



# Turning Back the Clock: The Inequitable Impact of Shortening California’s School Year

California’s education system has long failed to meet the needs of the low-income students and students of color who are now a vast majority of our state’s student population. To close persistent achievement gaps, we must dramatically improve the learning outcomes of our highest-need students by leveraging proven strategies such as increasing the amount of time students spend in school.

Yet, for the last two years, California’s policymakers have made the inequitable decision to systematically *reduce* the amount of instructional time that school districts are required to provide. Given that California has some of the widest achievement gaps and lowest student performance in the nation, reducing learning time in our schools should not be an option.

## THE BENEFITS OF EXTENDED LEARNING TIME

We need common sense solutions to boost proficiency, accelerate learning, and close the achievement gaps that plague low-income students and students of color in California. Increasing high-quality learning time is one such solution, particularly for those high-need students who have fewer opportunities for learning outside of the classroom.<sup>1</sup>

## More in-school time is key to improving student outcomes.

Research by RAND, The National Center on Time and Learning, and other leading organizations has documented that the conventional school year of 180 days, 6.5 hours per day is not sufficient to meet students’ learning needs, particularly those of low-income students.<sup>2</sup> Schools that have broken the mold and extended instructional time have more time to delve deeper into the curriculum, target instruction to individual students, and increase enrichment opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence from California’s own schools and from schools abroad makes the case for expanding learning time. An evaluation of the KIPP charter schools in California’s San Francisco Bay Area partly credited KIPP’s longer school day and school year for its students’ strong academic gains.<sup>4</sup> And studies of international test results show that U.S. students perform well below their peers in European and Asian nations, where students spend between 10 and 60 more days in school per year. Based on this data, leaders in states like Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Delaware, and in cities like Philadelphia and Chicago, have proposed extending the length of the school day or year, in some cases specifically for low-income students and struggling schools.<sup>5</sup>

As many of these leaders are recognizing, low-income and other high-need students have the most to gain from increased learning time. Not surprisingly, the negative impacts of limited instructional time are exacerbated for high-need students, who are less likely than their more advantaged peers to access additional support and enriched learning opportunities outside of school

and during the summer months. Cuts to summer school classes also hit low-income students the hardest, as they are the most likely to suffer from “summer learning loss,” or the loss of academic skills over the summer.

Lastly, it is important to note that “seat time” does not necessarily equal learning time. The way schools make use of instructional time is critically important, particularly for high-need students. Certainly, the biggest impacts on achievement will be realized when schools combine extended learning time with more effective use of those days and hours.

**California schools are improving student performance by extending learning time.**

A number of schools, school districts, and charter schools in California are experimenting with extended learning time initiatives, despite recent budget problems. A report by the Center for American Progress cites the following California schools and school districts serving predominantly high-need students as examples<sup>6</sup>:

- Los Penasquitos Academy in Poway Unified has expanded learning time by 40 percent by adding two hours to each school day and three to four weeks to the school year. In 2010, over 85 percent of the Academy’s fourth and fifth graders scored proficient or above on state tests in English language arts (ELA) and math.
- Manuel F. Cunha Intermediate in Half Moon Bay has expanded learning time specifically for its English learners. The school implemented a mandatory “zero period” for English learners who need additional hours of targeted instruction. These students have made steady gains in ELA and math performance in the four years since the program was implemented.
- West Fresno Elementary School District improved its chronically low-performing schools by expanding learning time to eight hours per day in grades four through eight, providing more time for both core academic classes and enrichment. Each year since 2007, the district’s Academic Performance Index

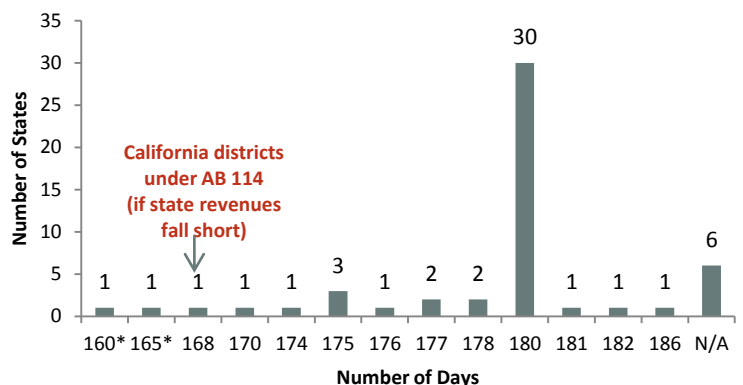
(API) score has grown between 40 and 60 points.

- The 13 charter schools that are a part of the KIPP network in California provide at least 50 percent more hours of learning time to their students than neighboring schools. This strategy has been shown to contribute to KIPP students’ strong academic gains.<sup>7</sup> KIPP runs some of the top-performing middle schools serving high-need students in the state.

**CALIFORNIA’S REQUIREMENT FOR LEARNING TIME FAILS TO MEET OUR STUDENTS’ NEEDS**

Most states, including the District of Columbia, have statutes in place governing the minimum amount of instructional days. As Figure 1 shows, 30 states have laws on the books calling for students to be provided with a minimum of 180 instructional days.<sup>8</sup> California technically requires 180 days of instruction. However, in recent years the state has allowed districts to decrease instructional time in response to budget cuts. Recent policy decisions would allow districts to reduce their instructional days to 168, among the shortest school years in the nation. (See the following section for more detail on California’s policy.)

**Figure 1. Current State Policy on Minimum Number of Instructional Days**



Source: Education Commission on the States (2008), revised by National Center on Time and Learning (2011)

\* Colorado requires secondary schools to provide a standard 1,080 hours of instruction (equivalent to 180 days), but permits school districts to utilize a four-day week. Colorado therefore sets an absolute minimum of 160 days, although students are actually in school for much more time. And although Michigan currently requires a minimum of 165 days, that requirement will increase to 170 days in 2012-13.

Of the six states without policies governing the minimum number of instructional days, five have state policies governing the minimum number of instructional hours. In these cases, the states set different criteria based on grade level (e.g., 400 hours per year is required for Kindergarten, 1,032 hours per year for grades 1-8, 1,080 hours per year for grades 9-12).

### **California lawmakers have allowed districts to reduce the amount of learning time.**

California Education Code requires school districts to provide a minimum number of days of instruction, although the requirement itself has changed considerably over the past decade.

- In 2001, the state officially *raised* the minimum required number of instructional days from 175 days to 180, in accordance with most other states' policies. Districts that violated this requirement were subject to the withholding of revenue limit funds.
- In 2009, the state made the decision that school districts could reduce five days of instruction from the school year (to 175 days) without facing the fines required by the 2001 law.
- In 2011, Governor Jerry Brown signed AB 114 into law, allowing school districts to further shorten the length of the school year by up to seven additional days, if and when state revenues fall short of projections. If so, districts could provide as few as 168 instructional days to students.

The provisions of AB 114 have the potential to limit the learning opportunities and academic outcomes of every California public school student. If California school districts offer 168 instructional days, as permitted under AB 114, they will be providing among the shortest school years in the nation—ahead of only Colorado (160) and Michigan (165). But these two states are actually providing more for their students than the data necessarily show. Colorado requires secondary schools to provide a standard 1,080 hours of instruction (equivalent to 180 days), but permits school districts to utilize a four-day week. Colorado therefore sets an absolute minimum of 160 days, although students are actually in school

for much more time. And although Michigan currently requires a minimum of 165 days, that requirement will increase to 170 days in 2012-13, recognizing that more time is needed to meet the state's educational goals for students.

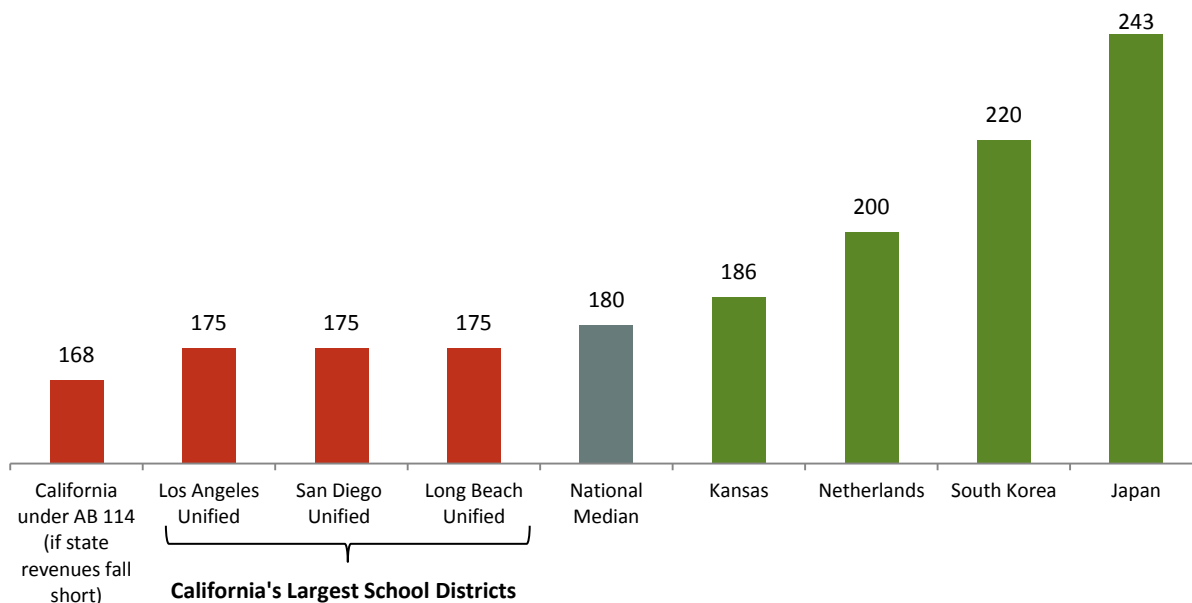
### **When California districts cut instructional time, high-need and underserved students are disproportionately impacted.**

Several studies have documented how California districts have reacted to recent flexibilities in state policy allowing them to reduce the required minimum number of school days.

- A survey by the Legislative Analyst's Office found that 20 percent of districts reported shortening the year to 175 days in 2009-10, and 60 percent of districts did the same in 2010-11.<sup>9</sup>
- A California Watch survey of the state's 30 largest school districts found that few districts took advantage of the flexibility to reduce instructional time in 2009, but in 2010, 16 of the 30 reduced the number of days.<sup>10</sup> These 16 districts together serve 1.4 million students, 64 percent of whom are eligible for free and reduced price lunch.<sup>11</sup>
- A 2011 UCLA/IDEA study of educational opportunities across the state found that nearly half (49 percent) of California high schools have reduced instructional days since 2008.<sup>12</sup>

These decisions have had a disproportionate impact on high-need students—including English learners and students from low-income families—for two key reasons. First, the UCLA/IDEA study found that more than half of principals from low-to medium-wealth districts reported cutting instructional days, compared with just 25 percent of principals from high-wealth districts.<sup>13</sup> Second, the UCLA/IDEA study highlighted research showing that reducing learning time can have negative consequences for “students struggling with new material, or English learners encountering curriculum in a new language.” So when California schools are allowed to reduce instructional time, it represents a double-whammy for the state's highest-need students, such as our 1.3 million English learners.

**Figure 2. Number of School Days Provided in California Districts, Other States and Nations**



Sources: California Watch (2010), National Center on Time and Learning (2011), Organisation of school year and school day, INCA Comparative Tables (2009)

If current trends continue, it seems increasingly likely that the highest-poverty districts serving the highest-need students will end up offering as few as 168 instructional days per year – potentially the shortest year in the country.

Figure 2 illustrates the shortsighted decision of California’s policymakers to allow districts to reduce instructional time. This decision will have a significant impact on the state’s highest-need students, particularly in relation to other states and nations that are leading the way toward providing more instructional time.

It is simply unconscionable that when the rest of the nation is discussing the benefits of *extending* learning time, California lawmakers are allowing school districts to *reduce* learning time. Now more than ever, our students deserve every opportunity, including more instructional time, to achieve their dreams of college and career.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Doris Entwisle, D., Karl L. Alexander, Linda Steffel Olson, “Children, Schools, and Inequality,” (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, et al, “Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children’s Learning,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011).
- <sup>3</sup> National Center on Time and Learning, “Learning Time in America: Trends to Reform the American School Calendar,” (Summer 2010).
- <sup>4</sup> Woodworth, K.R., David, J.L., Guha, R., Wang, H., & Lopez-Torkos, A., “San Francisco Bay Area KIPP schools: A study of early implementation and achievement. Final report,” (Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2008).
- <sup>5</sup> Elena Rocha, “On the Clock: Rethinking the Way Schools Use Time,” (Washington, DC: Education Sector Reports, January 2007).
- <sup>6</sup> Elena Rocha, “Expanded Learning Time in Action: Initiatives in High-Poverty and High-Minority Schools and Districts,” (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, July 2008).
- <sup>7</sup> Woodworth, K.R., et al.
- <sup>8</sup> Education Commission of the States, “Number of Instructional Days/Hours in the School Year,” (Education Commission on the States, State Notes, Updated June 2008). Revised by National Center on Time and Learning, April 2011.
- <sup>9</sup> Legislative Analyst’s Office, “Update on School District Finance in California,” (February 7, 2011).
- <sup>10</sup> Louis Freedberg, “Majority of state’s largest districts shrink school calendar amid budget crisis,” California Watch, July 15, 2010.
- <sup>11</sup> Education Trust—West analysis of data from Ed-Data.org.
- <sup>12</sup> John Rogers, Melanie Bertrand, Rhoda Freelon, Sophie Fanelli, “Free Fall: Educational Opportunities in 2011,” (Los Angeles: UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, March 2011).
- <sup>13</sup> “High-wealth districts” are defined as basic aid districts or districts with high levels of local revenue.