

## No evidence to support 7-hour school day

The controversial issue of mandating a longer school day in Rhode Island schools is now being hotly debated. Riding on the wave of the No Child Left Behind federal legislation, Rhode Island's Education Commissioner, Peter McWalters, has proclaimed that he wants all public schools to have a seven-hour day. In this way, he and his proponents argue, our children will perform better on standardized tests and receive a better education. This will provide students with "five hours of classroom time for English, math, science and foreign language, additional time for music and the arts, and for teachers to spend 30 minutes a day planning lessons, meeting with guidance counselors and talking about classroom activities," McWalters said in front of the RI Legislature.

Usually when a commissioner or government group proposes a change in policy there is some sort of research to validate a conclusion. In other words, if there were a study or two available that demonstrated a correlation between having a longer school day and higher student performance it would make this extension proposal credible.

The problem here though, is that there is no such study or commission that has investigated the benefits or negatives of extending the school day.

Arguably, in McWalter's defense, one might infer that more instructional time would produce more learning; hence, produce better results. But, one needs to consider the abbreviated attention span of an elementary or secondary student.

We are talking about adults working more hours and, therefore, producing more for a company. Instead, we are talking about children. These children also take part in after school sports, clubs, activities, or possibly jobs. Even the state of Rhode Island insists, by law, that a child/minor with the par-

ents/guardians permission, work no more than eight hours a day and no more than 40 hours a week when not in school. These laws were created to ensure that kids had the time to be kids before they took on adulthood responsibilities. If we are to consider extracurricular activities that are part of the majority of students' daily schedules, a longer school day will limit these important parts of a student's educational and life experience.

In order to implement the seven-hour day without costing more money for the local taxpayer, Commissioner McWalter insists that RI teachers already make more than they are actually worth. The citizens of Rhode Island, according to his calculations, are already paying for the added time proposed. Jumping on the ubiquitous teacher-bashing campaign, many local critics have attacked the supposed exorbitant teacher salaries. In a recent editorial in the Providence Journal, the President of the Education partnership provided examples demonstrating that RI teachers, on average, make more than chiropractors, nurses and state troops using her own mathematical formula based on some statistics from a RI Monthly magazine article she read.

She subjectively hand picked her comparisons. Of course, one needs to realize that many results or conclusions can be derived from the same set of statistics.

If she had paid attention in her math class as she covered statistics, she would realize that other sets of data might produce different results. Consider the following:

Education Week reported that the national average teacher salary, when adjusted for the cost of living in 2002, is \$44,678.

This, according to the A.F.T., places Rhode Island teachers in 15th place nationwide. Another study by the town of Portsmouth places RI teaches in ninth place when

not considering the cost of living. When compared to another occupation that also requires a four-year degree, the teaching profession falls short. For example, an engineer makes about \$76,298 per year on average. Based on 245 work days in the year, he/she gets about \$311 per day.

A computer analyst, another career that requires a four-year degree requirement, averages out to about \$304 using the same calculations. On the other hand, a teacher in Rhode Island, based on the 183 school day year, averages only \$282 per day. A different result from the same statistics.

Consider, though, that teachers don't actually work a six-hour day, or only 183 days per year. In fact, most teachers either stay after school or bring work home. There is a substantial amount of correcting to do, which takes up hours of their time. In addition, a teacher's lunchtime is usually less than a half an hour, compared to the normal hour-long lunch allocated in many other professions.

Also consider the amount of reading and professional development that takes place during vacation and at night time that teachers are required to do in order to keep their certification or stay on top of prevailing trends and regulations.

All of these and more alter or skew the published statistics that paint an inaccurate picture of teacher compensation.

If the ultimate goal of all involved in the forming of public educational policy is improving the educational experience for all students,

simply lengthening the school day by itself, is not an effective strategy.

Why not look into what has been studied and researched? For example, consider the correlation between high-test scores and affluent towns. Wealth and academic achievement go hand in hand. And, this is not due to large payoffs or bribes. This high performance is due to more resources, such as homework clubs, tutoring, technology, and other extracurricular activities that get cut when town finances are tight. In addition, affluent parents are more likely to be college educated, therefore more likely or able to help with homework and instill an intrinsic motivation in their children to strive to attend a college or a university after high school.

This, of course, means these children are going to take the standardized tests more seriously, leading to higher test scores.

If politicians and the critics were actually serious about improving education in our country, they would put their money where their mouth is and fund education properly. Rather than militarizing space, they should allocate more than three percent of the federal budget for public schools, so the local tax burden would be diminished. Instead of building more and more prisons, politicians might try thinking preventatively by buying books for kids.

This is not neuroscience. The data is there. It only requires some sacrifice and some ownership of the problem.

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