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Longer school day and year coming

By Jim Nowlan

Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel is pressuring Chicago public schools to add 90 minutes to their school day. This issue as well as that of how to evaluate teachers will drive education policymaking in Illinois in the years to come.

I recall that when I was a school boy in the 1940s and '50s I went to school from 8:15 to 3:20 each day. A check with the local school superintendent in my home county of Stark finds the day is now 8:10 to 3 p.m. Excluding lunch and time spent passing from class to class that amounts to 6 hours of instructional time per day. School is in session 175 days a year.

Chicago public schools have one of the shortest school days in the country, at 5 hours and 9 minutes.

Many public charter schools in Illinois have longer school days and years than the 5 to six hours that is typical of the regular public schools, with 90 minutes of reading and math each instead of the 45 minutes devoted to those critical subjects in most public schools.

In the late 1980s I wrote a book entitled "A New Game Plan for Illinois" in which I noted that Japanese children went to school 7 hours a day and 240 days a year, while those in Germany attended school for 210 days each year. Subsequently, when I was doing some teaching in China, I learned that school children there also have much longer school days and years than we do in the U.S.

I don't know the optimal number of hours and days for our school children, but I surmise that more time on task taught by stimulating teachers will generate more learning. There must be a point, however, where the limited attention spans of youngsters will reach sharply diminishing returns. Maybe the Japanese children go to school too much.

Then there is the amount of time devoted to after school homework and whether it is highly productive. Japanese children do more homework than our students as well but if it is spent on rote memorization such time may not be well spent.

Finally, there is the issue of the three month summer vacation. A teacher friend of mine says he and his colleagues spend several weeks at the beginning of each school year reviewing what was learned the preceding year—and forgotten over the summer.

I suggest moving to a year-round school calendar, with say a one month break in the winter and one month in the summer, and 6½-hour school days. This would be more productive than the American schedule which was put in place to accommodate an agricultural society and before global competition in education.

For any change to be valuable assumes effective classroom teaching, another topic on which I am not expert. Nor, it seems, are most school principals, who are in theory the “principal teachers” in their school buildings.

That is, between 1995 and 2005 only 1 in every 930 teachers received an unsatisfactory rating, according to research by Small Newspaper Group columnist Scott Reeder. Most were rated as excellent, and 83 percent of all school districts did not report any teachers unsatisfactory during that decade.

I am told that teacher evaluation procedures are typically negotiated between school boards and teachers' unions. This strikes me as unsound. Evaluation is a management tool, not something to be negotiated.

Legislation enacted this past year in Illinois requires that pupil academic growth be a measure of future teacher evaluations and that these new evaluations be part of tenure-granting decisions. The challenge is, of course, to figure out how to link individual pupil achievement to specific teachers, especially since many teachers are responsible for subjects that are not among those on achievement tests.

Education consultant Charlotte Danielson has developed a widely respected “framework for teaching” that is apparently effective in measuring a teacher’s performance, even though it is not tied to quantitative pupil achievement. The framework has been pilot tested in a number of Chicago schools and principals have found that more teachers were found to be low-performing under the system than previously. The Danielson method offers a frame of reference as to what good teaching looks like and provides teachers constructive feedback on how to improve.

Increased time on task for students and rigorous evaluation of teachers—and of how they can improve—should be at the top of any agenda for school improvement in Illinois.