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More time for better schooling

By Paul S. Grogan | November 27, 2006

IT IS JUST before 1:45 on a weekday afternoon and Superintendent Paul Joyce looks out his window at the Boston Police Headquarters and sees a disconcerting sight. While he is in the middle of his workday, the 1,500 students at nearby Madison Park High School, finished with classes, are pouring out of school. Some of the students head to after-school programs, sports, work, or home, but many others fan out into the city with nothing much to do.

As a seasoned police officer, Joyce knows as much as anyone in Boston about how teenagers get in trouble. Accordingly, when he sees teenagers without structure, he worries about the safety of the community and the future of these young people. To be successful, our children need a high-quality education that will provide them with the skills necessary to succeed in our talent-driven, knowledge economy.

Boston's schools have made impressive progress in the past 10 years, during former superintendent Thomas Payzant's tenure, but important problems remain to be solved. High on that list is the length of the school day.

In an age when education matters more than ever and our prosperity depends on highly skilled citizens, it is preposterous that the bus schedule dictates the length of the Boston school day.

Elementary, middle, and secondary school students share the same fleet of buses, which makes getting students to and from school a logistical nightmare. Buses start their rounds each morning by picking up high school students and delivering them to school by the 7:20 a.m. start time. The buses then restart the process with middle and elementary school students. By the time the last students are dropped off, it is almost time to reverse the cycle.

Transportation logistics are daunting, but they should not prescribe how much time our children spend in school. Critical decisions about our children's school day should be made by educators.

Most teachers agree students would be better served by a longer school day, and Boston's pilot and charter schools offer powerful evidence that this is true. All 20 pilot schools and all 15 charter schools in Boston have used their autonomy and superior flexibility to extend the school day. These numbers tell a compelling story and represent yet one more reason to favor the further expansion of pilot schools. Would anyone creating a system from scratch design the school day as it is today? The answer is obvious: no.

Linda Nathan, the headmaster of Boston Arts Academy, a pilot school, has suggested that students need more time in school so they can enjoy a more substantive and captivating curriculum. Once students engage in high-quality arts and physical education, she says, "I guarantee we will be able to engage our students in academic classes, too."

To his great credit, Mayor Thomas Menino understands that children need more time to learn and safe places to go after school. For years, he has been a national champion of promoting after-school programs.

Beginning in 1999, Menino and former venture capitalist Chris Gabrieli spearheaded a successful effort to increase after-school programs in Boston. The Boston After School for All Partnership was formed in 2001, and, by 2005, it had raised \$34.2 million from foundations and corporations. The partnership poured the funds into the creation and expansion of after-school programs. The successor to this effort is Boston After School & Beyond, a public-private partnership that is working to create a coherent system of programs. In a recent survey of Boston Public School parents, Boston Beyond found that nearly 50 percent of students now participate in after-school programs, up from 27 percent in 1998.

This remarkable progress demonstrates that a concerted philanthropic effort can make a real difference. Given the limits of philanthropy, however, one may ask how sustainable this model is; and one may ask further if the best strategy is to layer expensive new programs on top of an unchanged regular school day that no longer makes any sense.

Next September, Manuel Rivera will take the helm of the Boston public schools. He will inherit an improving system in a world-class city, but there are still urgent needs for further reform. One of our top priorities should be extending the school day.

As we move into the Rivera superintendency, we must maintain our high standards and high expectations. We also must acknowledge what educators already know: Children need more time in school. Let us all work together to make this possible by replacing the antiquated 7:20-1:45 school day with one that meets the needs of today's students and tomorrow's economy.

Paul S. Grogan is president and CEO of the Boston Foundation and co-chairman of the Great Schools Campaign. ■

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