It's About Time

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By Jim Hull

Almost from day one, the Obama administration has advocated for students to spend more time in school. Officials argued that U.S. students spend less time in school than students in other countries. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has stated: "Our students today are competing against children in India and China. Those students are going to school 25 to 30 percent longer than we are. Our students, I think, are at a competitive disadvantage. I think we're doing them a disservice."

Of course Duncan is far from the only one to make such a claim. It seems it is just taken as a fact that our students spend less time in school than their international peers. It may be because we often hear of the stories of how Japanese and Korean students work late into the night on their school work as U.S. students play sports and hang out with their friends.

But are these stories the norm for the average student? Do students in other countries receive more classroom instruction than U.S. students? To find the answers, NSBA's Center for Public Education (CPE) examined the international data in its report, Time in School: How does the U.S compare?, released late last year.

The answers to both questions were quite simply no. Yes, countries such as Korea and India have longer school years, but that doesn't necessarily mean their students receive more instruction. When examining actual time of instruction instead of simply the number of days in the school year, you may be surprised to find out that most U.S. schools are required to provide more hours of instruction per year than most countries -- including traditionally high-performing countries such as Finland, Japan, and Korea. CPE's report also found the same to be true when the data was compared to India and China. So students in China and India do not spend 25 percent to 30 percent longer in school than students in the U.S., as Duncan asserted.

Keep in mind that CPE's report is based on compulsory hours of instruction -- the minimum amount of instruction schools are required to provide. So there certainly can, and likely are, schools in China, India, Japan, and Korea that provide more instructional time than schools in the U.S. However, the data shows that is not necessarily the norm for all students.

Of course, one reason Duncan and others have been concerned about how much time U.S. students spend in school is due to the relatively poor performance of the U.S. on some international comparisons, specifically PISA, an international assessment of 15-year- olds (mostly high school sophomores) in math, reading, and science.

Most policymakers focused on the math results, which show U.S. students scoring below the international average and being outperformed by 17 of 33 industrialized nations. On the other hand, U.S. students performed as well or better on the TIMSS eighth-grade math assessments than all but five of 48 participating countries. Not the top of the list, but far from the bottom.

Boosting math achievement

Even so, there is a clear need to boost U.S. students' math performance so they are adequately prepared to compete in the global economy. But is simply increasing the amount of math instruction the answer? Again, the answer is no. Just like the compulsory data that showed most U.S. schools are required to provide as much or more instructional hours than in most other countries, the same is true when we look specifically at the hours schools spend on math instruction.

For example, data from TIMSS showed that U.S. eighth-graders received 148 hours of actual math instruction in 2007 -- fewer hours than in just three countries (Chinese Taipei, Colombia, and Oman) and the same number of hours as in high-performing Hong Kong. Yes, Chinese Taipei provided the greatest number of hours of instruction and posted the highest scores on TIMSS.

However, it may surprise some that U.S. eighth-graders received 24 more hours of instruction than their peers in high-performing Singapore and more than 40 additional hours of math instruction than peers in perennial math powerhouses Japan and Korea. So simply adding more instruction time is not likely to vault the U.S. to the top of the rankings.

However, this should not be misconstrued as finding that time doesn't matter. Another CPE report, a review of time and scheduling research titled Making Time, found that time is a valuable resource when used correctly and can be very effective at improving student achievement.

Keep in mind: Where studies have found adding time to be effective, it was not just about adding more time for instruction: It was about using that time more effectively. Specifically, the schools that used the extra time to improve student achievement provided their teachers with professional development to help them best use the extra time. They did this instead of simply teaching the same content in the same way over a longer period of time, which has little if any impact on student achievement.

Although the data shows that U.S. students do not receive fewer hours of instruction than students in other high-performing nations, it does not necessarily mean that time is unimportant. As a matter of fact, research has shown that adding time can be a very effective tool to improve student achievement, particularly for disadvantaged students who may not have the same access as their more advantaged peers to high-quality after-school activities.

So the benefit of states adding extra compulsory time for all schools is unlikely to outweigh the huge costs it would take to implement statewide. However, additional learning time can be an effective tool for school boards by targeting the extra time to those schools whose students would receive the greatest benefit and by providing teachers the training they need to use that extra time effectively. By doing so, the benefits of adding time would certainly outweigh the costs.

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