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COMMENTARY

A New Day for Learning

Expanding Our Notions of Time, Textbook, and Classroom

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In a lawyer's office in Boston, a fish hatchery in rural Alabama, an art museum in Peekskill, N.Y., a construction site in San Francisco, and an academy for young entrepreneurs in Oakland, Calif., a new day for learning is emerging. These locales do not look or feel like a traditional school, but what is happening in them combines classroom instruction with work in a community setting and represents the beginnings of a more powerful approach to learning.

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These learning environments are not constrained by the increasingly outdated classroom form and schedule: chairs in rows, 50-minute periods, and bells to both punctuate periods and puncture students' eardrums. Instead, these "schools" enable students to work deeply and use time more efficiently. Students engage in ambitious projects requiring the work of a team and mentoring and consulting with teachers, fellow students, and experts—a process similar to how professionals learn and communicate in the modern workplace.

Today, these more-expansive models of learning are exceptions in American public schools. But the day is fast arriving when such exceptions need to become the rule.

In this school year alone, several national reports have, in rapid-fire succession, called for an overhaul of the nation's education system: "Tough Choices or Tough Times," the report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, from the National Center on Education and the Economy; "Beyond NCLB," from the Aspen Institute's Commission on No Child Left Behind;

"On the Clock: Rethinking the Way Schools Use Time," from Education Sector; and "America's Perfect Storm," from the Educational Testing Service.



— Ken Condon

All these reports agree the crisis is upon us. Each recites the familiar litany of ills plaguing our schools, families, and communities: a growing achievement divide between students from middle- and lower-income families, and unacceptably high school dropout rates, especially among minorities and males.

As members of the Time, Learning, and Afterschool Task Force, convened by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, we spent two years analyzing and discussing three basic reform issues—time, learning, and their relationship to what happens to children and young people after school—before issuing our own national report in January. ("**Panel Favors Extended View of Learning**," Jan. 24, 2007.) We found that genuine improvements in outcomes for students seem elusive, or at least excruciatingly slow. We examined the studies of a multitude of comprehensive school reforms, which concluded that few result in measurable changes in achievement. Embedded in all these reform efforts are well-intentioned, even well-thought-out, strategies, yet they struggle to succeed, just as thousands of students do.

We also observed that many of the proposed policies push us even faster toward more of the same—more-stringent requirements placed on students and teachers without changes to the dynamics of instruction, more resources deployed to those already having advantages, and more traditional in-school time.

In the end, we arrived at a larger vision about when, where, and how today's students can learn. Our discussions moved beyond piecemeal reforms to call for nothing short of a complete redesign of the American system of education, to unify disparate policies and funding streams for children's education, health, and welfare.

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As we say in our report, "The structure of the day for American children and youth is more than timeworn. It is obsolete."

We concluded that only by redesigning the whole day—making it a seamless learning experience that provides students with multiple ways to learn, is anchored to high standards, and is aligned to educational resources throughout a community—can America change the outcomes for *all* students, immediately. "In a new day for learning," the report maintains, "there is no final bell."

To be clear, we do not mean just extending the traditional 8 a.m.-to-3 p.m. school day with more of the same. As one task force member put it, "A lousy eight-hour day is worse than a lousy six-hour day."

Real learning occurs when the curriculum is rich and relevant, instruction is reinforced in multiple ways, and students build knowledge by applying it to real problems. We suggest that the foundation for such a learning system begins with the following five elements:

- *Redefine student success.* Current definitions narrowly equate success in school with test scores, and focus on two subjects, reading and math. Since assessment drives instruction,

many teachers are being required to teach to multiple-choice tests, and are avoiding exposing students to the richness of language and literature or the relevance of mathematics to daily life.

American teenagers drop out of school at the rate of one every nine seconds, yet almost half of these dropouts say they left because school no longer seemed relevant or important in their lives, not because the work was too difficult. A system unable to educate so many who choose to leave it cannot simply dismiss them as academic failures. In many cases, it is the system that is failing.

Our panel's conception of student success moves beyond knowledge measured by tests. It embraces measures of deeper knowledge and ability across more subjects, as well as such 21st-century skills as the ability to work with others, critical thinking, and creativity.

In Peekskill, N.Y, for example, student voices have helped define a good education. The extended-day program uses cultural, recreational, and civic resources to complement instruction. Students learn leadership skills, show significant academic progress, and establish greater self-discipline.

- *Use research-based knowledge about how children learn best.* There is a growing body of research evidence, dating to the landmark "How People Learn" report from the National Research Council in 1999, that supports a richer curriculum, multiple types of assessment, and greater engagement with subjects through authentic work, such as project-based learning.

At the Build San Francisco Institute, high school students interested in architecture and civil engineering work at more than two dozen architectural firms during the half-day program. The institute, which originated as an after-school program led by architects, is now a part of the school district.

- *Integrate proven strategies for acquiring and reinforcing knowledge throughout a student's learning day.* The arts, technology, and service learning are tools to heighten core academic learning, not merely frills. Through the Dallas ArtsPartners program, every elementary student in the district can benefit from interaction with an arts, humanities, and/or science cultural agency. When this resource is available in classrooms, students become more active learners, and reading and writing skills improve substantially.

- *Build new collaborative structures across communities and up and down governance levels.* Through collaboratives like New York City's Harlem Children's Zone and Pittsburgh's Manchester Bidwell Corp., community groups, city agencies, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and schools are looking beyond the traditional school unit to include the entire community in education. Neighborhood assets are linked to citywide assets, so that students receive learning support from both inside and outside the school.

- *Create new opportunities for leadership and professional attainment for teaching.* While most leadership-development and certification programs are school-based, the importance of training educators to build community partnerships in this area is growing. The Teacher Advancement Program, now in more than 130 schools around the country, is one model for

supporting and compensating teacher-leaders who take on added responsibilities and successfully implement learning communities.

To redesign the existing system of learning acknowledges that we are living in an age when information is always "on," and knowledge is no longer confined to classrooms and textbooks. Instead of reading, analyzing, and memorizing information from a single source, the challenge for today's students is to locate and analyze information from the multiple sources available on the Internet. Technology has created the possibility of teachers' and students' learning and communicating in a 24/7/365 world, not being limited by the current 6/5/180 school calendar.

We see different possibilities for policymaking in creating this new day for learning. Federal and state policies must enable a responsible community to develop around children and where they are. But it is in mayors' offices, district boardrooms, community-based organizations, cultural institutions, and local businesses that actions can be formulated and energies marshalled to create the conditions for change so often missing from our reform rhetoric. The opportunity exists for leadership at every level to push for innovation rather than conformity.

A new education system will require rethinking purposes, practices, and policies across many institutions and interests within communities. As these examples suggest, leadership and model programs already exist to serve as cornerstones for constructing a new system. All of us who agree on the need for it now face the real test: Can we model the same 21st-century creative thinking and collaboration we espouse for our students to make it happen? For this generation of students, time is running out.

Milton Chen, the executive director of the George Lucas Educational Foundation, in San Rafael, Calif., and Judith Johnson, the superintendent of the Peekskill, N.Y., public schools, are members of the Time, Learning, and Afterschool Task Force, which earlier this year released the report "A New Day for Learning," funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. An-Me Chung is a program officer at the Mott Foundation, in Flint, Mich. "A New Day for Learning" can be downloaded at www.edutopia.org/anewdayforlearning.

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