

Make the School Day Longer?

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Will extra time in school help children make up for instruction lost because of the pandemic? The research is not encouraging: Studies show that extending school time has no effect or a very small effect on learning (Patall, Cooper, and Allen, 2010; Kidron and Lindsay, 2014). Blad (2022) noted that one elementary school in Atlanta had positive effects by adding 30-minutes to the school day, but the school made extraordinary efforts, e.g. two adults in every classroom, tracking, and ongoing analysis of test scores.

Increasing instruction time by increasing homework is clearly not the answer. In fact, homework may not help at all. Based on his review of the research, Kohn (2007) concluded that "... there is absolutely no evidence of any academic benefit from assigning homework in elementary or middle school. At the high school level, the correlation is weak and tends to disappear when more sophisticated statistical measures are applied."

I suggest we try a different path: Decrease school pressure and encourage pleasure reading.

In Stanovich and Cunningham (1993), college students who were more familiar with popular literature did better on a variety of tests of subject matter, including science, social studies, technology, and cultural knowledge, suggesting that those who read more, know more. In fact, familiarity with popular literature (including books and magazines but not TV) was a better predictor of performance on subject matter tests than high school grades. (Of great interest is that those familiar with popular literature knew more about practical matters as well, knowledge relevant to everyday living, e.g. how a carburetor works, how many teaspoons are equivalent to a tablespoon.)

It is reasonable to hypothesize that knowledge we absorb from reading that we select ourselves lasts longer than what we learn from study. This was Plato's view: "Bodily exercise, when compulsory, does no harm to the body; but knowledge which is acquired under compulsion obtains no hold on the mind."

Let's try providing more access to interesting reading material by investing more in libraries and librarians, and let's try giving young people more time to read for pleasure by reducing homework. As Kohn (2006) has pointed out, "authentic reading is one the casualties of homework" (p.175).

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Sources

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