

INCREASING THE LENGTH OF THE SCHOOL YEAR: A SURVEY

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Introduction

The educational system in the United States can best be described as an enormously diverse system that is held together by a commitment to knowledge and freedom. Yet, with this great diversity among the school districts, the length of the school year and school day are quite similar. The school year typically starts in early September and continues through the last week in May or into June for one or two weeks. "The school year is generally standardized at 180 days ..." (Kurian, 1988, p. 1360).

Practically every week, newspapers and journals run articles on how United States students are not doing well in geography, math, and science as compared with students in other industrialized nations. The country that we are most frequently compared with is Japan. Japan has a highly standardized and nationalized educational system. "The Japanese elementary and secondary school year is usually reported as being 240 days" (U.S. Department of Education, 1987, p. 10).

Legislators and educators in several states are discussing the option of increasing the number of days students are in school as a way to improve our educational system. A bill was introduced in the 1990 South Dakota Legislature to add 10 days to the school year. School patrons and educators banded together to help defeat the bill.

In reviewing the literature and research regarding extending time in school, it appears that increasing the time in school will increase achievement modestly and then at great expense. Granted, teachers are finding it difficult to teach all of the required materials in the typical school day, but then, it might be more important to use school time in a more effective manner. Quality of education appears to be more important than the quantity of education.

With so much debate regarding the quality and quantity of education, it was felt a need existed to determine the opinions held by rural school administrators regarding the length of the school year and school day. This study was designed to determine the opinions held by school administrators

in a rural mid-western state toward the length of the school year/day issue.

Research Procedures

A postcard questionnaire consisting of four questions and space for personal opinions about the longer school year/day issue was constructed by the investigators in order to ascertain the opinions of South Dakota school administrators toward the longer school year/day issue.

The population for the study was the total number of elementary school principals, middle school/junior high principals, high school principals, and school superintendents in South Dakota public school districts. By using a table of random numbers, 100 elementary school principals, 40 middle school/junior high school principals, 100 high school principals, and 100 superintendents of schools were selected. Fewer middle school/junior high principals were selected due to the smaller number in the population.

During November, 1989, the school administrators were mailed the postcard questionnaire. Seventy-two percent, or 247 questionnaires, were returned for analysis. Each questionnaire was coded so the investigators could classify them according to administrative responsibility. Seventy questionnaires from elementary principals were returned, 30 from middle school/junior high principals, 72 from high school principals, and 75 returned from school superintendents.

After the information was received, percentages were calculated for each of the four questions. Specific comments made by the respondents were also recorded.

Findings

The first survey question asked if the respondents favor or oppose increasing the amount of time that students in their school community spend in school. Fifty percent of the total respondents indicated that they opposed increasing the amount of time students spend in school while 43 percent favored increasing

the amount of time. Another 7 percent did not know.

Responses from all categories of school administrators surveyed on this question are shown in Table 1.

The second question asked which one of several plans for increasing the amount of time students spend in school would be preferred. Forty-one percent would prefer to increase the number of days, 17% preferred increasing the number of hours per day, and none of the respondents wanted to have a Saturday morning school. It should be noted that 42% of the school administrators did not want any of the three options implemented in their school district. Table 2 reflects responses by school administrator category on this question.

Who should determine the school policy regarding the length of the school year or day was the third question asked of the school administrators. Fifty-one percent of the administrators believed that the state should make the decision. Forty-four percent

wanted the decision to be made by local school authorities. Five percent of the respondents wanted the decision made by national authorities.

Table 3 indicates responses on this question by school administrator category.

The fourth and final survey question asked how many actual teaching days would be preferred for their school district. Thirty-three percent preferred 175 teaching days, 25% favored 180 teaching days, and 42% preferred a myriad of school lengths. The range of school days ranged from 175 days to 205 days. Table 4 presents responses on this question per school administrator category.

Comments

Thoughts about the longer school year/day issue was requested of each school administrator. Comments accompanying the survey were many and varied. Several long letters were received from

Table 1
Would You Favor or Oppose
Increasing the Amount of Time Students Spend in Schools?

	Elementary School Principals	Middle School/ Junior High School Principals	High School Principals	Superintendents	Total Administrators
Responses in Percentages					
Favor	34	53	34	57	43
Oppose	60	44	54	38	50
Don't Know	6	3	12	5	7

Table 2
What Plan for Increasing the Amount of Time
Students Spend in School Would You Prefer?

	Elementary School Principals	Middle School/ Junior High School Principals	High School Principals	Superintendents	Total Administrators
Responses in Percentages					
Increase Number of Hours Per Day	21	20	13	16	17
Increase Number of Days	29	37	39	57	41
Saturday Morning School	0	0	0	0	0
None of Above	50	43	48	27	42

the respondents. The concept of quality was manifested by several respondents. "Quality is what is important, not quantity. Students need to apply themselves when in school." "Quality is more important than quantity." "Quality and quantity are not synonymous." Some of the administrators asked if there was research to support the idea of a longer school year/day. "I have no statistics or proof to support more days or hours." "I would need a lot more evidence before I would support more days in the school year."

Several comments were received that dealt with comparing our schools with those in other countries in general, and Japan in particular. "The real problem in American education is here at home. It is ridiculous to use Japanese education as the standard - this is kept alive by politicians and industry leaders who use the comparison to deflect their own difficulty in gearing up to combat the Japanese in the technological market place." Paying for a longer school year was also mentioned. "Salaries in South Dakota are lowest in the United States now. How will we be able to afford the extra monies needed for

a longer school year?"

Many respondents discussed other educational issues that should be addressed before the longer school year/day issue. "A much better proposal would be to leave the current school year as is but strongly recommend that we try to limit the amount of time students work at jobs after school." "Many students do not take advantage of the school days we have now." "Cutting back on many school-sponsored activities would give us more time to do things that schools were created for." Perhaps the following quote best summarizes comments expressed by many concerned respondents: "Before considering more days to the school year, we need to consider the many problems that already exist in South Dakota education."

Conclusions

It is difficult to draw hard conclusions from an opinion study dealing with this highly-charged issue. When this study was first discussed, it was never anticipated that so much emotionally laden

Table 3
Who Should Determine the School Policy Regarding Length of School Year or Day?

	Elementary School Principals	Middle School/ Junior High School Principals	High School Principals	Superintendents	Total Administrators
Responses in Percentages					
Local Decision	57	47	38	36	44
State Decision	39	47	54	61	51
National Decision	4	6	8	3	5

Table 4
How Many Teaching Days Would You Prefer?

	Elementary School Principals	Middle School/ Junior High School Principals	High School Principals	Superintendents	Total Administrators
Responses in Percentages					
175 Days	39	24	42	24	33
180 Days	27	4	23	32	25
*Other	34	72	35	44	42

*Range of Teaching Days Preferred 175 - 205

information would be submitted with the questionnaire. This study generated more written comments than past South Dakota studies dealing with AIDS education, corporal punishment, and discipline.

It can be stated that one-half of the randomly selected school administrators in South Dakota oppose increasing the amount of time that students spend in school, but a sizeable number do favor adding more time. If schools were to increase the time students spend in school, increasing the number of days would be the preferred way. A majority of respondents want the state to determine the school policy regarding the length of school year or day. Most of the school administrators preferred a 175-180 day school year which is the average length of school year found in the United States. Many varied comments, with qualifications, accompanied the administrators' responses. The responses included statements, often expressed in strong terms, generally against the idea of increasing the length of school year or day.

Perhaps the greatest contribution this study can make is to promote thinking and discourse by educators regarding the issue of lengthening the school year or day. This study should also stimulate educators into a literature review of research studies dealing with the topic. It appears that educators are not familiar with the research studies dealing with the length of school year or day on student achievement.

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