



Washington Teachers' Union

Washington Post Op-Ed Submission, July 13, 2014 ***Longer Days or Long-Term School Improvement?***

The 4,300 members of the Washington Teachers' Union who work with District of Columbia children every day want real reforms that are supported by research and proven through experience to actually turn around low-performing schools and improve student achievement.

We know that better student performance does not flow magically from extending the instructional day. In some ways, adding time to the school day is like deciding to bake a bigger cake when the first one doesn't taste so good. You get more cake, but it still tastes bad. If we really want a better cake, we must have better ingredients. The same goes for better academic achievement: To improve our school system we need to take a careful look at all of the ingredients that go into high-quality education--and identify the real drivers of better outcomes.

Every three years, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) measures many indicators of academic performance by students in the world's industrialized nations. The 2012 PISA study, released last year, shows that U.S. teachers already have longer school days--40 percent more instructional hours than most of the highest performing nations in the PISA study.

For example, schools in Shanghai, China, ranked first in student achievement. Was this because of a longer school day? Clearly, it was not: On average, Shanghai educators teach just three 35-minute classes per day, while DCPS teachers are in class for three to five periods that range from 45 to 120 minutes each. So our bigger cake does not taste any sweeter. Most Washington teachers believe that is because of a relentless focus on increasing the wrong ingredients. So-called school "reformers" want a longer school day without much attention to how more hours will make our schools better for the children in our classrooms.



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It is easier to do that than to design and implement transformational change across the school system. The ingredients for systematic improvement are no mystery:

- * a deep commitment to teacher preparation and training.
- * peer-to-peer learning, coaching and professional development for educators.
- * authentic, committed parental involvement.
- * high standards and supportive school leadership.
- * a culture that prizes education and respects teachers.

Sadly, DCPS administrators refuse to include many of these ingredients in their recipe for better student achievement.

It is also regrettable that some commentators, including The Washington Post, have misrepresented the views of teachers and their union on this issue, suggesting that the WTU opposes discussion of the extended school day proposal. That is simply not true. Our concern is that DCPS sought or actually conducted school votes on what is indisputably a contract issue without consulting with teachers' recognized collective bargaining agent. Where those votes have taken place, few if any teachers have supported the proposal without real consultation.

Education experts and research reports repeatedly tell us that of all the things necessary to improve a school, nothing pays off more than giving teachers the time they need for preparation, peer review and feedback, and to deepen their mastery of what they are teaching. More technology, more hours in the school day, more tests--these can all make the cake bigger, but not necessarily better.

Members of the Washington Teachers' Union want real education reform. Superficial, knee-jerk, solutions do not produce lasting, meaningful improvement. We know that band-aid measures such as a longer school



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day of instruction on a curriculum that is driven by high-stakes testing do not work. Parents and teachers want the leaders of our school district to focus their efforts on the real drivers of creative, high-quality instruction. That kind of reform will produce positive results for years to come.

By Elizabeth Davis, President, Washington Teachers' Union