Extended Time for Learning

Given the high rate of poverty in Syracuse and the fact that so many children enter school lagging behind their more advantaged peers, Say Yes—at its heart—sought a commitment from the school system to extend the school day and the school year. The goal is to widen and deepen the experiences youngsters have beyond the normal school calendar. Both the after-school and summer programs seek to inculcate cognitive enrichment and to yoke the extra time to the curriculum. A grant in 2011 from the Wallace Foundation was designed to assist Say Yes in these efforts.

For the last twenty years, some of the nation’s educators have urged schools to find more time for learning. They view the traditional school calendar as an anachronism and say that more learning time during the hours and days when children aren’t normally in school is crucial to overcoming gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students. The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation recognized this need as far back as 1935 when it began supporting the community school concept to keep buildings open beyond the usual school hours.

Extended learning time and after-school programs in particular have become the pet project of major foundations in the years since 2000. They back these efforts with relish. Ford Foundation, Wallace Foundation, George Soros’s Open Society Foundation, the William T. Grant Foundation, and others have poured money into programs that seek to make better use of time, including weekends and summer.

In May 2012, more than one hundred individuals and organizations banded together to form the Time to Succeed Coalition, running a full-page advertisement in The New York Times advocating that “our kids need more time in the classroom.” Then near the end of 2012, the Ford Foundation announced a collaboration with the National Center on Time & Learning to create a partnership that would take its first step by working with 35 schools in ten districts in five states to develop high-quality and sustainable expanded learning time. The pilot project scheduled the program to start in fall 2013. The Say Yes foundation is in tune with this movement.

There were precedents for this trend. The federal government sponsored the National Education Commission on Time and Learning that in 1994 issued an early pivotal report on the topic Prisoners of Time. The Charles Stewart Mott
Foundation and the George Lucas Educational Foundation supported *A New Day for Learning*, a 2007 report. Other groups released reports in subsequent years, culminating in two important documents in 2011: *Making Summer Count*, from Rand Corporation, and *Reimagining the School Day: Making More Time for Learning*, from the Wallace Foundation. Despite the flurry of interest, though, by 2011 not many more than two thousand of the nation’s schools had added or were experimenting with school days at least 10 to 60 percent longer and school years of up to thirty days longer. For the most part, the 180-day school year remained as fixed in practice as breakfast in the morning and dinner in the evening.

Individual stories attest to the importance that an after-school program can have in some lives, especially for youngsters in the inner city, where idle hours after the end of the school day can prove deadly. Shavar Jeffries looks back thankfully: “When I was ten, my mother was killed. Shortly thereafter, my father abandoned my family. My grandmother took me in and put me in after-school programs run by the Boys & Girls Club of Newark, where I received academic, social, and emotional support that she could not provide by herself. These programs helped change my life.” Indeed, Jeffries went on to attend Duke University and Columbia Law School, serve as a senior executive in the New Jersey attorney general’s office, and become an associate professor of law at Seton Hall University. In 2013, he was running for mayor of Newark.

The nation’s largest school system, New York City, probably has the most after-school activity. But it is a hodgepodge, comprising many separate pieces that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle with some of the pieces missing. Some schools rely mostly on local funds, others on state funds, and still others on federal funds. In addition, foundations and parent groups sponsor some of the programs. Some principals work directly with individual nonprofit groups to support particular after-school activities, like chess or robotic clubs. There is not even an official count of how many of the city’s 1,700 schools offer after-school programs. Some parents must pay for the services, while others get them free.

To further confuse the issue, one of the most highly regarded offerings, operating in 55 of the city’s public schools on a $16-million budget, is known by more than one name. Originally called The After-School Corporation and sometimes recognized by the initials TASC, it has transitioned toward the name ExpandED Schools. Most distinctive and most important about this organization is its effort to integrate regular school hours with those that normally follow the regular school day.

The largest part of the enterprise in New York is the city-operated Out-of-School Time (OST) Program, overseen by the city’s Department of Youth and Community Development. The most recent study of this program led to conclusions that could help Syracuse and other locales bolster their programs. It pointed to the need to establish an explicit structure to promote a learning environment, enforce an attendance policy that emphasizes engagement, use outcome measures to evaluate the program, recruit capable staff, and train and monitor that staff.

The tide of opinion is running strongly in favor of extended learning time, but one hopes the zeal does not blind advocates to the need to ensure that extra time adds up to a significant benefit for children. “[S]ome worry that it may be