

# *It's* **About** **TIME**

## **Planning Interventions and Extensions in Elementary School**

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# Introduction: Harnessing the Power of Time

Austin Buffum and Mike Mattos

Time. It waits for no one, flies when you are having fun, and heals all wounds. Just a stitch of it saves nine. It can be raced against, borrowed, wasted, and served. It may be ripe, due, on your hands, and on your side. You can have a whale of it, yet when you have much to do, have so little.

In the world of education, these common idioms about time hold true. In the United States, the average student spends thirteen years and approximately fifteen thousand hours of time at school from kindergarten through high school—a boatload of time. Yet, with the staggering amount of required curriculum that must be taught each year, teachers are faced with a daunting reality: so much to teach, so little time.

At the elementary level, this time crunch is impacted by the fact that each grade-level teacher is responsible for not one area of the curriculum but as many as seven or eight, working his or her daily schedule like a juggler at the circus. Now add the developmental issues of primary students, the emerging social behaviors of upper-grade students, playground duty, and rainy day lunch duty—suddenly you have a seemingly infinite number of demands expected in an undeniably finite amount of time. Because adequate time is an essential variable in the formula of learning, this dilemma has a profound impact on both students and educators.

## The Importance of Time to Student Learning

It is commonly said that in this world, nothing can be certain except for death and taxes. In the education world, we have our own two universal truths.

1. **Every student does not learn the same way:** Every student has unique learning needs, based on his or her prior knowledge and experiences, cultural values, learning styles, and aptitudes. Due to these differences, no matter how well a teacher teaches a concept, we know some students won't get it the first time, because the best way to teach a concept to one student might fail miserably with another student in the same class.
2. **Every student does not develop at the same speed:** We know that there are spans of time in which students mature, both physically and intellectually. Some of these developmental spans, such as the period in which students start to show the physical changes of puberty, can be quite significant—it is not uncommon for a high school classroom to have a boy still waiting for his growth spurt sitting next to a fellow classmate who is a foot taller and already shaving. Less visible to the eye, but just as age-appropriate and extreme, are the differences in which adolescents develop intellectually and socially. Just as a group of boys won't develop the need to shave at the same speed or on the same day, secondary school students will not acquire the ability to solve abstract equations or display empathy at the same speed.

If we condense these two universal truths into a simple formula to ensure student learning, the equation would look like this (Bloom, 1968; Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012; Guskey & Pigott, 1988):

$$\text{Targeted Instruction} + \text{Time} = \text{Learning}$$

If a school can make both teaching and time variables in this equation and target them to meet each student's individual learning and developmental needs, the school is more likely to achieve high levels of learning for every student.

For any school dedicated to ensuring that all students learn at high levels, making the time to meet each student's varying learning needs is a critical consideration. Achieving this goal would be much easier if the U.S. education system was purposely designed around this outcome. Unfortunately, our traditional elementary model of education is not only misaligned to this goal but is also jam-packed full of "things to do." The brutal reality is that only some students leave elementary schools reading with comprehension, able to capture their thinking in writing, and possessing a sense of and fluency with numbers.



## The Original Purpose of Elementary Education

We should hardly be surprised that our traditional elementary school practices fail to make teaching and time variables, as the original purpose of elementary education in America was far different than high levels of learning for all. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, primarily European settlers initially recreated the school systems of their homelands. They established a two-track school system in which the lower socioeconomic classes attended primary vernacular schools and upper-class males attended separate preparatory schools and colleges. These primary schools—elementary institutions under church control—offered a basic curriculum of reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Thomas Jefferson argued that the United States needed to develop republican schools that were different from those found in the European monarchies. Jefferson's Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge introduced in the 1779 Virginia legislature would have (if passed) made the state responsible for providing both girls and boys with a basic elementary education, in a local ward school, at public expense.

In the 1830s and 1840s, this thinking led to the formalization of common or public schooling throughout the United States. It should be noted, however, that with our historic tradition of local and state control, the movement to establish public elementary schools was not national but instead determined state to state. The common school sought to develop the literacy and numeracy needed for everyday life and work, which was predominately agricultural in nature. Its basic curriculum stressed reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, history, and geography. Emphasizing American patriotism and Christian piety, the common school was regarded as the educational agency that would help assimilate the children of immigrants but certainly not ensure that all students would learn at high levels.

Frank M. Leavitt from the University of Chicago provides a great glimpse into the purpose of elementary education at the beginning of the 20th century in his article in the October 1912 issue of the *Elementary School Teacher*:

A generation ago the expression "a common school education" meant the training given to that large majority of school children who never had any intention of going to a "high" school. No one thought of criticizing the common or grammar school because only a small percentage of its graduates went to the high school. Preparation for high school was not the primary purpose of such schools. (p. 80)

According to Leavitt (1912), in the common or grammar school:

There was little doubt that somewhere the boy would be taught to be a shoemaker, a machinist, a salesman, a bookkeeper, or what not, but it was believed that he would be more intelligent, both in his business and outside of it, because of the sharpening and the habitual drill which he was to receive in school. (p. 81)

John Stuart Mill from the University of St. Andrews also clearly states the purpose of the common school in his 1867 inaugural address:

Education makes a man a more intelligent shoemaker, if that be his occupation, but not by teaching him how to make shoes; it does so by the mental exercise it gives and the habits it impresses. (p. 7)

Only the lucky few went on to complete a high school education, with virtually no thought of college or beyond.

## The Brutal Facts

Drastic economic changes driven by global competition and technological advances require us to rethink and revise our fundamental purpose and practices in elementary education. Consider the following characteristics of the 21st century U.S. economy.

- Less than 1 percent of the population directly farms for a living, and less than 10 percent work in factories (Hagenbaugh, 2002; U.S. Department of Agriculture, Utah State University Extension, & LetterPress Software, n.d.).
- According to the U.S. Department of Labor, nearly two-thirds of the new jobs created between 2006 and 2016 will be in occupations that require postsecondary education or considerable on-the-job training, while jobs requiring routine manual tasks will continue to decrease (Chao, 2008).
- Among traditional blue-collar trades, higher levels of academic preparation will be a prerequisite for employment. For example, the nonprofit organization ACT (2006) examines mathematics and reading skills required for electricians, construction workers, upholsterers, and plumbers and concludes they match what's necessary to do well in a first-year college course.
- Wages for careers that require higher levels of education and training will outpace non-degreed jobs, with the average college graduate earning 77 percent more than the typical high school graduate (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008).

Educators commonly say that it is our job to prepare students for the real world. Well, the stats we've just listed are the real world. In our current global economy, there is virtually no pathway to the middle class that does not require a postsecondary education—anything less is a one-way ticket to poverty. As the American Diploma Project (2004) states: