

By Bolgen Vargas & Sandra A. Parker

When it comes to economic decline, Rochester, N.Y., tells a story that should be familiar to many urban educators.

Unfortunately, like many urban districts, we have had to work extra hard to empower a generation of students to be truly prepared for these jobs, as well as for active and productive citizenship. Our solution: Provide more and better learning time to support our students, our teachers, and our families.

This past December, the Washington-based nonprofit group ReadyNation issued a report spotlighting the many reasons why six-hour school days and nine-month school years were better suited to the nation's agrarian past than to the 21st century's demands and opportunities. That report, **"Not Getting Our Money's Worth,"** also showed that the nation's schools were losing an estimated \$21 billion each year because of summer learning loss among children from lower-income families.

Our efforts, undertaken several years before the report's release, were motivated less by these substantial money considerations and more by the fact that our students were receiving less instructional time than any others in the upstate New York region. Like children in many high-poverty districts, our students also need more time for art, music, and athletics at school than those in wealthier districts, where families are more likely to provide enriching learning activities in the home.

A collage of various educational icons including a clock, a violin, a book, a calculator, a globe, a microscope, a test tube, a lightbulb, and a graduation cap.

Although virtually every day is a learning experience for those of us who are driving this effort, three key strategies have been instrumental to our success.

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• **Take time to get allies on board.** Changing the way we've run schools for more than a century doesn't happen overnight. Our effort is ongoing, and succeeds only with the support of unions and parents. Once the union leadership agreed to consider a way forward, we involved union representatives in districtwide decisionmaking, and as members of the school-based teams at each participating site. Each of the schools taking part in the initiative had the autonomy and flexibility to make important adjustments, thanks to a provision in our union contract, known as the "school-level living contract."

Our first step for engaging parents was to develop messages tied directly to their individual concerns. Most of our parents are working people who cannot be home between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. They are acutely aware of how student experiences in city schools differ from those in better-resourced suburban schools. Recognizing this, we sold the concept of extended school time by focusing on how the longer days would provide extra time for tutoring and the arts, to improve the overall student-learning experience, while also keeping kids in a safe place during the late-afternoon hours.

We delivered that message through a monthly coffee and conversation hour, and in every meeting with individual parents. We also shared information through bilingual newsletters, which included contact information for school representatives who could respond to questions. And we encouraged those who liked the plan to share their enthusiasm with other parents.

"Isn't it well worth educators' time and effort to bring more and better learning time to the lives of their students?"

There was no real end point to this process. These conversations are taking place to this day, as we report on benefits that include higher test scores, lower levels of truancy, and greater student engagement.

• **Tap community organizations to fill the gaps—and hold them accountable.** Our effort to add learning time without increasing teacher and staff workloads depends on community organizations that bring their staff members and resources into our schools. These relationships differ from most "partnerships" with groups that typically volunteer to support students: The organizations involved are contractually bound. All of our cooperating organizations had to work hand in hand with the participating schools to respond to requests for proposals detailing these outside groups' offerings and formal plans for the partnerships.

Both geography and student needs played a role in this process. For example, almost all of the students who attend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School, the city's largest bilingual elementary school, live in poverty and have a high need for both academic support and safe places to be during the afternoon hours. One natural partner was the community center next door, which provided recreational opportunities. Another was a city water plant, which supported a project-based learning activity that required students to learn about and make a presentation on how safe, clean water comes into their homes.

Across town, the smaller, pre-K-6 Francis Parker School serves more students from higher-income homes. While many of them have been performing well academically, they now have the opportunity to take part in Friday-afternoon classes hosted through the Rochester Art Gallery, within safe walking distance of the school.

These are just two examples of how we've turned to community organizations to provide the additional learning time students need. In every case, our schools have turned to organizations that were already well established in their neighborhoods. In another era, these organizations might have provided after-school activities, but now they are an integral part of our longer school day.

• **Make the longer school days voluntary, with a rigorous school-selection process.** Participation in our effort to extend the school day isn't universal. In fact, it's limited to 10 schools that partnered with community organizations. All proposals from interested schools had to demonstrate how they met the National Center on Time and Learning's "seven essential elements of high-quality expanded-learning-time schools," which include the following: designated time for teachers to collaborate to improve instruction; enrichment activities, ranging from the arts to athletics to technology; and

Perhaps the best indication of the rigor of this process is the final tally of schools that participated the first year. Ten applied, and five were rejected because their plans didn't include all of the elements we required. In the second year, two of the rejected schools revised their proposals significantly enough to win the opportunity to participate.

We know we're not alone in this effort. The NCTL has identified more than 1,000 expanded-time schools, serving 520,000 students across the nation, and has offered a new resource aimed at giving policymakers ideas for how to combine extra learning time and better use of digital tools in smart, effective ways.

It is a challenging process, as we've indicated, but a recent district survey shows that our teachers are responding positively. What is more, that study also found that in the 2013-14 academic year, test scores rose in most of the participating schools.

Meanwhile, kids from low-income families nationwide continue to lose an average of two months of education every year because of summer learning loss alone. Isn't it well worth educators' time and effort to bring more and better learning time to the lives of their students?



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