

Getting the Most Out of the School Day

Ida H. Love

In many schools the amount of time lost is frightening. We spend more time getting ready to teach than teaching. In some schools, there is more movement daily than in the elevators in a public building.

Several years ago achievement at J.F. Chick Elementary School was typical of inner-city schools. Today Chick School has achieved national norms at every grade level, except 3rd grade in reading and math, where we fell short by a matter of two or three months. Much of this success is the result of our Time Awareness Program. Here are a few of the problems we addressed in our effort to get the most out of our school day.

Starting the day. When the first bell sounds, students often take five minutes to get to their classrooms. Once inside, they can lose another 15 minutes hanging up coats, looking for pencils, sharpening pencils, turning in money for fund-raising, and looking for homework assignments. Ten more minutes are lost when teachers start asking for lunch money and taking attendance, usually calling the name of every child. Finally, everyone is asked to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and the opening song. After this, directions for starting the morning activities often consume another 5 or 10 minutes. By then, 30 to 40 minutes have been spent doing what could have been done in 15 minutes or less.

Children can be trained to enter the classroom and start to work on morning practice activities immediately. They can also learn to check their presence on a chart, which the teacher can see at a glance. This is not a time to sharpen pencils or visit with other students. Teachers can schedule a special time during the day to sharpen pencils and save early morning time for concentrating on learning.

Changing subjects. When finishing one subject and starting another, a teacher can lose 10 minutes without meaning to. Often students use this time to open and close desks, disturb each other, or call the teacher's attention to some unrelated topic.

This loss of time can be reduced by giving the students something to think about to bridge the gap between subjects. Teachers can use an idea related to the objective in the next subject to capture students' attention. They can motivate the children to look forward to "coming attractions."

Recess and restroom. Recess is important, but if we are not careful, this block of 20 minutes can turn into 30 or 40. Just putting away classwork and getting in line can take five minutes. Then, getting to the restroom at the end of the hall and finally arriving outside can take an additional 10 minutes. That leaves only five minutes to do organized games, line up to come inside, find a seat, take out work for the next subject, and listen for directions.

There is a remedy to this situation, too. Children can be trained to take out books for the next subject when opening their desks to put away materials from the previous subject. This allows for a smooth start when the class returns from recess. Carefully taught routines are necessary, if the teacher intends to get the students to the restroom, outside, and back into the classroom within the allotted time.

Assemblies and programs. Assemblies and programs are necessary, but only within limits. When the excitement starts building, classroom management becomes difficult; additional time is spent just settling down. Some programs become detailed and involved, including making decorations and costumes, learning speeches, and rehearsing frequently. The disruption can be devastating to the instructional plans of every teacher in the building.

The principal must give direction as to what assemblies and programs will be held during the year. It is not wise to allow every activity proposed by every teacher; we must set limits and stand firm. It's urgent that we stress the relationship of these activities to subjects being taught in the classrooms.

Other ways to lose instructional time include too many fund-raising activities, classroom visits from parents, emergency personal calls, late arrivals, intercom calls, poor attendance, and late buses; the list goes on. Even when these are not daily occurrences, together they result in the loss of substantial amounts of time.

The key to successful learning is to allow the teacher to teach all day without breaking the teaching/learning cycle. When we use time well, we see happiness in the faces of students who are learning to read their books and master their lessons.

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“Learners who begin well often gain at a faster rate; and, as time goes on, slower learners fall increasingly behind.”

learning? Kemmerer's (1978-79) compilation of various U.S. indexes 1890-1974 appears to be the most extensive for the 20th century. The compilation for the 84-year period shows that all indexes rose substantially:

- the number of days per year, from 135 to 178;
- average days attended by those enrolled, from 81 to 160;
- percentage of 5- to 17-year-olds enrolled, from 69 to 88;
- percentage of 14- to 17-year-olds enrolled, from 7 to 92;
- percentage graduated from high school, from 4 to 75.

Moreover, the median number of school years completed by the adult population rose from about 8 to 12. These gains are impressive; but Japan currently graduates about 96 percent of its students from high school in contrast to the 75 percent rate in the U.S.; Japanese schools have 240 days per year in contrast to 180 in the U.S.; and Japanese students engage in far more extramural study (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, U.S. Department of Education 1987).

Despite the lack of a ministry of education in the U.S., Kemmerer's state indexes varied only moderately: For a dozen states on which data were available, the school year in 1970-71 varied from 175 to 180 days, attendance varied from 86 to 97 percent, and days attended varied from 155 to 173. These aggregate statistics, however, conceal large differences that can be found within states and districts. Kemmerer's compilations show, for example, that time allocated for specific subject matter varied widely across communities. Ratios of highest to low-

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