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# Hours to decide: Obama's ideas on longer days raise issues for local educators

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When U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan laid out President Barack Obama's bold ideas for improving education this week, he spoke of longer school days and school years pushing deeper into summer.

And when a president lays out dramatic ideas like that, educators around the country sit up and take notice. Local educators this week expressed mixed reactions to the Obama proposals, raising questions ranging from how practical they are to whether they are necessary.

Some suggested the president leave such decisions to local and state governments.

"National initiatives in the long run I don't think are the most helpful for schools," said Easthampton School Superintendent Deborah Carter. "There's a point at which it works and a point at which it doesn't. I don't want to be told how we're going to spend that time from Washington, D.C."

But most agree the issues raised do merit discussion.

Northampton School Superintendent Isabelina Rodriguez said she supports the direction Obama is pushing because she believes year-round education with shorter vacations is beneficial for students - and, she said, six to seven hours is not enough time to "provide all that we need to provide in a student's day."

Obama says American students are at a disadvantage when compared with students in other countries because they spend too little time in school.

Also, he said, this country follows a school calendar based on the agrarian economy, when the reality is that most schoolchildren no longer work in the fields during summer months.

Obama's education reform ideas were discussed in Philadelphia this week in school visits, public meetings and media briefings under the leadership of Duncan, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and civil rights leader Al Sharpton, who kicked off a tour Tuesday.

Their focus is to lay out the educational challenges in low-performing schools; support greater transparency and accountability through enhanced data systems, and propose rigorous assessments to improve both teaching and learning. They highlight reforms aimed at improving student achievement through intensive support and interventions, including the implementation of a longer school day and a longer school year for all public schools.

While the concept of extended time in the classroom is not new here - Pioneer Valley Performing Arts

1 2 3 4



CAROL LOLLIS

Cassidy Hall, 14, of Florence, in a dance technique class at the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School in South Hadley, where school starts at 8:30 and goes to 4:15 p.m.



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Charter Public School in South Hadley has had longer school days for the 14 years it's been around and Bridge Street School in Northampton considered lengthening its day with a grant two years ago - the notion of a blanket policy for more school in all public schools is new territory.

"The idea of looking at the agricultural-based calendar we have is very worthwhile," said Amy Aaron, administrative coordinator for the Hilltown charter school, where students spend about half hour more class time a week than other area public elementary schools.

"There's going to be a lot of conflicting views and needs," Aaron said. "I think it's an important, in-depth discussion to have and I'm glad that the president's taking it on."

Among the questions local educators are asking now are how would longer days and a longer year be paid for? What does it mean to teacher contracts? And what about air conditioning during hot summer days in school?

"It seems there's a lot of questions before we can say this makes sense or this doesn't make sense," said Jon Sass, math teacher at Northampton High School.

Easthampton's Carter questions the validity of the president's argument, saying he is comparing American education to education systems in other countries that operate differently. Whereas some countries put energy and resources into students who perform exceptionally well, she said, America provides equal education to all students.

"You are clearly comparing apples and oranges," Carter said. "We put the bulk of our resources into leveling the playing field for all kids. When you do that and you test all of our kids versus kids in other countries, it's not a level playing field."

Carter added she believes the premise behind Obama's education reform is that public schools are bad, a sentiment she does not agree with.

"I think we've worked really hard and if we're only going to be judged based on our test scores you might as well judge us by who lives in our community," Carter said.

Still, she noted, a half-hour extension to the school day would be beneficial as long as children have an option to work after-school jobs, participate in plays or other programs of interest.

Rodriguez, of Northampton, said she would prefer physical education, art and music classes be held each day instead of the current structure with those classes held twice a week. And math should be a full hour each day in elementary schools, she added, rather than 45 minutes.

"To prepare our students for the global economy it's got to be done more," Rodriguez said.

Furthermore, she noted, more school time would also help student equity, narrowing the gap for low-income, special education and at-risk students.

At the elementary level, time is dedicated to academic lessons, lunch, recess, library, music and art activities, and sometimes there are interruptions, like special events or presentations during the day.

"Before you know it there's no time left," Rodriguez said.

### **One school has been there**

Meanwhile, PVPA has had a longer school day for all of its 14 years because it ties in with the school's mission, according to Bob Brick, executive director.

While the average public school day is six hours and 15 minutes long, Pioneer Valley School of Performing Arts students spend 7 hours and 45 minutes each day in school. They devote roughly 30 percent of their time to arts and 70 percent to academics, according to Brick.

The school has "rigorous" graduation requirements, Brick said, including four years of language arts; three years of science, math, history and world language; 64 credit hours of performing arts; four internships and a physical education requirement.

"We felt a short day was not conducive to what we were trying to do," Brick said. The longer day "gives them the time to really excel in the academics and the arts. It helps to keep students busy; We think less free time is a good thing."

While the strictly academic classes wrap up around 2:30 p.m., students take classes until 4:15. with those classes focused on the performing arts and related classes.

Dan Klatz, education coordinator at Hilltown Cooperative, said education reform should be based on needs which are dependent upon school communities and family profiles .

"It's a good conversation to have... my perspective is whenever it's one size fits all, somebody or many are going to feel mismatched to what that one size is," Klatz said.

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