters of support from teachers unions to plan for ELT. Districts that were interested in ELT but unable to garner union support could not proceed with planning and/or implementation. Districts and schools that involved the unions early in the process and maintained open communication tended to arrive at agreements that were more aligned with the schools' proposed staffing models than districts and schools that had less union involvement in planning for ELT.
- Near the end of the first year of ELT, almost two-thirds of teacher survey respondents reported that they perceived positive effects of the expanded schedule on several dimensions of classroom instruction. In addition, more than half of teacher survey respondents indicated that student academic performance and engagement in school were improved as a result of ELT.
- Students' feelings about the expanded day varied significantly by grade level, with younger students reporting positive feelings about ELT with more frequency than older students. Specifically, nearly two-thirds of students in elementary grades were happy or very happy about a longer school day as compared to 35 percent or less of students in middle school grades.
- The teacher surveys asked respondents to list the advantages and disadvantages of the expanded day. The most frequently cited advantages were increased instructional time, enrichment opportunities, and student safety. The most common disadvantages were student fatigue, teacher and staff fatigue, and scheduling issues.
- We found no effect of ELT on indicators of student behavior, including rates of attendance, truancy, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension, as compared to non-ELT matched comparison schools.

One school administrator summed up the first year evaluation findings quite nicely, noting that this year “has been about working out the procedural kinks [i.e., logistics and operations]. Improving instructional quality is next.” With a short planning period, and eleventh hour notification that grants had been received, Cohort 1 schools are pioneering the initiative. Subsequent cohorts have had more opportunity to plan, and as each year of funding is approved by the legislature we hypothesize that schools will perceive a stronger likelihood that funding will come through and will be less hesitant to make commitments to major schedule changes and to community partners. Thus we might also expect to see faster or greater improvements in student outcomes in schools in later years. For the early implementation sites, we are not expecting dramatic early improvements in student outcomes given the complexities they experienced in implementation. As schools are better able to consistently provide teachers with adequate individual and collaborative planning time and professional development, and to offer student-centered enrichment opportunities, the added instructional time likely will be put to even more productive use.

Future Analyses

In the second year of the ELT evaluation, the study team will continue to track the implementation and outcomes for Cohort 1 and begin collecting data in the nine Cohort 2 schools implementing ELT in 2007-08. The following is a look ahead to future reports:

- Planning and implementation topics that may be examined in future reports include technical assistance to schools, the actual financial costs of implementing ELT versus the grant award, and the characteristics of districts or schools that do not proceed past the planning phase.
- Subsequent evaluation reports will include analyses of student MCAS achievement data, which will center on a comparative interrupted time series (ITS) analysis of the impact of ELT on student achievement. A comparative ITS design is the most rigorous possible given the grant award process, and this type of design is strongest when there are at least five years of prior achievement data and at least two years of post-intervention achievement data available. Hence, we will conduct ITS analyses after Cohort 1 schools have completed their second year of ELT.