



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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By the Numbers: Just How Much Instructional Time Do We Really Have?

The standards movement in the American public education system has resulted in state developed curriculum documents that vary significantly regarding content specificity, rigor, relevance and numbers of learning targets. Additionally, new mandates, the infusion of technology, and high-stakes testing all impact instructional decisions and reduce the amount of instructional time available to the classroom teacher. This dilemma is further complicated by findings from compelling research indicating that learners need a more future’s driven curriculum in order to be successful in a world that is changing exponentially.

Most school districts operate within a 180 day academic year. Teachers are expected to provide learning opportunities for ALL students that will enable them to pass federal/state mandated tests, in core content areas, not at the end of the academic year, but at times as early as January and often by mid-April. Thus, the increased learning expectations, high stakes testing, and the shortened academic year—due to testing windows---portend a trend of stagnant or falling test results. Even more disconcerting is that most often the state tests are NOT measuring what many consider to be essential learning outcomes for 21st Century students. (Pink, Friedman, Bracey)

What can districts do to maintain required test efficacy and yet better prepare their students beyond the assessment requirements? One interim solution is to embark on a purposeful analysis of the district’s curriculum and an assessment of instructional time. The following is an example of how this might be done:

A team of educators use the district’s academic calendar to determine the actual number of instructional days available. This is done by subtracting from the 180 days all of the following kinds of days in which students are not receiving or are not involved in purposeful learning opportunities. These may include conference days, testing days, some field trips, celebrations, days before holidays, and all of the days AFTER the test window. The average tends to be approximately 140 days left for instruction to prepare students for THE TEST.

The next audit is of classroom time that is actually available for purposeful instruction. The average number of hours in the classroom averages about 5.5 hours (Marzano). This, however, is not all dedicated to instruction. Educators must subtract non-instructional time from the daily routine. This includes taking attendance, transitioning, passing out papers, listening to announcements, disciplining a student, administering tests, students socializing, absenteeism....etc. What is left is engaged time. The national averages are 51.4% for High School, 57.7% for Middle Schools and 55.1% for Elementary Schools. This generally means for example, that for high schools, 51.4% of the school day is available for learning (Marzano).

This data does not require brain surgeon mentality to understand we have too much content to teach, a too short academic year, and significant reasons to challenge high stakes accountability. Worthy solutions may include, extending the academic year, reducing the numbers of standards as have other countries, upgrading curriculum standards into essential learnings, revising learning activities that better represent real life applications, being active in informing the public about the quality of instruction that is available in the public schools. (Marzano, Essential Knowledge, 1999; Pink, A Whole New Mind, 2005; Friedman, The World is Flat, 2005; Bracey, Setting the Record Straight, 2004)

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