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Districts pushing for longer school day Boston among 20 applying for grants

The Boston Globe

By Scott S. Greenberger, Globe Staff | October 3, 2005

Boston, Springfield, Cambridge, and at least 17 other Massachusetts school districts are moving forward with plans to extend the day in some of their schools, rejecting the traditional 180-day, 6-hour schedule because educators believe there is not enough time to teach students what they need to know.

The 20 districts met Friday's deadline to apply for grant money that the state Department of Education is offering to districts that want to explore adding about two hours to the day in some of their schools. If the school districts, their teachers unions, and the state agree, the longer school days would begin next fall.

With its grants, Massachusetts becomes the first state to officially sanction a longer schedule, though some schools in Massachusetts and around the country already are experimenting with a longer school day or school year. Many of the schools that already have longer days are charter schools, or traditional public schools led by creative principals.

Under the new program, approved by the Legislature, not every school in a district would be required to have a longer school day. But if a school is in the program, every student in the school must be on the longer schedule.

Boston's school system notified state education officials last week that it wants to explore the idea of longer school days in seven of its 30 middle and K-8 schools.

Mary Russo, principal of Boston's Murphy K-8 School, said the benefits of a longer school day are worth the complications. "Right now, as we think about our school, we think about it as not having enough time within the confines of the 8:30 a.m.-to-2:30 p.m. day to teach everything that needs to be taught, everything we'd want kids to have," Russo said. "The hours in the school day just aren't enough for us."

For the past five years Murphy has had a different approach: a voluntary after-school program that offers arts and crafts and athletics as well as academic help for students. When the program started 40 students participated, and now more than 300 of the 900 in the school do.

In Springfield, school administrators are considering a more radical idea: tacking on 20 days to the school year, 10 at the beginning and 10 at the end. They also want to add time to the school day during the months when it does not get dark too early to and make the students' commutes dangerous.

"If you have students who have more limited learning opportunities at home, because their parents are working extra hours, or because there are some resource limitations at home, if we can have that added work time with students as part of the school day, that's extremely helpful," said Springfield's superintendent, Joseph Burke.

But in other parts of the country the idea of extending the entire school year has run into opposition from parents who want to preserve their children's summer vacations and interests, such as camps. Most Massachusetts districts said they would focus on expanding the school day, not the school year.

In considering the extended school day, educators around the state are heeding the advice of education specialists who say the current school schedule is a vestige of America's agrarian past, one that made sense when students had to plant and harvest crops but that is ill-suited for the demands of the 21st century.

Paul Reville of the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, said students in other countries tend to spend far more time in school than students do in the United States.

Perhaps as a result, he suggested, US students generally trail children in other industrialized countries in key areas such as math and science.

"We spend about 40-45 percent of the time that other countries are spending on core academic subjects," Reville said. "It's not surprising that we aren't seeing the level of achievement [they're] seeing in those areas."

Reville, who chaired a 1995 state commission on school schedules, said lengthening instruction time could be especially beneficial to city schools. Many urban districts are struggling to raise the test scores of black and Hispanic students, who tend to lag behind whites.

"The coin of the realm for a lot of us talking about education is money, but for kids it's instructional time," Reville said. "It stands to reason that if you have some kids who have a long way to go to close the achievement gap and you give all students the same amount of instruction time, you're not likely to close that gap."

At least 75 percent of the grants must go to urban districts. Worcester, Lawrence, Fall River, Brockton, and Lowell were among those that applied last week. But so did suburban and rural districts such as Reading, Ware, and Old Rochester.

This year's "planning grants" are relatively small: The state only has \$475,000, and it will hand it out in \$25,000 increments. But next year, the Legislature has indicated that it will pay \$1,300 per student to districts that want to expand the school schedule by at least 30 percent, either through more classroom time or after-school enrichment programs with substantial academic content. That translates into roughly two additional hours per day, assuming that no days are added to the year.

But lengthening the school day or year won't be easy. Expanding the school day means increasing costs, including money for teacher salaries and heating and electric bills.

Even though state lawmakers included language in the fiscal 2006 budget promising to spend \$1,300 per student once a program is up and running, there is no guarantee the money will actually materialize if the state's fiscal situation worsens.

"The devil is in the details, because in order to extend the day by 30 percent, you're talking about a significant commitment of resources," said Catherine A. Boudreau, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association. "You can't ask school districts to do this and then not make a commitment that there is going to be the resources to follow."

Senator Robert A. Antonioni, the Leominster Democrat who cochairs the Legislature's Joint Committee on Education, said he is optimistic that his colleagues will follow through, but he cautioned that the program "is competing against a lot of other things."

"As the new kid on the block, this extended learning time has got some stiff competition. But the fact that we've funded, at least at this level, suggests there is some appeal there," Antonioni said.

He added that lobbying by Chris Gabrieli, the entrepreneur and former Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor who now heads the Massachusetts 2020 Foundation, an education nonprofit, has pumped up the idea's legitimacy on Beacon Hill.

Districts might run into resistance from parents in districts that have decided to require longer school days in some schools, but not all; that approach could complicate the lives of parents who have children in different schools. Similarly, teachers who have organized their lives around the customary, six-hour school day may also object.

Then there is the issue of extracurricular activities, an increasingly important element in many children's heavily structured lives.

"Not everybody wants to reorient their lives to a school day that is 30 percent longer. That's true for people

who work in the school, and it's true for parents and students," said Cambridge Superintendent Thomas Fowler-Finn. "If you're a child who is in seventh grade and you're in a community soccer league, does that mean you can no longer participate in the soccer league? Or it could be piano lessons. When do you take your piano lessons?"

Lisa Zeig, the Department of Education official overseeing the grant program, said the state had those potential complications in mind when it decided to start with planning grants. To apply, districts had to demonstrate that there was interest among teachers and parents in a particular school.

"There are lots of things to consider, and to figure out how to do this takes some negotiation and a significant amount of planning and training," Zeig said. "Districts need to be able to think carefully about how they start this up. We want them to be successful."

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READING

Officials ponder a longer school day

The Boston Globe

By Peter Martin, Globe Correspondent | October 9, 2005

School officials think that extending the school day at the town's two middle schools, Parker and Coolidge, by two hours -- a proposal they will consider in the weeks ahead -- would enhance learning and keep some youngsters whose parents both work from going home to an empty house.

The school district has applied for a \$30,000 state planning grant to explore the proposal. It is putting together a school day study committee and may seek up to \$1,300 per middle school pupil in state funds to help finance the first year of the change. Superintendent Patrick Schettini said the district's Parent Teacher Organization and the local teachers' union have expressed a willingness to look into the initiative, which could bring a change by as early as next September.

But parents interviewed at the Parker Middle School last week expressed misgivings about the proposal, which still needs to be worked out but may mean a 7:50 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. school day for middle school students. Now students get out at 2:25.

"I'm opposed," said Sue Cameron, the parent of a student at the school. "I can't imagine them there for more hours. They hate it for six; why would they like it for eight? The students and teachers would be burnt."

"The money could be better spent," said Adela Brennan, the mother of an eighth-grade student. "Hire more teachers, have smaller classes."

Reading is one of 20 Massachusetts school districts that have applied for the Department of Education planning grant. The Education Department will award the planning grants Nov. 1 and give the qualifying communities 11 weeks to submit proposals for extending the school day. The state is offering up to \$1,300 per pupil to help finance the first year of the effort. The funds must be matched by the community, meaning Reading could have to come up with as much as \$1.3 million to extend the hours for the 1,000 students at the middle schools. And the state monies are not guaranteed beyond the first year.

"At this point we simply want to explore this possibility and its feasibility and funding is something that will need to be discussed," said Schettini.

Other matters that need to be worked out are teacher scheduling, extra pay, and school supplies. The teacher issues would need to be discussed between school officials and the teacher union. Union president Alex Porter could not be reached for comment, but Schettini said Porter has told school officials that teacher representatives are willing to talk about the proposal.

Those who support the proposal believe that there's not enough time in the traditional school day to adequately teach children. Reading school officials said extending the hours would better prepare students to compete in the global marketplace, allowing teachers to dedicate more time to the core curriculum and to enrichment classes.

"I can't imagine how any negative would come from it," said Carl McFadden, a member of the School Committee. "We want children to learn as much as possible."

Extending hours would also keep some middle school children from returning home to unsupervised situations, said school officials. Some after-school activities are available to students, but not all participate.

"Ten years ago I would've thought differently; parents should be home for their kids," said Elaine Webb, cochairwoman of the Reading School Committee and a likely member of the school day planning team.

"But the tide is too strong. It's the way things have become in this postmodern society. Most parents have to work two jobs, and the schools can offer something that parents are unable to offer now."

Middle school children are at a particularly vulnerable age, said school officials.

"Obviously we want kids to make good decisions, and if left unsupervised, we don't want them going down the wrong path," said John Doherty, the assistant school superintendent who wrote the grant request.

But this will not be about providing baby-sitting for the children of busy parents, Webb said.

"It must be a high-quality extension, instructional and confidence-building," Webb said.

School administrators said they are focusing on extending hours at the middle schools because it presents fewer logistical complications than the high school. The middle school children are also considered better equipped to endure a longer school day than elementary school students.

The Reading middle schools do not have an after-school sports program, unlike the high school where teams compete against other towns. High school class hours and athletic schedules must mesh with other school districts that participate in the region's various leagues.

The Reading Recreation Department runs after-school sporting programs for middle school students and they will participate in planning a longer school day, Doherty said.

Also, class size is not a significant issue in the middle schools, Doherty said.

"I think in Reading we have a decent setup with two smaller middle schools, with pretty good class sizes in the low 20's," Doherty said. "We have those pieces in place and this is a good opportunity to enhance what we already have."

But a longer school day and the continuation of after-school recreational programs may leave less time for students to complete their homework. "It's something that the planning team will address," Doherty said. "If you lengthen the day, you have to look at expectations of homework."

Parents interviewed at the Parker School were concerned about the toll such a long school day would take on students.

"They need to come home and blow off steam, play with friends, listen to music," said Suzy Axelson, the mother of an eighth-grade student. "There's pressure from other countries, like China, which has an intense curriculum, and we need to compete, but kids need to enjoy their childhood too."

While it's expected that students would object to more school, at least several students warmed to the idea of extending the school day in exchange for no homework.

"Yeah, no homework, I'd like that," said Tim Axelson, Suzy Axelson's 14-year-old son. "I'd take two more hours in school if I didn't need to worry about homework." ■