

Lost Opportunities

District Trends Reveal Unproductive Use of Student Time and Individual Attention

Watertown MA | April 12, 2010

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Education Resource Strategies with the National Center on Time & Learning (NCTL) released today a paper that documents how six urban school districts structure high school time compared to nine Leading Edge high schools. In “Time and Attention in Urban High Schools: Lessons for School Systems,” ERS Director Stephen Frank found that districts do not organize or use time and individual attention in strategic ways to improve instruction.

“In exemplary schools, teachers use data on student progress to provide students extra time and attention throughout the year when they need it to master important concepts and skills,” says Frank. “Exemplary schools allocate time to match academic priorities and to fit instructional needs.”

The paper documents how in six typical districts additional time was triggered primarily by course failure, and increased individual attention resulted almost exclusively from placement in special education. Schools structured time in rigid blocks that don’t vary in length or amount based on the subject. “These types of rote practices result in lost opportunities for helping struggling students to succeed. Districts would make better use of resources by addressing student academic needs before remediation is necessary,” says Frank

“This important ERS report shines a light on best practices for districts that want to significantly improve student outcomes,” says NCTL’s Jennifer Davis. “Time in school is a precious resource and how time is used impacts school success or failure.”

The study presents findings from the data as it compares with results from ERS’s study on Leading Edge Schools.

According to the ERS 2009 study, the practices for student time and individual attention used by Leading Edge schools include:

1. Clearly defining an instructional model that reflects the schools’ vision, learning goals, and student population and making tough trade-offs that prioritize use of people, time and money to support that vision.
2. Increasing the overall amount of time students spend in school by an average of 20 percent more than local district schools.
3. Devoting an average of 233 equivalent days more to core academics than traditional district schools, primarily by expanding core academic expectations and individual and small group academic support.
4. Building a school schedule that strategically advances the school’s instructional model and addresses student needs.
5. Adapting their strategies in response to lessons learned and changing student needs and conditions.

This new paper identifies five findings on the practices of the six urban districts and illustrates how the practices of these districts, at the time we collected data, do not match the Leading Edge School practices. Findings include:

1. **Student time in school varies by up to 30 percent across districts.** This difference translated into a difference of over 50 days per year, or almost an extra year of high school, between students in the two districts with the most and least time.
2. **Time allocation is strikingly similar across districts because it is driven by traditional graduation requirements and rigid structure of school schedules.** Despite the variation in the amount of student time available, the districts *used* their scheduled time in strikingly similar ways. Overall, students spent 66–73 percent of scheduled instructional time on the core academic subjects of English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, and Foreign Language, with English language arts (18–20 percent) slightly higher than other core subjects. This was true regardless of the amount of time in the school day.
3. **General Education class sizes and teacher loads are not lower for core academic subjects, high needs students or foundation grade levels.** These six urban districts did little to reduce class sizes or teacher loads by subject or grade to give attention to high-priority subjects or students. In half the districts, the smallest class sizes were found in upper-grade electives.
4. **Schools aren't using data to adjust time and attention.** At the high school level, urban school systems did not continuously adjust time and attention throughout the year based on ongoing (formative) assessment of student needs and student progress.
5. **Struggling students get extra attention primarily through special education placement, which can drain resources from general education and instructional support.** These districts gave added support to struggling students primarily by placing them in special education settings where students had much smaller class sizes. This shifted tremendous amounts of resources (beyond special education revenues) away from general education and other programs for instructional support.

The findings from this research suggest some clear action urban leaders can take to improve time and attention practices. “We’re hoping that districts will first look at their use of existing time and their structures for providing individual attention to make sure they are targeting their efforts to meet the needs of each student,” Frank says. “The first priority must always be to invest in teaching effectiveness. But some districts also clearly need to add more time for students and teachers to the school day and school year. In tough times, it may seem difficult to talk about adding time, but this needs to be on the negotiating table with other priorities, especially in districts where the day is shorter than seven hours.”

Download: [Time and Attention in Urban High Schools: Lessons for School Systems](#)
[Strategic Designs: Lessons from Leading Edge Small Urban High Schools](#)

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Education Resource Strategies, Inc. (ERS) is a non-profit organization that works extensively with large urban public school systems to rethink the use of district and school level resources and build strategies for improved instruction and performance.

Through policy, research and direct technical assistance, **The National Center on Time & Learning** is dedicated to expanding school time to help close achievement gaps, provide a well-rounded education, and help children meet the demands of the 21st century.