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Commentary on "Expanded Learning Time in Schools"

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When Dave Levin and I first came up with the idea for KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) in 1993, the common wisdom was that the traditional school calendar offered plenty of time for students to learn. But it seemed clear to us that that wasn't true. As young fifth grade teachers in an underserved Houston neighborhood, we watched our students leave our class prepared and optimistic at the end of the year, only to fall behind in the higher grades. To get our kids prepared for success in college and life, we needed to give them more time to catch up and get ahead.

In the summer of 1994, Dave and I started KIPP with 48 Houston fifth graders. We offered an extended school day, week, and year—by our calculations, amounting to almost 67 percent more time on task for our students than in traditional-day schools. This extended calendar gave us an opportunity to get students up to speed academically, while at the same time turning the "or" into "and": instead of having to choose more math *or* music for our students, we could teach more math *and* music.

KIPP has now grown to the nation's largest charter school network, with 125 schools in 20 states and D.C. From the beginning, time in the classroom has been one of KIPP's core operating principles—our Five Pillars—along with high expectations, power to lead, choice and commitment, and focus on results. By expanding the school calendar to encompass more of each day, as well as selected Saturdays and part of the summer, we aim to give our students a leg up as they climb the mountain to and through college.

We now have proof that our work is paying off. Fifteen years after KIPP's founding, we asked Mathematica Policy Research to investigate what Dave and I understood from experience—that more time in the classroom leads to improved student achievement. In 2010, Mathematica released the first report from their multi-year longitudinal study of KIPP middle schools. The report concluded that most of these schools are producing significant achievement gains for our students, while serving a student population that comes to KIPP in fifth grade with lower entering test scores and a higher concentration of poverty than the average for nearby districts. The gains our students are making are big enough to substantially narrow the achievement gap, in terms of both race and income level.[1]

Research is also enriching our understanding of extended time throughout the public school system. Reading David Farbman's article, "Expanding Learning Time in Schools: Considering the Challenges of Implementation and the Potential Impact," I found that many of the summarized findings resonated with our experience. Farbman's overview

of recent research on the topic brings up a crucial point: it's not just about the time spent, but about how you use it.

As Albert Einstein once said, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." With extended time, that's especially true. Practitioners need to ask: how is students' time being spent? Are they getting excellent instruction delivered by highly skilled teachers, and opportunities for expanding their horizons beyond academics? Or is it just more of the same?

At KIPP, we have found that there are three key elements that can make or break an extended-time model. The first of these is great teaching, and more of it. We know that a highly skilled teacher can have more impact on a child's academic success than any other single factor. According to research by Dr. Eric Hanushek at Stanford University, a good teacher can produce academic gains for students that are equivalent to one-and-a-half years' worth of learning in just one year.[2]

The second element is what we call the "joy factor." If students aren't excited about learning, they won't learn—no matter how long they are in school. One of KIPP's strategies, inspired by Houston master teacher Harriett Ball, is using rhymes, chants, and songs to teach key concepts in math, science, and reading. Our teachers and administrators make learning exciting, fresh, and hands-on, from interactive projects to contests and field trips. Our students are so immersed in learning, and having so much fun doing it, that they often don't want to go home at the end of the day.

The third element is including both cognitive and noncognitive skills in the extended day. KIPP has always had a dual focus on academic skills and character development. In recent years, we have developed a more systematic approach to character, based on the work of psychologists Martin Seligman, Christopher Peterson, and Angela Duckworth. We infuse our extended day with opportunities for students to build character strengths—including grit, curiosity, zest, optimism, and gratitude—that will give them the best shot at success in college and beyond.[3]

Beyond what makes extended time successful, there is also the question of whether these practices can scale throughout the public school system. Farbman lays out three crucial obstacles that have prevented extended time from growing. Like any public school, KIPP has encountered these challenges, and found ways around them.

The first obstacle Farbman cites is money. It is true that extending time in the school year costs money, and in times of economic strain, it can seem like an unsustainable priority. This is one instance where charter schools are often at a disadvantage: per-pupil funding for charter

schools varies widely from state to state, and charter schools like KIPP typically receive less per-pupil funding than neighboring district schools do.[4] Overall, KIPP has settled on a two-part response to the money issue: raising philanthropic funds to support extended time in our newest KIPP schools, which haven't reached economy of scale yet, while pushing all our schools to set up sustainable financial models that draw most or all of their permanent funding from public sources.

The second problem Farbman highlights is conflict with family schedules and extracurricular activities. This assumes that two more hours of school means two more hours of math instruction, at the expense of extracurriculars or family time. But that's not necessarily true. In the communities KIPP serves, most of the parents work long days and can't afford out-of-school activities for their kids. With an extended day, our students are safe and supervised in school while their parents work, and we have time to provide extracurriculars like sports, art classes, music, and field trips.

The final obstacle is what Farbman calls "the inertia factor." This is an issue that KIPP encountered early on. Dave Levin and I started KIPP in a traditional district classroom, hoping to build our idea within the confines of the Houston school district. We encountered enough resistance from different corners that we moved to a charter school model after our first year. But happily, in the 18 years since KIPP's founding, districts across the country have responded to our success by overcoming inertia and reaching out as partners. Houston ISD has piloted a program called Apollo 20, applying elements of KIPP's successful model—including the extended day—in failing district schools. Meanwhile, in nearby Spring Branch ISD, KIPP and YES Prep networks formed the SKY partnership with the district to expand a successful more-time model in its schools.

More time in school is by no means a silver bullet for education. It takes hard work, and much more than a few extra hours in the week, to create a model that helps students make learning gains. But if we consider both the risks and the benefits, and focus on developing more extended time programs that take all the factors Farbman highlights into account, we can bring real success to more of this country's most underserved students.

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