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The Northeast Foundation for Children

71 Montague City Road,  
Greenfield, MA 01301  
1-800-360-6332  
[www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)  
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## Time and Reform

### ***To Change the Pace of School Is the Clearest, Simplest, and Most Straightforward Way to Improve Education***

*By Chip Wood*

This school year, Massachusetts 4th graders will spend close to 15 hours over the course of two weeks practicing and taking standardized assessments to measure their proficiencies against state curriculum standards. It is a scene repeated across the nation, as the "accountability" approach continues to grow stronger in the powerful educational establishment, which consists of local and state school boards, national policy groups, politicians, and the "trade" media of education. It is a sad fact that teachers, who often have the clearest insights about children and the most direct contact with them, are seldom included in this powerful group.

One of the clear choices policymakers are making about time in school is to use increasing amounts of it to test what children are learning. The theory is that the tests will show us what children do not know, and that we can address these areas more efficiently by, essentially, teaching to the test. But the more time we spend testing and preparing to test, the less time we have for real teaching. Policymakers mistake better test scores for better students. These are two different things.

If the focus were *really* on creating better students, children would have time in school to consider and reflect on what they were learning and time to care about and contribute to one another and their school. They would have time to ponder where their lives were headed. School would be a learning community, not a fact factory with only enough time to worry about the next test or homework assignment.

Talk to any teacher today and ask him or her about time. As a teacher of teachers, I constantly hear the frustrated voices of dedicated professionals, as they grow more and more concerned:

*"There just isn't enough time."*

*"The day is so rushed, we're always going somewhere."*

*"The kids beg me to keep going. They beg to finish stuff. I feel like such a time tyrant, but we have to cover so much curriculum."*

Lessons are chopped up into small, microwavable, bite-sized portions that can be quickly and easily swallowed and digested. The curriculum is served, but there's also a lot thrown away--just like the food in the cafeteria, where there's no time either. There always seems to be more curriculum to cover, more tests to take, but never any time added to the day. Children and teachers are left gasping for air.

If this sounds overstated, ask a student about time:

*"We don't have time to finish anything. The teacher always says we'll finish it later, but we hardly ever do."*

*"If math was longer, I might get it better."*

*"I wish we had time for our teacher to read to us every day."*

Students have an internal, somatic understanding of the kind of time it takes to learn anything meaningful. School systems are restraining the physical and mental growth of the young by eliminating such "frills" as recess, exercise, physical education, music and dance, and art. "Time on task" is said to equate with learning. The students know better. They learn differently.

Early in their school lives, children are presented content and constrained in a school schedule that assumes they think diachronically about past, present, and future, when in fact many do not. Currently, schools assume that children think qualitatively about concepts such as changes in the rain forest in 1st grade as well as their own time decisions relating to assignments, homework, revisions, and quality of work.

Trying to help children cope with unrealistic expectations, even kindergarten teachers teach the schedule every morning. First graders are expected to remember their entire daily routine, which often includes moving from room to room throughout the day on a timetable resembling a typical high school day. We expect 3rd graders, at a stage when they are just beginning to grasp time durations, to keep planning books in which they keep track of homework, daily assignments, spelling words, and more, mimicking the "week at a glance" planners of their parents and teachers.

We are clearly asking too much and going too fast. We need to remember that children do not experience or understand time in the same way adults do. Children live in real time, a world which knows mostly the present moment. Picture preschoolers absorbed in a puddle or blowing a dandelion. Think back to moments as a child when you were lost in time at the edge of the ocean building sandcastles or playing with imaginary friends. This is not romance, it is child development. And it takes time. We bemoan our children's lack of motivation, perseverance, ability to sustain interest, revise, critique, complete. All of these are skills that children learn when given the time to endure.

The Greek root for the word "school" is *scoleri*, which is literally translated as "leisure." Consider how far we've moved from our educational roots. Teachers who want to dedicate themselves and their classrooms to a pace that encourages investigation, contemplation, completion, and community must struggle with social and educational influences that force them in the opposite direction. Teachers are under extraordinary pressure from principals who, in turn, are hurried by superintendents who are pushed by school boards. It is a vicious and self-perpetuating cycle.

It is possible to stop this cycle. But "time on task" is not the answer. Instead, we need to explore both the quantity and quality of educational time, both the way we structure and schedule time and how we use that time.

To change the pace of school is the clearest, simplest, and most straightforward way to improve education. It will not be easy to do; nothing worth doing ever is. Here are just a few of the ways we might re-regulate the school and our well-intentioned but unrealistic expectations of students:

- Lengthen the academic year and keep schools open longer each day.
- Reduce school size.
- Reduce class size to fewer than 20 in the primary grades.
- Increase the quality of instructional time by eliminating formal tracking.
- Teach social skills as an integrated part of the content curriculum.
- Change the architectural design of new schools to create small schools within large schools.
- Narrow the scope of the curriculum and lengthen time blocks.
- Reduce the number of "specials" that pull children out of classrooms and move special-area teachers back into regular classrooms.
- Construct realistic daily schedules with adequate time for transitions.
- Reduce the number of transitions.
- Go slower at the beginning of the school year to create clearer expectations and standards.
- Adjust the school day to allow for midday exercise, nutrition, and rest--in that order.
- Add reflection time as a part of every lesson, class, and school day.

The use of time in school indicates our respect for learning and our understanding of those we seek to teach. Taking time, for instance, to help students see the applications of the skills and content they are learning deepens their reasoning and helps engender respect for the educational process in which they are engaged. This, in turn, allows them to see state tests designed to measure their academic growth as reasonable and, consequently, will enable better results on these assessments.

Good teachers have always known that time taken on a deeper and narrower curriculum creates higher standards of performance, teaching, and learning. Transformations in our schools and classrooms are urgent in order for public education to fulfill its mission of teaching academic skills and modeling social standards. But urgency must not lead us to rush. The pace of change must be reasonable and related to the right pace of children's learning. School reform is a matter of time. Adjusting the pace of school will improve the pace of reform.

*Chip Wood is a co-founder of the Northeast Foundation for Children in Greenfield, Mass., and a co-creator of the "Responsive Classroom" approach to school reform. He has worked in K-8 schools as a teacher, principal, and teacher-educator for more than 30 years. This essay is based on his book, Time to Teach, Time to Learn: Changing the Pace of School (Northeast Foundation for Children, 1999).*

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