

## Time in School: Opportunity to Learn

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In districts across the country, there are significant variations in the amount of time children spend in school. This variance suggests that those schools focusing on student “time on task” as an indicator of learning may be putting the cart before the horse. Instead, schools may want to first examine the *student time in school* as a baseline indicator of student opportunity to learn.

This paper looks at the times districts establish for the length of the student school day, as described in collective bargaining agreements, personnel handbooks, board policies, and school calendars. We do not examine the length of the *instructional day*. Rather, we measure the student *school day*, which more readily permits fair comparison among districts. The data are culled from a sample of the 50 largest districts in the United States, and our focus is kindergarten through fifth grade. We reveal fundamental disadvantages some children face by virtue of the school district they attend. Even when the daily difference may appear quite small (what’s a few minutes here and there?), over time, the variation can be quite substantial. By comparing the school district that purportedly has the shortest school day with the one that supposedly has the longest, we find that children in the former district receive the equivalent of 41 days less school in a single year, and of one less year of school for every four and a half school years. The vast majority of this variance can be explained by the length of the school day (not the number of days in a school year), a number which is generally more standard among all districts.

The development of a new database that was launched this January by the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) makes this analysis practical for the first time. The NCTQ database has made it easier to examine such issues as the school calendar, as well as many other policies that concern the rules, rights, and roles of teachers. Our aim is to shed more light on the impact that teacher rules and rights have on the operation of schools and, more specifically, their impact on student learning. We have organized the often cumbersome and dense contents of collective bargaining agreements as well as information from teacher handbooks and the personnel policies approved by school boards in districts that either are not permitted to or choose not to bargain collectively. Other relevant board policies such as

school calendars are examined, when available. With a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, we have begun with the nation’s 50 largest school districts and will be adding more with time. We intend to add personnel contracts of private and charter schools, as well as principals’ contracts.

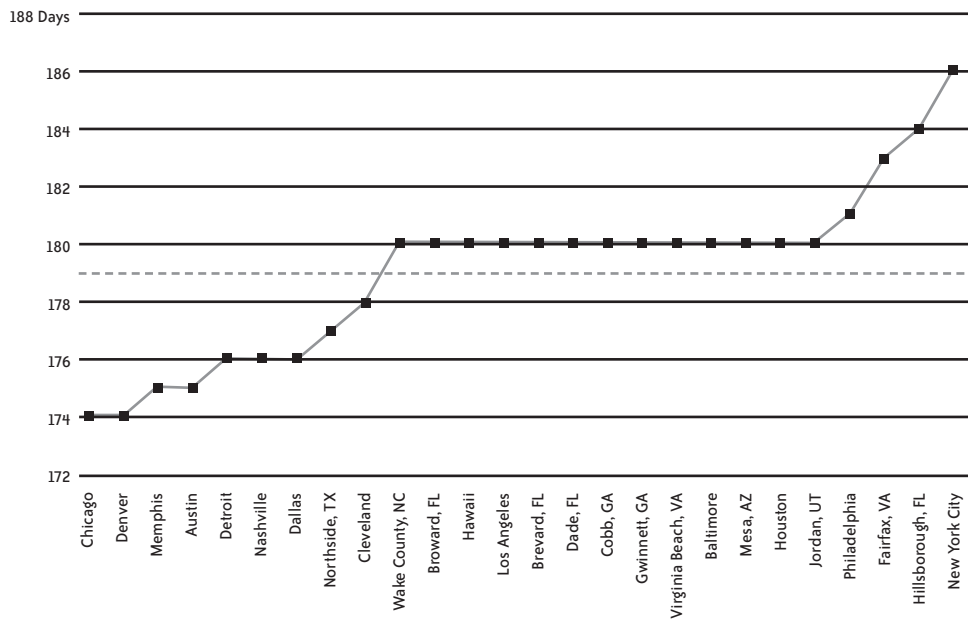
We combed through these agreements and board policies, coding them in anticipation of any question a user might have. To date, we have developed more than 300 tables that look at not just issues surrounding time and the school calendar, but also at teacher benefits, leave, salaries, class size limits, pay alternatives, teacher evaluations, professional development, working conditions, transfers, teacher dismissal, and more.

This paper provides comparisons for students in 26 of the 50 largest school districts. Data from the remaining 24 were either missing or ambiguous.

### Time in the Day

The length of the student school year varies little across districts. Relatively small differences in the length of the school year may send some misleading signals that not *that* much difference exists among districts in the amount of time children spend in school. For example, following is the range in the number of school days that 26 districts report:

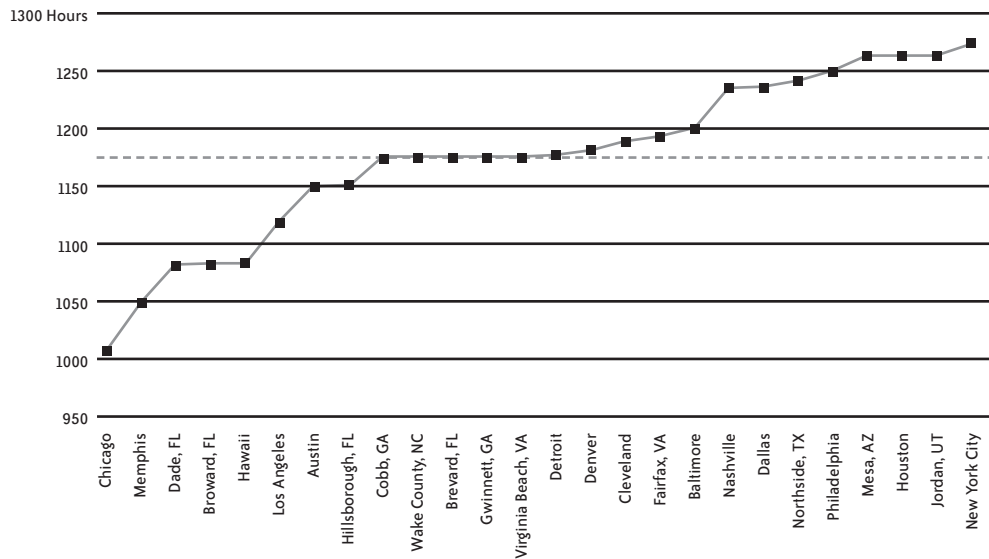
**FIGURE 1: HOW LONG IS THE SCHOOL YEAR?**



Exactly half the districts in the sample report the same number of days in the school year—180 days—with an overall average for the 26 districts of 179 days. With a couple of exceptions, most of the remaining districts fall within four days of this standard. The finding reflects the standardization among districts resulting from similar state laws mandating that their districts provide a minimum 180-day school year. Given the tendency of districts to report this number with or without professional days, with or without accounting for half days, and other odd accounting choices, the general sense of policy makers looking at this issue may be that the data are a wash. All children appear to be getting roughly the same amount of instruction each year.

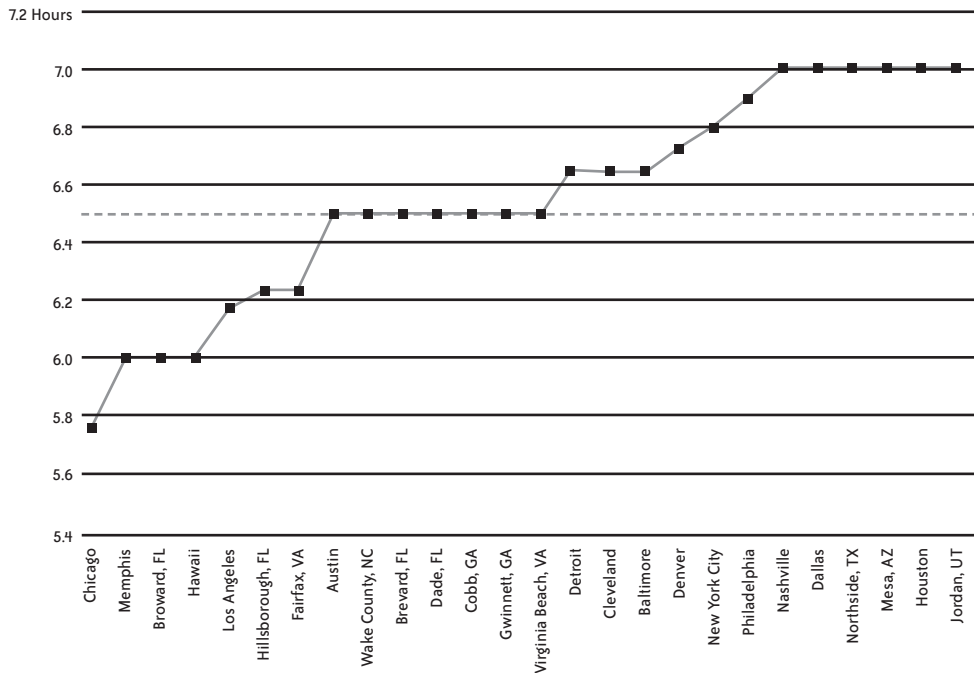
Although many states legislate the number of instructional hours that students must receive, these laws do not appear to have led to as much standardization of the data. Districts appear to regularly exceed or find ways to work around their state’s required number of instructional hours. We do not equate districts’ instructional hours with the state requirement here, because we are looking at a broader interpretation than the state allows: the length of the student day.

**FIGURE 2: HOW LONG IS THE SCHOOL YEAR—IN HOURS?**



By multiplying the number of student school days with the reported hours per school day, the relatively flat findings from Figure 1 change quite dramatically and in a meaningful way. Figure 3 and Table 1 show the number of hours that students spend in school each year and the substantial variations that occur by looking at hours, not days.

**FIGURE 3: HOW LONG IS THE STUDENT DAY?**



The Chicago school district has the shortest student day, logging 1,001 student hours in a year, and New York City has the longest student day, logging 1,271 hours per year. New York students attended school 93 hours more than the average district in the sample and 270 hours more than students in Chicago, the equivalent of more than eight weeks of school in single school year. New York’s students are getting the equivalent of about 14 more days of instruction than their peers in an average district and 41 more days of instruction than their peers in Chicago.

**TABLE 1: THE STUDENT SCHOOL DAY AND YEAR**

District	Days in Student School Year	Length of Student Day	Hours in a Week	Hours Per Year*	Number of Hours Over Six Years
Chicago	174	5 hours, 45 minutes	29	1,001	6,003
Dade County, FL	180	6 hours	30	1,080	6,480
Broward, FL	180	6 hours	30	1,080	6,480
Hawaii	180	6 hours	30	1,080	6,480
Los Angeles	180	6 hours, 10 minutes	31	1,110	6,660
Hillsborough, FL	184	6 hours, 15 minutes	31	1,150	6,900
Cobb, GA	180	6 hours, 30 minutes	33	1,170	7,020
Wake County, NC	180	6 hours, 30 minutes	33	1,170	7,020
Brevard, FL	180	6 hours, 30 minutes	33	1,170	7,020
Gwinnett, GA	180	6 hours, 30 minutes	33	1,170	7,020
Virginia Beach	180	6 hours, 30 minutes	33	1,170	7,020
Detroit	176	6 hours, 40 minutes	33	1,173	7,040
Denver	174	6 hours, 45 minutes	34	1,175	7,047
Cleveland	178	6 hours, 40 minutes	33	1,187	7,120
Fairfax, VA	183	6 hours, 30 minutes	33	1,190	7,137
Baltimore	180	6 hours, 40 minutes	33	1,200	7,200
Nashville	176	7 hours	35	1,232	7,392
Dallas	176	7 hours	35	1,232	7,392
Northside, TX	177	7 hours	35	1,239	7,434
Philadelphia	181	6 hours, 54 minutes	35	1,249	7,493
Mesa, AZ	180	7 hours	35	1,260	7,560
Houston	180	7 hours	35	1,260	7,560
Jordan, UT	180	7 hours	35	1,260	7,560
New York City	186	6 hours, 50 minutes	34	1,271	7,626

\*The numbers in this column have been rounded.

### **Why Is New York So Strong?**

Notably, New York City stands out with students in school for a scheduled 1,271 hours in the 2006–07 school year. Although the city’s school day is not the longest (6 hours, 50 minutes per day, compared with 7 hours in several other districts analyzed), it more than makes up for these lost minutes by lengthening the school year to 186 days from the sample average of 179 days and the state of New York’s 180-day requirement. It is important to point out, however, that New York’s school year, while usually longer than most, does not always commit to the 186-day school year.<sup>1</sup>

### **Why Is Chicago So Weak?**

The collective bargaining agreement for Chicago, also an American Federation of Teachers (AFT) affiliate, paints quite a different picture from the New York agreement. It has both the shortest student school year and the shortest school day, resulting in dramatic deficits in student opportunity to learn. Chicago’s unambiguous contract spells out what time school will start each day and when it will end. (It also contains a unique provision that gives teachers their 45-minute lunch period at the end of the day, offering teachers the opportunity to go home instead. Presumably, this allows schools to assign teachers to lunch duty.)

These data reveal the impact on student opportunity to learn that occurs when districts shave what seem to be small amounts of time off the school day, just 15 minutes. Putting aside the outlier of Chicago, the remaining 25 districts set a school day ranging from six hours (Hawaii, and Broward and Dade County, Florida) to seven hours (Dallas, Northside, and Houston, Texas; Mesa, Arizona; and Jordan, Utah). Philadelphia and New York, both of which have recently renegotiated contracts, approach nearly 7 hours, with 6 hours 54 minutes and 6 hours 50 minutes, respectively. A decision to provide a 6-hour 45-minute day over a 7-hour day reduces time in school by 1.4 weeks in one year.

Table 2 shows how these differences play out over six years of elementary school. Given that New York City does not always have a 186-day school year,<sup>2</sup> we selected the three districts closest to the New York City figure to serve as the controls: Mesa, Houston, and Jordan. Student opportunity to learn in these three districts is far greater than most other districts, with half the districts in the sample providing three to nine weeks less each year in instruction.

**TABLE 2: HOW THE MINUTES ADD UP**

District	Difference in Hours in One Year*	Difference in Weeks in One Year	Percentage Difference in One Year	Difference in Hours in Six Years	Difference in Days in Six Years	Difference in School Years in Six Years
Chicago	-260	-9	-26%	-1,557	-271	-1.51
Dade County, FL	-180	-6	-17%	-1,080	-196	-1.10
Broward, FL	-180	-6	-17%	-1,080	-180	-1.01
Hawaii	-180	-6	-17%	-1,080	-180	-1.01
Los Angeles	-150	-5	-14%	-900	-146	-0.82
Hillsborough, FL	-110	-4	-10%	-660	-106	-0.59
Cobb, GA	-90	-3	-8%	-540	-83	-0.46
Wake County, NC	-90	-3	-8%	-540	-83	-0.46
Brevard, FL	-90	-3	-8%	-540	-83	-0.46
Gwinnett, GA	-90	-3	-8%	-540	-83	-0.46
Virginia Beach	-90	-3	-8%	-540	-83	-0.46
Detroit	-87	-3	-7%	-520	-78	-0.44
Denver	-86	-3	-7%	-513	-76	-0.42
Cleveland	-73	-2	-6%	-438	-66	-0.35
Fairfax, VA	-71	-2	-6%	-423	-65	-0.34
Baltimore	-60	-2	-5%	-360	-54	-0.29
Nashville	-28	-1	-2%	-168	-24	-0.13
Dallas	-28	-1	-2%	-168	-24	-0.13
Northside, TX	-21	-1	-2%	-126	-18	-0.10
Philadelphia	-11	0	-1%	-66.6	-10	-0.05
Mesa, AZ	0	0	0%	0	0	0.00
Houston	0	0	0%	0	0	0.00
Jordan, UT	0	0	0%	0	0	0.00
New York City	11	0	1%	66	10	0.05

\*Based upon rounded numbers in Table 1.

## Limitations

As one would expect, agreements and personnel handbooks are complex. Any findings derived from their inherent complexities make accurate comparisons difficult. For example, although we have data from 50 districts, we could include only 26 districts in our sample for this paper. To present accurate data requires much more than merely reporting what the agreements and handbooks state. It is necessary to call districts, talk to officials in the local union and in central offices, and run random checks with the schools themselves. This work is done to verify what is stated in formal language, interpret the language correctly, and look for additional sources of data. The more we learn about the data we have collected, the more we recognize the problems that prevent us from presenting a clean, unambiguous picture of how schools operate. We are working to ameliorate those ambiguities, which is one of the reasons why we will be posting the data in phases, instead of all at once.

Four general problems with the data as it appears in these agreements and handbooks are observed:

1. **On many fronts, these agreements are surprisingly silent.** Many people assume that collective bargaining agreements serve as the primary constraint on the ability of schools to be flexible and responsible. In fact, that blame may be miscast. Only a small number of the 50 agreements (usually in only the biggest cities such as Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, and Cleveland) contain the kind of detail that might give these contracts a “bad name.” For the most part, users will find that agreements are relatively agnostic.

Although this problem would be a welcome surprise to many, for the purposes of research, the lack of data can be frustrating. For example, only about 40 percent of the agreements and personnel policies in the sample made reference to the length of the student school day, while only 26 percent made reference to the length of the instructional day. To the extent that the lack of data dispels a myth about the power of unions, the observation is significant.

2. **The agreements are full of ambiguity and do not contain standardized data that allow simple comparison without additional investigation.** In spite of having ready access to all sorts of data that would normally take weeks to collect, we faced roadblocks that must be reconciled before the database goes public.



Many ambiguities surround issues relating to the school calendar and the time children spend in school each day:

- Some districts spell out the student day, while others specify the length of the “student instructional day.” The latter could easily be mistaken for the student day, but it does not actually tell us how many hours each day students are at school. Thus, seemingly similar contract provisions are actually incomparable.
- Because so many agreements and handbooks did not provide the length of the student day, we attempted to back into the student day by using the figure provided for the teacher workday. As might be expected in personnel materials, this figure was reported more frequently, but it proved too problematic to use consistently. We had assumed we could arrive at the length of the student day by starting with the length of the teacher day, subtracting the time that teachers must report in the morning as well as the time that they must stay after school is let out for the day. Many contracts, however, do not specify the before and after time teachers must be on site. Also, the calculation yielded all sorts of answers that are best described as  $2 + 2 = 5$ . It may be that “before” and “after” times, even when listed in contracts, are approximations of what is expected of teachers, instead of firm requirements. Accordingly, as much sense as it might have seemed to make, we could not derive student school day by “backing into” the figure we sought.
- In spite of district practice to the contrary, our database reports only teacher hours that are worked on site. This restriction is not intended to fuel any debate over how much teachers work, but to provide a figure that was measurable and comparable among districts. To be more specific, a number of school districts describe the standard workday for teachers as eight hours, presumably mirroring the standard workday of most professions. Yet it is clear that a number of districts do not expect teachers to be in the school building for those eight hours. Los Angeles, in particular, explicitly states that the eight-hour workday includes time that teachers work off site. For our purposes, the Los Angeles strategy of counting time worked at home would open a Pandora’s box. The data that we report in the database is only for teacher *on-site* hours, excluding any school districts that count time worked at home as time on duty.
- We adjusted data to accommodate the different ways in which districts report the student school year. In many districts, the student school year actually includes teacher professional development days; state law permits them to be counted as part of the instructional days that the state requires. For other districts, these days

are not factored. This practice can lead to differences in the school year by as many as five days, a significant amount of time when making comparisons.

- We adjusted data to accommodate the different ways in which districts report the teacher year. Some districts, particularly districts in the South, interpret the number of teacher days to include paid holidays. In Northern states, paid holidays are generally excluded from the total count. When comparing agreements, it may look like teachers in the South spend a lot more time in school than teachers in the North, which is not the case.

3. **Not everything in the collective bargaining agreements is a provision that has been bargained.** For example, many contracts refer to the school year as 180 days. The length of the school year is established by state law, not in collective bargaining or board personnel policies. It is not bargained unless the district decides to exceed the minimum set by the state. We are trying to accommodate these important distinctions in our presentation of the data on the site, so that the user will know the genesis of the data, be it state law, board policy, or a bargained provision.

The distinction between state law and agreement provision is not as clear as one might first assume. Just because the source of a provision is state law (or board policy), the provision may still be essentially the product of a negotiation. State laws are not made in a vacuum. Legislators are heavily influenced by organized voices that argue for or against a new law. In particular, they are heavily influenced by union lobbies, as well as state school chiefs and superintendents. So while state law is responsible for the 180-day school year, the process for arriving at the 180 days likely involves equally as much union and management input. Particularly in states in which there is no collective bargaining (there are seven such states), teacher associations generally rely on state law and school board policy to accomplish the same goals as would have been accomplished through a collective bargaining agreement.

4. **The documents represent *policy* and not necessarily *practice*.** A contract may stipulate that the school day is seven hours for all teachers. Many teachers exceed this requirement on a regular basis, and most teachers may not know they are supposed to work only seven hours in the school building.

This difference being noted, the agreements are still meaningful. In fact, their words matter a lot; otherwise, unions and districts would not find themselves at loggerheads for months, even years, negotiating the language of the next contract. For starters, real costs are associated with what is bargained. Without question, schools operate differently than they would absent these formal agreements, not always for what the agreements state but sometimes for what people *think* the agreements state. For good and for bad, these agreements have a real impact on schools and cannot be dismissed as irrelevant.

To accommodate these four limitations, all of the collected data were sent back out to districts and local unions for verification. This verification step did not prove to be all that helpful. Although new data were almost always provided, filling in many blanks, it usually was not clear from what authority the data were derived or if much care had gone into ensuring that answers were accurate. When a district and a union responded, their answers did not necessarily match. One district, for example, reported the school day as 6.5 hours, but the union reported it as 7 hours. The union provided the correct number of hours (including the time for lunch, as asked).

Both national arms of the two teacher unions were cooperative, giving us access to materials and expertise that they have, improving our definitions, suggesting questions we should pursue, and pointing out when our questions seemed biased or loaded. We are particularly indebted to the AFT for the time they spent helping us improve the site.

## **Conclusion**

The simple comparisons presented here precipitate a more profound question for research. Do districts like New York City and Mesa, Arizona, have higher achievement levels for students than districts like Chicago, or Dade County, Florida? The question is not a simple one to answer and is beyond the scope of this paper; however, it is most likely a question that requires an analysis of many school years of data—the length of a child’s elementary years, for instance. This long-term approach would be necessary not only to realize the impact of a school day that is 30 minutes shorter over, say, 6 or 10 or 13 years, but also to accommodate variances in teacher quality. Such a study would have to provide some evidence on the overall quality of teachers in districts in New York City versus districts in Chicago, not an easy factor to isolate.

Research questions aside, it seems that this issue shares a lot in common with other issues relating to teacher quality. Any remnants of the debate over the need for

teacher expertise in subject matter knowledge, for example, are spurious. A teacher who knows a subject is better equipped to teach that subject than a teacher who does not know a subject. In this instance, it is common sense that more instruction can be provided on average in a seven-hour school day than in a six-hour day. Certainly, as illustrated in the example provided here, schools can provide a more comprehensive schedule that meets children's full range of instructional, physical, and social needs. What follows from longer school days may be at the whim or efficiency of the individual teacher and even school, but the answer is ultimately obvious. Although it is left up to teachers and schools to use that extra 30 minutes to an hour a day either poorly or well, more instruction certainly occurs during that extra time than is ever likely to occur after the dismissal bell rings.

## **Appendix.**

### *An Effective Day in a First-Grade Classroom*

#### **Length of Day: 7 hours**

8:00 through 8:15

#### **Opening Business: Pledge, Announcements, Attendance**

8:15 through 8:30

#### **Opening Activities**, whole class (not all activities are done every day)

- Warm-up activities to encourage student engagement
- Language assessments (once a week)
- Homework, review and check
- Decoding drills, especially those involving choral responses, including alphabet/sound routines, nonsense words
- Timed math drills

8:30 through 8:55

**Teacher read aloud and class discussion or writing assignment**, nonfiction topic in history and science

8:55 through 9:55

**Small Group A**

**Decoding practice with teacher: 30 minutes**

**Small Group B**

**Decoding practice with teacher: 30 minutes**

While teacher is working with small groups:

**Independent and Remedial Activities**

- Partner reading
- Comprehension and skill work
- Math problems
- Listening and responding to recorded read-alouds to reinforce student listening and understanding
- Decoding and language remediation with tutor

9:55 through 10:15

**RECESS**

Followed by quick refocus activity for whole group: sound/symbol routines

10:15 through 10:45

**Spelling, Grammar, and Usage, whole class**

Includes phonemic awareness; spelling by sounds, type of word, and context; spelling of high-frequency words, conventions for writing and speaking sentences, and handwriting.

10:45 through 11:45

**Mathematics**

11:45 through 12:15

**Small Group Reading C**

**Decoding Program: 30 minutes**

Groups A and B work independently on math and reading

12:15 through 12:45

**LUNCH**

12:45 through 1:00

**Teacher Read Aloud: Language & Literature**, whole class

The teacher reads selected literature out loud to the class.

1:00 through 1:20

**Language Remediation**, small groups to whole class

Daily 20-minute remediation lessons in language that are best taught by the teacher.

In high-poverty schools, remediation will most likely need to be scheduled for whole-class instruction.

1:20 (1:00 for some) through 2:05

**Specials**

Art, music, physical education, library

2:05 through 3:00

**Social Studies or Science**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> New York's recent renegotiation with the local AFT affiliate of its teacher contract extended the school year by two days, but the greater number of instructional hours this year goes beyond these two extra days to the flexible system of calendar development used by the city. Instead of specifying the number of student days in the collective bargaining agreement, the agreement simply states that teachers will report the Thursday preceding Labor Day and will work through the month of June excepting the last two weekdays. Besides a requirement for a minimum of three professional development days, the school is free to have as many student days as it would like within these broad limits.

In some years, the number of days decreases because more state holidays will fall on weekdays or because of unforeseen circumstances; during the 2005–06 school year, for example, schools were closed for two days to complete emergency test scoring. This is not a problem as long as schools stay above the state minimum of 180 “instructional days” (of which 4 days may be used for professional development). New York City routinely exceeds the minimum and in general seeks to maximize instructional time within their broad framework. Thus, in a year like this one, in which fewer holidays fell during the weekday, they are able to achieve an impressive 186 teaching days.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.