



***Testimony by Jennifer Davis
Co-Founder, National Center on Time & Learning
Senior Advisor, Harvard's Education Redesign Lab
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Student Learning Loss: Widening the Achievement Gap During the COVID-19 Pandemic***

Background

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for inviting me to testify today. As the witnesses before me have made clear, this is an unprecedented crisis which demands a bold set of responses. Over the last twenty-five years I have worked at the federal, state and local level of government and in the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors -- all with a focus on improving educational opportunities for children. My recommendations today will reflect upon this past work and, more specifically, my role as the co-founder of the National Center on Time & Learning, my current work at Harvard to address the impact of poverty on academic achievement and child well-being, and my experience building an intermediary for the City of Boston to double the number of children in high quality after-school and summer programs.

Expanded Learning Time

Several years ago my organization supported a team in the D.C. Public Schools as they explored options to expand learning time in low performing schools. At that time, the focus was on options for creating a longer school year and to increase the hours in the school day in targeted schools. As the District learned, these strategies are very challenging to implement, costly, and do not always result in improved student achievement. My work on Expanded Learning Time (ELT) began by researching a group of charter and district schools to understand how they structured a longer school day and year. As one example, we found that KIPP was offering students 50 percent more learning time compared to the typical 6.5 hour 180-day school year. Think about the impact of that many more hours in a quality learning environment, especially if a child stays in a KIPP school from kindergarten through high school. I know you will be hearing from Susan Schaeffler, the Founder and Executive Director of KIPP D.C., today.

Our research over the years found that high quality expanded learning time schools—both traditional district schools and charter schools-- had several important elements: (1) they supported small group, individualized instruction using data to identify academic challenges

and carefully monitored each child's educational learning levels; (2) they allowed significant time for teacher collaboration so that teachers could learn from one another and address student needs as a team; and (3) they invested in a broad array of enrichment programming (often provided by CBOs) that engaged students in school and in their passions, built new skills and helped deepen adult-student relationships.

While exploring expanding the school day or year might make sense for the District in the future, I would not recommend making it a top priority right now. Why? Students have more urgent needs based on the impact of the pandemic.

Summer Learning and Enrichment

I would recommend that the District plan an expansive summer learning and enrichment program. In my view, this should not be a typical "summer school" experience. Instead, the model should be a collaboration between the schools and community-based organizations. The programming should include opportunities to deepen adult-child relationships, build social-emotional skills, offer fun and enriching activities (karate, swimming, art, leadership programming) as well as small group tutoring. The enrichment programming will help attract students to attend. Teachers should be hired to provide the academic support within summer camp facilities. CBOs could also offer programming in school buildings. Especially until the Pandemic is behind us, teachers should not be forced to work over the summer. But many teachers will raise their hands to help our students.

For older students, expanding the D.C. summer jobs program with a work-based and academic component is also important.

Building Relationships and Individualizing Supports and Services

The Pandemic has had a debilitating impact of children's mental health. This is why I believe it is so important to encourage the building of relationships between educators and students (and their families) and between youth workers/CBO staff and educators and children and youth.

In some districts across the country their response to the pandemic has been to call upon a city-wide Children's Cabinet or other cross-sector collaboration to support the schools to provide food, computers, internet connectivity, and other supports. In districts like Oakland, CA they used their Community Schools infrastructure and a platform created by Salesforce to document and facilitate the delivery of individualized supports children needed in the areas, for example, of physical and mental health care, housing availability, and academic support. At the Education Redesign Lab at Harvard we call this "success planning." We are encouraging all districts to build systems that enable the delivery of individualized supports and opportunities to students throughout the school year and during the summer months. Districts like Nashville, TN, have asked school staff to serve as "navigators" to build relationships with students and

their families and to coordinate the services families need. I also see a core of academic tutors as an important strategy to consider.

Funding the Recovery

As I am sure you know, the Biden-Harris proposed rescue package includes \$29 billion for extended learning time and supports for students (tutors, summer school). We are all anxious for that to pass.

Conclusion

One final thought. With such significant learning loss, all school districts across the U.S. need to take a hard look at their academic priorities. We all must ask, what do our students need to know and be able to do to be prepared for the future economy and to live happy, healthy and independent lives? Research points to these necessary skills: the ability to problem solve, speak publicly and confidently and to write convincingly. (I realize we are also going to need to change our federal education accountability systems to focus on a broader set of child well-being goals.) We need this generation to be prepared to be our leaders of the future as we seek to build a more just and fair society—one that addresses our racist past and implements policies to close wealth gaps so that more families can achieve the American Dream. We need whole communities to come together to help students build those necessary leadership skills. Schools, alone, cannot do it.

Thank you.