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It's About [Time](#)

One of the hottest trends in public education is adding more time to each school day. See how two districts structure, pay for, and benefit from these programs.

By Wayne D'Orio

[César E. Chávez Multicultural Academic Center](#) in Chicago has a perennial problem. Every year, students begin their first day of kindergarten at the South Side school significantly behind in academic development in comparison to their peers in other schools.

Staff members are charged with getting them on track by third grade, a goal that requires an average of one-and-a-half years of growth for each school year. That's difficult, particularly because many of these students confront other challenges as well. Nearly all of Chávez's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 80 percent speak Spanish, 13 percent have IEPs, and the rate of fluctuation in the student population due to frequent family moves is 14 percent.

Across the country, in the small city of Meriden, Connecticut, school leaders face a different problem. Five years ago, a new team took over the 9,100-student [district](#), looking to energize staff and impart a love of learning to students. One major problem the district has is a lack of funds; the former manufacturing city hasn't had a school budget increase since Superintendent Mark D. Benigni took over in 2010.

The surprise is that the solution to both of these districts' problems is the same. Both Chávez and Meriden have turned to a tactic that until recently has been better known as a tool of charter schools—extending the school day. Both have created programs to add time for teachers and students, and statistics show they are among a growing number of districts doing this.

In the past two years, the number of public schools using expanded learning time has doubled to 2,000, while the number of students participating in these programs has grown from 520,000 to 1.2 million. Thirty-five districts in 10 states now have expanded time programs, and in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the entire district has adopted this model. In 2006, Massachusetts became the first state to create a specific program to fund extended time programs; it currently doles out \$15 million a year.

Growth and Results

In 2009, three out of every four schools with expanded time were charters; by last year, six out of 10 expanded time schools were public.

Jennifer Davis, the cofounder and president of the [National Center on Time and Learning](#), cites several reasons for this growth: The federal government's School Improvement Grant program, along with changes to how schools can allocate their after-school money, has allowed districts more leeway in how they spend funds. On the private side, foundation grants have helped many of these extended time programs get off the ground, including Meriden's. And on a local level, with school officials encouraged to experiment with the typical six-and-a-half-hour day, more schools have incorporated expanded learning time, later start times for high schools, and even Saturday sessions.

It's not hard to figure out why schools are anxious to try this latest trend. The average expanded day program adds about 200 hours to each student's year, tacking on about six additional weeks of school. While programs vary, Davis says that if a school is open for seven hours or longer and is open at least 30 minutes a day more than any neighboring

school, it counts as an expanded time school.

For Chicago's César Chávez, the extra time, in addition to the school's laser focus on data-driven instruction, has produced impressive results. Starting the program in 2010, Chávez, which comprises three buildings that serve students from PreK to eighth grade, jumped to the city's highest rating in just one year, and by the end of the 2013–14 school year, student performance on assessments pushed the school to the top 16 of the 480 schools in the city. "And that includes some schools you have to test to get into," Chávez's principal, Barton Dassinger, says.

In Meriden, results at the two elementary schools with the program have shown academic gains in the past two years in both reading and math. In addition, attendance at both schools has improved and more students say there is a "positive school climate."

One Size Does Not Fit All

Expanded time programs vary in length and structure, and Chicago and Meriden bear that out; the two took vastly different paths to create their successful programs. Chávez draws all of its students from a four-block radius, and its program is voluntary—although only one student in the PreK–8 program did not participate last year. Teachers offer students extra time to do mostly math and ELA work and review, and kids work at their own pace on computer programs, with teachers nearby to consult. Chávez's program adds one hour after school Monday through Thursday.

Because many Meriden students are bused to school, its program is compulsory; students at the two participating elementary schools (a third is being added this year) come to school 100 minutes before school starts. Its model is more in line with most other expanded time programs in that it offers a wide range of extracurricular activities, from judo to woodworking to lessons in how to read and create Braille. [Meriden's Pulaski Elementary School](#) principal, Dan Coffey, says his staff ties academic work into fun activities. For instance, last year, when students explored aerodynamics through making paper airplanes, they also looked up biographical information on Amelia Earhart.

Even the ways Chávez and Meriden pay for their programs are different. In Chicago, the district chose Chávez as one of 15 schools to pilot the expanded time program. When the money ran out after two years, Dassinger says the results were so impressive the school decided to pay for the program itself. Chicago Public Schools are decentralized, so Dassinger has the freedom to decide which books, computers, and programs he purchases with the school's \$7.5 million budget. By keeping additional resource staff such as reading coaches, aides, and interventionists to a minimum, Dassinger has been able to free up the \$200,000 it costs to run the program each year.

Meriden, on the other hand, cobbles together money from a number of sources to pay for its program. An [American Federation of Teachers](#) Innovation Fund grant for \$450,000 over three years kicked off the program's implementation. The city shared a \$3 million grant from the [Ford Foundation](#) with districts in four other states, and it has received further money from the state to help fund the program.

"We've cut some programs to pay for this," Superintendent Benigni admits. He estimates that it costs \$800 per student, or \$450,000 per school, to run the program. Pulaski Elementary pays the 16 teachers who participate an additional \$7,500 stipend annually.

Chicago's Model

Chávez's experiment in expanded learning started in 2010 with a daily 90-minute block. The school partnered with community-based organizations, including the YMCA.

Principal Dassinger was distressed by the low rate of pay offered to program instructors, some of whom were teachers at his school, and negotiated better pay for them in the second year. When the school took control of the program in the third year, he and his staff noticed that students had vastly better results when they were paired with teachers. So the school scaled the time block back to 60 minutes, four times a week, and got every staffer to participate. Assistants fill in when teachers need time off.

"I'm constantly worried about [staff] retention and burning people out," Dassinger says.

While Chávez uses its time specifically for academics, the school doesn't ignore the extracurriculars that make up so many expanded time programs. The buildings stay open until 7:30 each night and offer student and parent classes in knitting, Zumba, floor hockey, and golf. "Our floor hockey team has a waiting list," Dassinger says proudly. "Parents feel very safe at Chávez," he adds, noting that this is a big deal in a neighborhood that has seen gang violence to its immediate north and south.

As proud as Chávez is of its students' successes, Dassinger knows the real payoff is seeing them test into Chicago's best high schools and then graduate and go on to get a college degree. Last year, 25 of the school's 83 eighth graders were accepted into top high schools. "When I got the job, there was one student," Dassinger says, adding that the school's previous record for top-tier acceptance was 14 students.

Chávez's staff works hard at making sure children show up each day, going so far as to knock on doors when needed. The work has paid off—the school's attendance rate has hovered around 96.5 percent in the past year, up slightly from 94.9 percent in 2009. The school's suspension rate is less than 1 percent.

Chávez's reputation has grown along with these statistics, meaning that families are choosing to stay with the school even when they leave the area. (It is a boundary school, but it does allow students outside the neighborhood to enter a lottery to fill any remaining spots.) Dassinger relates that one student who had only a 60 percent attendance rate in sixth grade moved across town with her family after that year but continued to attend Chávez by taking a subway and a bus every day. Her eighth-grade attendance was perfect, and this year her 5-year-old sister signed up for the lottery to be part of the school.

Cooperation in Meriden

One similarity between Chávez and Meriden has been union cooperation. [Chicago Public Schools](#) went through a divisive citywide teachers strike just three years ago, but Dassinger made sure to have his staff on board with the expanded time program from the beginning. The same ethos applied in Meriden, where union president Erin D. Benham helped construct the program with Superintendent Benigni.

"We're creating a new model of school," Benigni says. "You need union leadership." When issues such as delayed openings because of snowstorms occurred the first year, he relied on union support and principal buy-in to thwart any complaints that one group of teachers was working less than another. (Meriden's teachers work a split shift, with some coming in early and others coming in later and staying until the end of the day.)

Benham, who is also a language arts specialist at Lincoln Middle School, says the administration earned teachers' trust despite minimal raises by not laying off any teachers in five years. "We're very transparent," she says of how the program was set up and funded. "We're not hiding anything, and that goes a long way with teachers."

Meriden's program offers students the type of activities that suburban children routinely get outside of school. "In a lot of schools, they add time around ELA and math," says Davis, of the National Center on Time and Learning. "But [at Meriden] they are eager to bring arts and hands-on science back in. They want to engage students in ways that excite and interest them." Still, Benigni admits that he had some vocal parents who weren't sure they wanted the program for their children. The superintendent was careful not to mention any academic goals, explaining that this extra time wasn't just for students who were behind, but for all students. He implored parents to allow their children to try the program, knowing that time spent doing fun activities was likely to improve attendance and student engagement.

"The results are winning people over," he says, adding that he knew better grades would follow. Pulaski's attendance jumped to 98 percent, a 10 percent hike from prior to the program's inception.

Meriden has also been careful to set up all three of its schools with programs that are picked by teachers and parents at that particular school. And teachers at all three locations are encouraged to mine their hobbies as possible sources of programming.

Benham says the program has had one unintended consequence. In elementary schools, it can be difficult for students to know all the teachers in the building, since they typically have only one main teacher each year. But with teachers leading clubs before school, Benham says, they tell her that now when they walk down the hallway, "every kid knows me. It's much more of a community."

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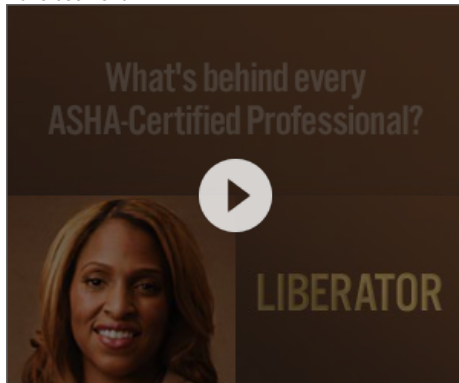
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