

A school reform long on common sense

By Scot Lehigh

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It's the most felicitous of developments: an education reform that is not only delivering results but is also popular with school administrators, students and their families, and teachers and their unions.

The experiment has helped boost test scores while providing more opportunities for activities like theater, music, art and sports. So what is this miraculous solution?

Simple common sense: a longer school day.

To see the idea in action, consider Clarence R. Edwards Middle School in Charlestown, Mass. A few years ago, students arrived at school about 7 a.m. and left at 1:30. Now they stay until 4:15, except on Fridays. The additional time, which is split about 50-50 between instruction and enrichment, lets the school focus intensely on individual academic needs.

"I have an extra four hours-plus every week in instruction time to work with kids," says Jeffrey Riley, who returned to Edwards as principal this school year after a previous stint as director of instruction. "If a kid is strong in math and weak in English, he gets extra English help, and vice versa." The longer day lets the school as much as double instruction time in a student's weak subject.

It also leaves ample time for popular extracurriculars. For example, the school has new or expanded offerings in musical theater, Latin dance, art, band, karate, swimming and soccer. The kids wanted a football team, and so Riley started one last fall.

The students I met loved the activities — and even said they appreciated the extra academic time.

"You get more extracurricular activities, and I like the longer classes, too," offered seventh-grader Rowan Houlihan of Charlestown, who this year has taken modern jazz, chorus and musical theater.

"For me, my math scores have really improved," said Idalia Guillen, an eighth-grader from East Boston, who has participated in musical theater, band, chorus and songwriting. Her mother was initially skeptical about the longer day, Idalia said — until she saw how much it helped her academic performance. And having heard her talk about the extracurriculars, Idalia's siblings now want to enroll at her school as well.

At Edwards, teaching in the expanded-day program is voluntary, with teachers paid at their regular hourly rate. In the first year, 60 percent of the faculty participated. This school year, 100 percent have signed on.

Statewide, the longtime impetus behind a longer school day has been Chris Gabrieli, venture capitalist and indefatigable citizen activist, who is passionate about its promise.

In 2006-2007, the program's first school year, there were 10 schools, with about 4,500 kids; now there are 18 schools, with 9,100 students. Another 32 schools hope to institute a longer day next year; 16 have fully approved plans and are ready to go, provided the state increases funding for the program.

When surveyed, parents overwhelmingly say a longer school day is helping their kids; teachers are also strongly positive.

Gabrieli points to data showing students in expanded-learning-time schools making impressive gains toward proficiency on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System and highlighting the progress those schools have made in closing the achievement gap between middle-class and less affluent students.

"This is the only large-scale reform that I know of that can potentially help every school whose students are struggling to overcome the achievement gap," says Gabrieli, who equates the expanded learning time for poorer urban students with the extra tutoring middle-class parents frequently provide for their children.

The early results have also impressed U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy, who hopes to take the idea national with a pilot program.

Here, the program started in 2005 as a legislative initiative. Gov. Deval Patrick, an enthusiastic backer, has recommended a doubling of current funding, to \$26 million, in his new budget.

"The current school day is simply insufficient to give kids everything they need to be successful in today's world," says Paul Reville, the state's secretary of education-designate.

This is a success Massachusetts should be proud of — and a program that deserves to grow, even in tight budgetary times.

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