



Appendix C. Study Methods

The purpose of the study is to investigate and better understand implementation of expanded learning time (ELT) initiatives in four states, 11 districts, and 17 schools, with particular emphasis on schools designated by states as the lowest-achieving under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) waivers and the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. The study investigated these specific questions:

- Do states support a range of strategies to expand learning time or do they rely on one definition for all districts and schools?
- Are states using the flexibilities under ESEA waivers, which relieve them of some of the requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, to support comprehensive strategies to expand learning time for students?
- How and will states and districts use federal flexibility to support efforts currently funded by the SIG program?
- What factors support or hinder a community's ability to expand learning time?
- Do state and local officials perceive expanded learning time as an effective school improvement strategy?

Research design

The research conducted for this study was modeled as a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2003) and allowed us to analyze the data in layers at these three levels. It followed a sequential, developmental method, in that findings from the collection and analysis of data provided by state education agency (SEA) personnel informed the selection of districts, schools, and participants; interview protocols; and the analysis of data collected at the district and/or school levels.

Study setting and participants: State, district, and school selection

The states, districts, and schools included in this study were purposefully selected for maximal variation sampling (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2002). We intended to represent a heterogeneous sampling of geographic locations, urbanicity, and preparedness and support for expanding learning time. The states selected were implementing the SIG program, received an ESEA waiver, and requested to waive the requirements of the 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) program. As of August 2013, the time when states were selected for this study, 20 states met these criteria: Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, and Virginia.

After conducting some preliminary background research about ELT initiatives in various states and informal interviews with experts in the field, we selected four states for the study:

- Colorado, a Mountain West state, has a history of strong local governance of districts and schools.

- Connecticut, a Northeastern state, has longstanding state-level support programs focused on school improvement for its persistently low-achieving schools.
- Oregon, a Pacific Northwestern state, has an interesting combination of state encouragement of school improvement initiatives, including ELT, and a variety of local contexts for program implementation.
- Virginia, a Southern state, has a variety of rural, urban, and suburban schools that receive SIG funding and have been designated as priority schools under the state’s ESEA waiver.

In the fall of 2013, we sent letters about the study to deputy state superintendents and invited SEAs to participate. (Ultimately, the selection of states, districts, and schools also depended on officials’ willingness to participate.) Once the state agreed to participate, we conducted semi-structured interviews with SEA officials who oversee the SIG program, 21st CCLC grants, and/or the priority schools identified under the waivers in these four states. The guides used for these interviews were developed based on prior research on ELT, media coverage, and prior reports from CEP about ESEA waivers and school improvement. The interview protocols underwent internal and external review prior to data collection.

In advance of the SEA interviews, CEP assembled a list of districts with schools that received federal SIG funds and were implementing either the transformation or turnaround school improvement models, were designated as priority schools under the state’s ESEA waiver accountability plan, or received 21st CLCC funding. SEA officials provided some guidance and recommendations about which of these districts and schools CEP researchers should visit for the ELT study. Drawing from SEA officials’ recommendations, as well as our own background research related to our selection criteria, CEP collected data for:

- 6 schools in two districts in Colorado
- 4 schools in three districts in Connecticut
- 3 schools in three districts in Oregon
- 4 schools in three districts in Virginia

We conducted semi-structured interviews with district level officials who oversee school improvement and ELT initiatives, as well as the 21st CCLC programs, where applicable. We conducted semi-structured interviews with principals, the majority of which were done in person and at the schools, and any additional staff who help to lead ELT initiatives in the case study schools. To provide a context for these interviews, we assembled background information about the districts and schools and any relevant policy documents or publications about their school improvement plans and ELT initiatives. More detailed information about these districts and schools is included in the district and school case study files accompanying this report on the CEP website at www.cep-dc.org.

In total, CEP researchers spoke with 49 education leaders—including 13 state education officials, 18 district leaders, and 18 school leaders—across 4 states, 11 districts, and 17 schools between September 2013 and April 2014. These interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, reviewed, and then cleaned before deeper analysis.

Data analysis and validity

As noted earlier, the study followed a sequential yet iterative design in which state-level data informed

district- and school-level analysis and vice versa. Digital interview audio files, transcripts, background data, policy documents, and school visit notes were organized and uploaded to Nvivo—a software program used to organize and analyze multiple sources of data. Researchers reviewed and coded these documents independently, within Nvivo, to extract patterns, emerging themes, and exceptions to these themes within and between data sources and cases. Then we reviewed and compared these coding schemes and developed common coding matrices for each case. This type of collaborative analysis among the researchers provided the benefit of multiple perspectives and fostered the development of themes and patterns across cases.

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, researchers spoke frequently about interview findings, coding, and overall content analysis. We wrote case study summaries that documented and described our findings for individual state-, district-, and school-level ELT implementation, as well as study participants' views of the challenges, successes, and overall impact of these initiatives in their respective state, district, and school. We used these case study summaries to discern crosscutting themes.

One of the last stages of the iterative design was to create a cross-case narrative that summarized the main findings of the individual case study sites in a cohesive document. To do this, researchers developed a list of emergent themes from the district and school case studies. Using these cross-case themes, we developed a cross-case matrix within a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to record instances where a studied site had one of the ELT characteristics. This broader, cross-case analysis helped us to identify patterns and other cross-cutting themes, as well as exceptions to these themes and patterns, from the state, district, and school narratives.

Researchers promised district- and school-level study participants that in all reporting, the names of the district and schools, as well as their names, would not be identified and remain anonymous. As is the case with all interview data, we considered the possibility of “reactivity,” (Maxwell, 2005), wherein study participants respond to questions with answers they perceive as politically correct. Therefore, we paid careful attention to develop and build relationships with study participants and emphasized the anonymity of their responses to minimize this potential validity threat. Finally, to help ensure the accuracy of the data collected from the interviews, researchers conducted “member checks,” in which we asked study participants to review the summaries and reports resulting from the interviews and school visits for factual accuracy.

Study limitations

It is important to note that because we studied four individual states, the data may not represent all states implementing ELT initiatives under the SIG program and with ESEA waivers. And each district and school case within these four states may not represent all SIG or priority schools implementing ELT. Finally, information about ELT experiences were gathered primarily from the perspectives of state, district, and school leaders rather than all the stakeholders—including teachers, students, parents, and other community members—involved in ELT implementation.

Nevertheless, findings drawn from this study contribute to the existing literature and knowledge base about expanding learning time and should inform future studies about the topic. This concept of theory development by way of qualitative studies is supported in research by Becker (1991), Dumas and Anderson (2014), Maxwell (2005), and Yin (2003).

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