Denver Case Study:  
The Case of Local Control

This case study is part of a broader study by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) of grantees under the Ford Foundation’s More and Better Learning Time (MBLT) initiative. The study aimed to learn more about the motivation to pursue MBLT policies, the impact of MBLT grants, and the conditions and approaches found in schools that have successfully implemented and sustained MBLT. This is one of three case studies that focus on locations where MBLT reform activities were implemented.

People Interviewed

In Denver, CEP interviewed eight individuals who were associated with the Ford Foundation’s MBLT grant making. We contacted all eight interviewees based on input from the Ford Foundation. Below, we list the interviewees, their position and organization, and their relationship to more and better learning time.

Todd Ely, Assistant Professor, School of Public Affairs at the University of Colorado Denver  
Studies, evaluates, and documents MBLT in Colorado

Ben Kirshner, Associate Professor, School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder  
Studies, evaluates, and documents MBLT in Colorado

Janet Lopez, Senior Program Officer, Rose Community Foundation  
Advances teachers’, parents’, and communities’ understanding of and engagement with MBLT opportunities

Alex Magaña, Executive Principal, Grant Beacon Middle School and Kepner Beacon Middle School  
Principal of two Denver Public Schools sites that are implementing MBLT initiatives

Samantha Olson, Vice President of Strategic Learning; Tara Jahn, Senior Manager of Initiatives and Next Generation Learning; and Paul Beck, Manager of Initiatives and Next Generation Learning; all with the Colorado Education Initiative  
The Colorado Education Initiative engages in capacity building for the implementation of MBLT initiatives in Denver Public Schools and surrounding metropolitan districts

Wendy Loloff Piersee, Chief Executive Officer, Generation Schools Network  
The Generation Schools Network uses MBLT activities to provide students access to a great education, regardless of their circumstances

Background on MBLT in Denver

In Colorado and Denver, education leaders focus on giving all students access to more and better learning activities. At the state level, Colorado’s vision for expanded learning time focuses on better time and includes providing students with “access to a wide range of high-quality educational opportunities, to reflect their interests, needs, and talents- regardless of where they live or the school they attend” (Hazel, Soberay, & Voroselo, 2013). At the district level, schools that are implementing
expanded learning opportunities (ELO) need to include all students in those activities (Denver Public Schools (DPS), 2012, p. 1).

Todd Ely said that the most important impact of MBLT in Denver has been to reorganize the school day so that all students can benefit from the expanded time, improved instruction, and enrichment activities:

By pulling those activities to within the day, everybody gets exposure. Before, even if programs were after school and even if they were free or really low cost, there's some selection process taking place right there, where the kids who may need that exposure the most are the ones that aren't actually participating.

Other interviewees said that in addition to increasing time for academic learning, MBLT activities provide schools with an opportunity to level the playing field in other areas of the educational experience. However, these benefits are only available if MBLT programs are successfully implemented and sustainable. This study looked at successfully implemented MBLT programs and identified commonalities between those successes. In brief, successful MBLT programs in Denver showed the following characteristics:

- **A focus on improving student achievement.** All of the successful programs discussed by interviewees had the goal of improving achievement, but the means for reaching that goal differed by location.
- **Focused and consistent leadership.** Successful MBLT programs had continuous support from those people who adopted the policies and from stakeholders who joined the district or school after MBLT was implemented.
- **Efforts to address and mitigate challenges.** In successful MBLT programs, district and school leaders have overcome challenges, including inconsistent funding and parent/student resistance.
- **Localized initiative.** Colorado’s Innovation Act affords greater flexibility to school leaders for making scheduling changes in their schools. The most successful programs in Denver were led by the school administration who knew how to tap into district supports and utilize other resources (such as community organizations and foundation grants) to carry out their MBLT programs.

**Motivations for Adopting MBLT**

The need to improve students’ academic achievement was the most commonly mentioned reason for adopting MBLT. Other motivations included a desire to increase time for teacher collaboration and professional development and an awareness of MBLT programs in other schools and communities.

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1 Denver Public Schools used the term expanded learning opportunities instead of more and better learning time. This case study will use ELO and MBLT interchangeably.

2 Because MBLT activities can vary greatly in their activities and intent, and their successes (or failures) are judged by different measures, CEP did not define "successful" MBLT programs, activities, or schools. Instead, survey respondents and interviewees responded to question using personal definitions of MBLT success.
**Academic needs**

Interviewees gave various reasons, and often more than one reason, for why their district, school, or organization decided to adopt or support MBLT efforts. The most commonly cited reasons for the adoption of MBLT activities in the Denver Public Schools (DPS) were providing more equitable academic opportunities for less affluent students and closing achievement gaps. When talking about the need for equitable education opportunities, Tara Jahn from the Colorado Education Initiative discussed Denver’s “moral imperative” to help disadvantaged youth “become successful in the world.” Later, Jahn said that some schools were motivated to adopt MBLT to “close the opportunity gap” and these schools drew on the services and perspectives that community organizations offered. The students in one school, she said, “didn’t have access to things that kids who weren’t in poverty had access to. [The school] valued the services and the perspective that the other youth-serving organization could provide.”

A related motivation was to improve achievement overall. Janet Lopez, a senior program officer of Rose Community Foundation, explained that “[we were] pretty focused on the idea of the practices and the tools and strategies used with extension of day or year that resulted in increased academic achievement for students.”

Some Denver schools, including Johnson Elementary and West Generation Academy, adopted MBLT to address their persistently low performance on state assessments (South-West Teachers Union Reform Network (SW TURN), 2013). At Grant Beacon Middle School, the executive principal, Alex Magaña, said that he and his staff redesigned the school day because their students were not showing measurable growth in achievement.

**More time for teachers**

Another motivation for adopting MBLT was a belief that increasing time for teacher collaboration, planning, and professional development could lead to better instruction and student outcomes. Recognizing that teachers are ultimately responsible for the quality of instructional time in their classrooms, DPS has made increased time for teacher collaboration and planning a central tenet of its MBLT efforts (DPS, 2012). In its application for a MBLT program, Johnson Elementary cited teacher time as one of the most compelling reasons for their interest in ELO: “Teachers need more intentional, collaborative planning time to design, construct, evaluate and refine their practices so they can deliver world-class instruction all day, every day” (Johnson Elementary, n.d.). Interviewees associated with Grant Beacon Middle School and West Generation Academy stressed the importance of giving teachers time for planning and collaboration. Wendy Loloff Piersee of Generation Schools, stressed the benefit of providing teachers with a significant amount of time annually for teacher professional development and daily collaboration: “At West Generation Academy when the model was being fully implemented, teacher turnover was half the rate of the rest of DPS.”

**MBLT in other schools**

Still another factor that motivated the adoption of MBLT activities in Denver was an awareness of the effectiveness of MBLT in other schools and communities. Stakeholders in Denver, looking for examples of evidence-based practices that reduced achievement gaps, took interest in the work being done by the National Center for Time and Learning. Lopez spoke about this group’s influence:

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3 Except where otherwise noted, the quotations come from CEP’s interviews with the person cited in the text.
We looked at early learnings that we saw from the National Center on Time and Learning, and the work that they’ve done in the Boston schools and the Boston school district, and the achievement gains they saw as a result of adding more time . . . I think for us, that was an early area of interest.

In addition, several charter schools in the Denver area were already using expanded learning time models, and other public schools wanted to remain competitive with charters, said Todd Ely, an assistant professor at the University of Colorado (CU) Denver, who has studied expanded learning time in Denver. “I found examples of anecdotes and folks saying, ‘Well, the charter schools are doing [MBLT], and for us to remain competitive for students within our neighborhoods [we have to expand learning time],’” said Ely. Similarly, Magaña commented about the competition for student enrollment and the success of charters: “There was a charter opening nearby. The competition was high. I knew my enrollment was down; I knew if I lost another ten percent of my kids to a charter school that we’re going to get shut down.”

A final motivation mentioned by interviewees was the existence of district and state policies that encouraged or made it easier to implement MBLT, as discussed below.

**State and District Policies for MBLT**

At the state level, Colorado’s Innovation Schools program, which gives designated schools more flexibility over staffing, time, and budget matters, has been helpful for MBLT implementation.

At the district level, DPS helped to encourage MBLT through a pilot program, but the district’s commitment to MBLT was hampered by shifts in management of this program and attention to other priorities, according to some interviewees.

**State policies**

The state of Colorado has policies in place that encourage MBLT activities. Examples include the Summer School Grant Program created in 2002 and the Before- and After-School Dropout Prevention Program adopted in 2009 (Colorado Department of Education (CDE), 2011). The most significant program for MBLT, in the view of multiple interviewees, is the Innovation Schools Act of 2008.

The Innovation Schools Act gives school leaders greater autonomy over curriculum, personnel decisions, and the allotment of time:

> While the ultimate responsibility for controlling the instruction in public schools continues to lie with the school district board of education of each public school, each school district board of education is strongly encouraged to delegate to each public school a high degree of autonomy in implementing curriculum, making personnel decisions, organizing the school day, determining the most effective use of resources, and generally organizing the delivery of high-quality education services, thereby empowering each public school to tailor its services most effectively and efficiently to meet the needs of the population of students it serves. (Innovation Schools Act of 2008, Title 22, Article 32.5, 102(e))
Under the Act, any proposed school-based changes must be approved by a majority of the school’s administration and teaching staff. Furthermore, parents, students, and local community representatives must sign a statement of support (§104(3)(f) and (g)). After garnering support for Innovation-based changes from local stakeholders, schools seeking Innovation status submit to the district school board a waiver from district-level policies, such as the districts’ school calendar or collective bargaining agreement. Schools seeking flexibility from state policies must submit a waiver to the Colorado Department of Education that is separate from their submission to the district.

A study of schools in the Denver metro area that were expanding learning opportunities found that Innovation status has become an important policy tool for school leaders who want to make changes but may have previously been constrained by district regulations or collective bargaining agreements (Hazel et al., 2013). Magaña made a similar point when he explained that Innovation status gave him the “flexibility in people, time, and money” he needed to figure out how to improve student performance at Grant Beacon. Ely said that “I can’t think of any examples where there wasn’t a time element within the [Innovation] plan . . . Sometimes it wasn’t substantial, but it was always addressed, and I do believe that the process of having to come up with a plan to improve your school was likely the impetus for a lot of the decision to add time.”

Colorado Department of Education’s 2016 Innovation Report (Rosensweet, 2016) included a discussion of the most commonly requested waivers by Innovation schools. The three most commonly requested waivers all related to increased flexibility with the structure of time in the school: 1) adopt district calendar, 2) determine teacher-pupil contact hours, and 3) local board duties concerning school calendar. In total, 158 waivers related to time were requested throughout the state. Of those waiver requests, over 80% were approved by local school boards.

In Denver, 39 of the 40 schools with waivers have requested all three time waiver options (Rosensweet, 2016). This means that these schools have the flexibility to establish their own school calendar that does not align to the district’s, establish teacher-pupil contact hours that differ from the district’s requirement, and are not beholden to changes made to the school calendar by the local board of education.

For MBLT schools with shared campuses who had time waivers approved, “the challenge wasn’t necessarily about getting the waiver approved, but more around how to fulfill the plan for MBLT amidst shared staff, bus schedules, and sports teams” according to Lollof Piersee.

When talking about the origins of MBLT in Colorado, Samantha Olson said that there are state policies that give schools flexibility for implementing MBLT activities; however, it is still up to local actors to mobilize and actively pursue MBLT opportunities. In the end, local actors and community organizations are probably bigger drivers of MBLT activities than the state. “There was certainly more of that state-level organizing and awareness building and interest generating, while at the same time the communities that we’re talking about had robust, more on-the-ground grassroots efforts overall,” Olson commented.

**District policies**

In 2012, DPS began a pilot program for expanded learning opportunities. According to a guidance document published by DPS, the purpose of ELO was “to support schools in providing a well-rounded education for all students that maximizes time in the school day and year for core instruction,
intervention and acceleration and enrichment opportunities” (DPS, 2012, p. 1). The guidance document established four parameters for schools applying to the ELO pilot program and the ELO renewal process:

1. Maximize time that currently exists in the school day
2. Use time more effectively for core instruction, intervention/acceleration, and enrichment
3. Expand time beyond the current school day or year
4. Ensure time for teachers to collaborate in order to support and develop their professional practice so the above parameters can be implemented with consistency. (pp. 1-2)

In 2012, schools submitted proposals to the district, and seven pilot schools were awarded funding from DPS and the Colorado Legacy Foundation (now the Colorado Education Initiative) to implement their ELO plan. This first cohort of pilot schools has continued to receive funding from DPS for ELO at gradually decreasing levels (DPS, 2014).

In subsequent years, an additional group of eight Denver schools implemented expanded learning time through the TIME Collaborative, an initiative sponsored by the National Center on Time and Learning in five states, including Colorado. These eight schools did not receive funding for ELO from DPS but they—along with three more Denver schools—did receive private foundation money to design expanded learning time plans.

In recent years, responsibility for Denver’s ELO activities has moved from one office to another and across different managers. As of 2016, the schools implementing expanded learning time, whether begun through the DPS pilot or the Time Collaborative, have been merged into one ELO cohort. In the 2016-17 school year, there were 11 schools that were still considered part of the ELO cohort (personal communication, October 13, 2016).

This internal shifting of responsibilities across offices and managers in the district central office may have contributed to the perceptions voiced by some interviewees that DPS was not fully invested in MBLT. A few interviewees noted that the district seemed more focused on other policies, such as charter schools or Innovation schools, that could be used to implement MBLT but did not have MBLT as the main priority. The limited district role was seen by interviewees as problematic for strong, sustainable MBLT initiatives that create systemic change. As Olson put it, “A barrier to sustainability or to implementation, if we’re thinking from a systems and sustainability point of view, is that this type of work can’t just be a school-by-school based initiative.”

**Conditions That Allow for MBLT Success**

Interviewees considered strong leadership to be critical for implementing and sustaining a successful MBLT initiative. Other conditions identified by case study participants included stakeholder support for MBLT activities from parents, teachers, and the community; a plan for sustaining MBLT activities; and reliable funding dedicated to planning, implementing, and sustaining the activities.

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4 The seven original pilot schools were: Cole Arts and Science Academy, Grant Beacon Middle School, Johnson Elementary, Lake International Baccalaureate Middle School, Manual High School, Merrill Middle School, and North High School (Poppen, 2012).
Leadership

All of the Denver interviewees cited the need for strong leaders who have a plan for both implementation and sustainability. Interviewees said school leaders need to have a clear sense of purpose and strategy for MBLT that considers the needs of their community. They also need to be able to coordinate and lead collaborative relationships and to respect student and teacher time. A 2013 report of MBLT in the Denver metro area by SW TURN concluded, “In every school, the importance of strong and collaborative leadership has played a significant role in being able to explore and implement ELO within schools” (p. 16). The report went on to say “leadership and collaboration is essential to rethink staff roles and programmatic structure to achieve results for students” (p. 16). CEP’s interviews suggest that education leaders from schools and community organizations have been instrumental in planning, implementing, and sustaining MBLT activities in DPS.

In many cases throughout the Denver metro area, leadership teams\(^5\) were responsible for planning and implementing MBLT activities. A report for the Colorado Legacy Foundation and the Colorado Department of Education stressed the importance of these teams for MBLT success: “Leadership teams are an essential way of ensuring that all voices are heard within a school, especially when implementing new practices. They also serve as a way to allow faculty to focus on one area and work with others to enhance expertise. These team managers are seen as the go-to people within the school when other teachers have questions or concerns” (Hazel et al., 2013, p. 25).

While leadership teams were essential to implementing and sustaining MBLT activities in many Denver schools, principals are ultimately responsible for maintaining their school’s culture and ensuring that MBLT activities do not overwhelm students or teachers. Ely pointed out the challenge principals face when balancing the addition of high-quality time with support for teachers:

> And talking to these principals, they’re doing some really basic things to reduce the workloads on teachers, even in the environment of adding time to the day, and even to the year. You know, being creative, working within union contracts, but still respecting their teachers and taking care of them.

Support from teachers, parents, and community

A study of ELO in Colorado by SW TURN (2013) emphasized that teachers must play a role in creating expanded learning opportunities and that schools must be responsive to staff, students, communities, and the existing system structure (p. 19). Ely highlighted how the planning requirements for Innovation schools can help secure teacher support:

> [The] Innovation plan has to be voted on and approved by your teachers, and so to some degree, if you’re doing expanded time at an Innovation school, the teachers have already bought in, at least formally, by supporting the plan.

Since Grant Beacon Middle School was awarded Innovation status, Magaña used the Innovation plan to make sure all his teachers and staff members were on-board with the school’s MBLT plan: “I rolled it

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\(^5\) According to Hazel et al. (2013) leadership teams in Denver may include teachers, parents, and, at the high school level, students. Leadership team composition and purpose varies by school.
[the MBLT funding proposal] into my Innovation plan. This was not an opt-in/opt-out. It had to be all or none.”

Study participants talked about how stakeholder support continued throughout implementation of a school’s MBLT initiative. Ben Kirshner, an associate professor at CU Boulder who studied how three organizations in Denver shaped more and better learning time in the district’s schools, discussed a survey of parents administered by one of the community organizations, Padres & Jóvenes Unidos. Of the survey results, he said “it suggested that parents [of students] attending schools with expanded learning time that were using these practices [integrated community partnerships and efforts to coordinate with community residents] generally reported greater satisfaction and enthusiasm for the school and felt better about the quality of the schools.”

Recognizing this, Magaña spent about 18 months working with a group of parents and community members and teachers to incorporate their voices into the planning process. Magaña said that he would “spend time at the farmers’ market and ask parents, ‘What are they looking for?’ Then I would talk to the teachers and ask, ‘What are we going to become?’”

In some Denver schools, parents and community organizations were particularly influential in the MBLT planning, adoption, and implementation process. Lopez talked about how families and school leaders collaborated to create a MBLT plan that worked for everyone at Grant Beacon Middle School. In this case, she said, there was community support from the start because community members were part of the process. Kirshner elaborated on the importance of finding common goals between parent groups, community organizations, and others involved in MBLT plans:

With Together Colorado and Padres [& Jóvenes] Unidos, there was a synergy between the core elements of more and better learning time, as proposed by Ford, and some of the platforms they were already advocating for . . . And internally, with the teacher organization SW TURN, I think there was a synergy between their interest in teacher professionalism and opportunities for teacher collaboration and planning.

Most interviewees agreed, however, that the support of the school district is a necessary element in the efforts of parents and community organizations to effect systemic change. As Kirshner noted, “Community organizations, I don’t think they had the formal authority to actually coordinate across schools. They didn’t have that additional power, but they were certainly playing a leadership role in raising specific issues.”

**A plan for sustaining MBLT activities**

In their original applications for the DPS pilot program, ELO schools had to have a sustainability plan that included four strategies: technology and digital content, rethinking staff roles, partners and stakeholders, and staggering staff schedules (DPS, 2014, 11-12). As the ELO report explains, “This [sustainability criteria] is part of an effort to ensure that each school’s ELO plan would outlive and withstand economic downturn, leadership turnover and other transitions and hardships” (DPS, 2014, p. 10).

Beyond funding, sustaining MBLT activities requires schools to continually revisit their model to make sure they are meeting the needs of their students and community. Each year, the school community evolves, as students graduate to the next level, new students enter, and teachers and administrators...
move in or out of the school. Over the course of just a few years, these changes may result in a different community than the one that planned and implemented the MBLT program. Because of this turnover, said Jahn, schools need to be lithe and make sure MBLT activities serve their current and incoming students:

The families and students who were part of creating this plan, they felt ownership of the plan. They knew where it came from. They were happy it was part of their school day. But as those students moved on into other grades and other schools, they had an issue where new families didn’t have that level of ownership over their school day and year. So, that realization, that sustainability, is also continuing to personalize for the students they have in the building, and be flexible to know and read what the crowd needs.

Olson added that when her organization, the Colorado Education Initiative, helped districts and schools plan MBLT activities, they focused on producing a plan that was sustainable and did not rely on extra funding:

A part of Colorado’s model...was to really try to focus on no- or low-cost options, which was to not be naïve to the fact that an expanded day costs more, but to get leaders in buildings and districts to think more strategically about the tradeoffs and priorities related to their school and district vision. When we would say no- or low-cost, it’s not that there was literally no- or low-cost, but it was, how did they think differently about resource allocation.

This sustainability planning will benefit schools as ELO funds provided by DPS dwindle. Between school years 2012-13 and 2013-14, the district allocation decreased for all of the original eight ELO schools. For example, Grant Beacon’s budget dropped from $180,423 to $164,303. Interviewees noted that some DPS schools have had to abandon their MBLT activities when their funding dried up. Other schools that have successfully sustained their MBLT activities have found funds from other sources, as discussed next.

Reliable funding

Funding for MBLT activities in Denver has come from many sources, including federal, state, and district funds; foundation grants; and funds from community partnerships.

The only federal source of funds for MBLT cited by Denver interviewees was the 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) grant program. Consistent with Colorado’s approved waiver of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act provisions, the state opted to use 21st CCLC funds, normally reserved for activities during non-school hours, to expand learning time during the school day. Grant Beacon, one of the DPS schools with a 21st CCLC grant, used the funds to bring on a new staff member who was responsible for organizing ELO at the school and securing funds to sustain ELO well into the future.

As already noted, DPS provided support to schools for ELO pilot programs. Schools that were part of the ELO cohort received seed funds to plan and implement their design. After that, funding continued but with some fluctuation. (See table 1 for funding information through 2014-15.) One district official familiar with DPS’s budget, said that funding is expected to continue, but budget constraints could impact the amounts that individual schools receive
The district’s Office of School Reform and Innovation also provided some financial support to ELO schools by paying for transportation costs (Denver Public Schools, 2014). In the 2016-17 school year, 11 schools received district funds for their ELO activities.

Table 1. DPS district allocations for ELO schools

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Source: Denver Public Schools, 2014 p. 17.

Foundation support has also been important in promoting and implementing MBLT initiatives in Denver, according to interviewees. The Ford Foundation, Rose Community Foundation, the Colorado Education Initiative, the Gates Foundation, and the Donnell-Kay Foundation were specifically mentioned by study participants. West Generation Academy had support from a handful of foundations and Lollorf Piersoe talked about the time and effort they placed on fund-raising, “We have probably an average of a proposal going in a day, so we’re always working on funding.”

As noted above, Grant Beacon has brought on a full-time ELO coordinator who works on fundraising, among other MBLT related activities. This type of outreach to foundations is advised by SW TURN (2013) which explains that a number of foundations “have supported technology purchases and other resources” (p. 14). The SW TURN report also suggests that a school without funding for MBLT activities might work with a community organization (such as the YMCA) to provide students with extended learning programs, and more generally proposes that schools work with nonprofit organizations to develop relationships with foundations that might help to fund MBLT activities.

Indicators of Success

The successful outcome most often referenced by interviewees was improved student achievement, but they also talked about the following other indicators of success:

- The influence of MBLT activities on other schools within Denver and across the country
- The impact of enrichment activities on students
- Increased teacher collaboration

Improved student achievement

Interviewees attributed many positive changes to MBLT activities, including improved student academic outcomes, more time for teacher collaboration, improved school climate, and increased enrichment opportunities for students. However, some interviewees cautioned that making direct casual links between MBLT and successful outcomes is difficult because there are often multiple reforms taking place simultaneously. Lopez addressed this issue:

> We can point to a number of schools that are seeing some positive academic achievement results, and MBLT is a component of their school. But, I think the harder part is, is MBLT on its own the reason that we’re seeing such positive impacts in the school? And I would say no, it’s an element. There is no silver bullet. It’s one piece of the puzzle of really high-functioning schools serving kids in poverty.

The aforementioned study by Padres & Jóvenes Unidos (2015) compared results on the state TCAP (Transitional Colorado Assessment Program)\(^7\) from 9 expanded learning time (ELT)\(^8\) schools in Southwest Denver with results from 27 non-ELT schools in the same area. Although no statistically significant differences in student performance were found, the report highlighted growth trends in 5\(^{th}\) grade math and reading scores for students in ELT schools. Between 2012 and 2014, the percentage of students in ELT schools who scored proficient or advanced on the TCAP increased by 15 percentage points in reading and 14 percentage points in math (compared with 3 percentage points in reading and no growth in math for students in non-ELT schools) (Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, 2015, p. 11). In ELT schools and in grades 5 and 8, Latino students, English language learners, and students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch outscored their counterparts in non-ELT schools for the 2014 TCAP administration (see table 2).

While there are no studies in Denver that show statistically significant academic gains for students in ELT compared to their counterparts in schools using a traditional school day, week, or year, there are some interesting developments that indicate MBLT could be having a positive impact for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, after observing the impact of MBLT at Grant Beacon Middle School, DPS district leaders worked with Magaña to replicate the school’s expanded learning time model in a nearby underperforming school, Kepner Beacon, starting in the 2016-17 school year.

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\(^7\) The TCAP is the state’s math, reading, writing, and science assessment for grades 3-10 (science is only administered in grades 5, 8, and 10).

\(^8\) Padres & Jóvenes Unidos (2015) refer to MBLT or ELO as ELT.
Table 2. Percent of 5th and 8th grade students scoring proficient and advanced in TCAP, 2014

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<th>Latino students</th>
<th>Students eligible for free and reduced-price lunches</th>
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<td>ELT  Non-ELT</td>
<td>ELT  Non-ELT</td>
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<td>5th Grade</td>
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<td>48</td>
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<tr>
<td>8th Grade</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>TCAP Math</td>
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Influence of MBLT on other schools

More and better learning time has spread across the country. It now exists in district policies in Denver, Colorado; Rochester, New York; and Los Angeles, California, among other districts and schools across the nation. And those who are successfully using MBLT-related activities have had the opportunity to share their stories with others who go on to adopt MBLT for their own schools. For example, Magaña said he was inspired to bring MBLT to Grant Beacon after reading an article about the expanded learning activities at Clarence Edwards Middle School in Boston; he said he kept an article about the Boston school on his desk as he worked on redesigning the school day.

López said that Rose Community Foundation provided a Seeing is Believing tour with schools from across Colorado. The tour was designed to showcase successful MBLT programs in district-run, public innovation, and public charter schools that served similar populations of students. As Lopez put it, “Grant Beacon, a public innovation school, looked like their schools. I think when you go to Grant Beacon and you’re a teacher that’s in a district-run public school, you can go to that school and see yourself as a teacher in that school.” Then teachers would be able to see how MBLT activities would play out in their schools, López explained.

Locally, MBLT-related activities are also spreading in and around Denver. Paul Beck of the Colorado Education Initiative said that discussions about the use of school time can be valuable even for schools that have not expanded the day, week, or year. Schools that are redesigning instruction around various reform models, such as competency-based learning, “inevitably start thinking about time differently,” he said. It is helpful for schools engaged in redesign to be able to draw from the experience of “schools that have been successfully evolving their schedules, expanding their time, bringing in community partners, and . . . [providing] opportunities for educators to collaborate differently,” Beck added.

Impact of enrichment activities

Enrichment opportunities are an essential component of MBLT. Denver interviewees stressed the importance of including activities that went beyond core subject areas. Although no studies of the impact of enrichment offerings have been done in Denver, many participants connected enrichment activities with equity of opportunity. For example, Ely mentioned that using expanded time to include enrichment was “undoubtedly a positive” because it gave many students in MBLT schools access to activities that may not have been available before; even if
these opportunities are not closely aligned with academic objectives, he said, they offer students valuable learning experiences. Jahn mentioned the importance of providing students with more than just a safe place after traditional school hours, by offering them “an integrated and engaging school experience.”

As an example of the lasting impact of extra time for enrichment activities, Magaña told the story of “a really tough girl” from a challenging neighborhood and a single-parent family whose success in dance, an enrichment activity, allowed her to join the high school’s junior dance team as a freshman. Ultimately, the confidence the student gained from dance translated into academic confidence, he said.

Teacher collaboration

For Beck, time for teachers and teacher collaboration was a natural development of MBLT, “As people have more quality time that they’re spending with students, [they realize] the more time they need. Also, the more depth of planning and implementation educators are having to do, the more time they’re needing to collaborate.”

At Grant Beacon Middle School, “some of the top successes have been the teachers collaborating and working together and building that teacher leadership component,” said Magaña. Teacher leaders plan in advance how to best use the time available for teachers to work in teams, he explained. “We use our time. Every minute is used to the fullest extent.”

At West Generation Academy, some teachers have reported in testimonials that they really enjoy the daily collaborative planning time offered under the Generation Schools model, Loloff Piersee said. Even though West Generation Academy9 will be returning to a more traditional school schedule in the 2016-17 school year, teachers will still have an hour and a half of time set aside for collaboration activities, explained Loloff Piersee. “Once [the school leaders] figured out that teachers could have 90 minutes of collaborative planning time a day...Even though they’ve gone back to a much more traditional schedule, no one’s willing to give that up after they’ve experienced it.”

Challenges for MBLT Implementation

The major challenges faced by Denver schools that have implemented MBLT include inadequate or inconsistent funding, resistance from parents and teachers, transportation complexities, a shifting pool of stakeholders, and student and teacher fatigue. Some schools have successfully resolved these challenges.

Funding challenges

Challenges associated with funding usually begin with the planning and implementation process and continue as schools try to sustain MBLT activities. According to a 2013 report by SW TURN about expanded learning opportunities in DPS, funding is “one of the largest constraints on

9 West Generation School became West Early College when these changes took place. See the Policy Churn section for a more detailed discussion.
schools . . . as they explore potential ELOs” (p. 18). Olson noted that Colorado has “a really restricted funding climate” compared with other states in the TIME Collaborative, and explained that “there wasn’t a big state mandate to give extra per pupil funding for this type of work” as in New York, Connecticut, or Massachusetts.

Multiple interviewees referred to the uncertainty of various funding sources for MBLT. Although Colorado’s Innovation Schools program supports MBLT activities by giving schools autonomy over school schedules and personnel decisions, as explained above, there is no funding associated with the program. And although expanded learning time was an approved strategy for schools with federal School Improvement Grants (SIGs), this program recently ended. Ely mentioned a Denver-Metro-area school that had to abandon its MBLT initiative after its federal SIG funding ran out.

At the district level, schools are continually trying to keep their innovative programs going with reduced support from DPS. Loloff Piersee said West Generation Academy initially received some supplemental district funds to support the first two years of implementing their new school model. The Generation Schools Network augmented DPS funding through its own foundation support. However, their contract stipulated that after two years the school was supposed to operate under the same per pupil allotment as other schools in the district. Loloff Piersee explained when the supplemental district funding left, the innovation was difficult to maintain.

Loloff Piersee noted that another contractor, the College Board, who was working under a similar contract with DPS on the same shared campus only completed the first two years of their agreement because they were not able to maintain their program with reduced financial support from the district and a slowly growing enrollment.

DPS has provided some direct funding for ELO through the pilot schools as described above, but these funds have diminished over time. Lopez suggested that although DPS leaders “do believe in MBLT practices,” the public charter models have significant appeal because they often have expanded school days but do not cost the district additional money. “I think [district leaders] have struggled to figure it out,” she said. “They know that the strategy [MBLT] works, but they’re struggling to put additional financial resources to pay for the extra time for the teachers—at least on a larger scale.”

**Parent and teacher resistance**

While the level of support for MBLT activities in Denver has far exceeded the level of resistance, according to interviewees, some parents and teachers did voice concerns over how longer school days, weeks, and years would impact their schedules.

For example, interviewees mentioned parents who worked and had multiple children, only some of whom attended expanded time schools. For this group, much of their resistance lay with schedule changes that can complicate family logistics, said Ely. “The district has a districtwide service day, the kids are off, but the expanded time schools don’t have it off. Then

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10 The federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program, which was discontinued by the Every Student Succeeds Act, provided grants to raise achievement in the lowest-performing schools in each state. Two of the four reform models that could be supported with SIGs required schools to implement strategies to increase learning time.
the parent is stuck with, ‘Do I just keep both of them home, since I have to arrange care for one of them?’” He also mentioned a school in Denver that had tried to significantly expand time but then went forward with only limited changes to the traditional school day because of parent resistance.

Another source of friction came from primarily affluent parents who had already paid for after-school activities that met their child’s interests. Under an expanded-day schedule, children would gain time in school but lose out on the programs paid for by parents. Jahn said this created an “equity conflict” between parents, based on socioeconomic status. She gave the example of the principal of a school that was considering implementing MBLT; this principal had concerns that if the school day was expanded for all students, some parents of gifted and talented children would leave the school because they had the attitude that “it’s fine if you can have those extra services for those kids, but my kid doesn’t need it.”

Some teachers also resisted MBLT strategies. Lopez attributed much of this teacher resistance to concerns that teachers would have to work more hours without being compensated for that additional time. To address teacher concerns, at least one Denver school used staggered teaching schedules to provide more time for students without increasing teacher time. Even when new school schedules expanded time without requiring teachers to work longer hours it was sometime difficult for teachers to reimage their work day, Lopez explained:

   Every single teacher will tell you that the biggest problem is that they need more time. But then, when it was actually time to move into implementation [of MBLT activities in their schools], they had a really hard time thinking about school any differently than they’d ever thought about it.

Lopez said that using community partners to provide extended learning time activities instead of compensating teachers for more of their time was also problematic. Teachers may have resisted working with community partners because teachers alone, not community partners, are held accountable for student performance. Lopez said that teachers “would have preferred to just have the authority to have their kids the whole time and be paid for that additional time.”

**Transportation complexities**

Transportation for MBLT activities also surfaced as an issue for some Denver families. The problem was that students in some schools with extended days did not have access to after-school transportation. Kirshner described transportation access as an equity issue because it mostly impacted low-income families. “At some of these schools, they might have extended opportunities after school, but if there’s not a school bus that will stay for the extended time, the kids can’t take advantage of them,” he said.

To address this challenge, Denver instituted a shuttle system, the Success Express in Near and Far Northeastern sections of the district. The system, which has been active for the past three years, runs from 6:30 to 9:30 a.m. and again from 2:30 to 6:30 p.m. at 15 minute intervals. Ely and Kirshner, the two interviewees who discussed the Success Express, considered it a promising program to provide access to MBLT activities to students with the greatest needs.

Transportation complexities in Denver are not the result of unwillingness in the district office but it is the inevitable result of trying to organize a suitable schedule for over 85,000 students, said Loloff.
Piersee. She said that everyone in Denver from policymakers to teachers and parents are in favor of giving students more learning opportunities through innovative practices but the responsibility for orchestrating some of the initiatives falls on midlevel district employees. Loloff Piersee uses transportation as an example of the inevitable bureaucracy found in large school districts:

At the superintendent and school board level, they look at an innovation plan and think, “Wow. If we can do this for kids, this is awesome.” But then it gets down to the next level, that middle level of people who are trying to make the buses run, and trying to make the sports schedules work, and trying to organize teacher PD, and trying to get technology for the district, and all these things Innovation schools have an option to do on their own or do differently. So, what it does, honestly, for that person at the middle level is it creates a huge challenge for them because they had the bus schedule figured out. That’s where it breaks down when options like the Success Express aren’t easily implemented.

**Policy churn**

As discussed in the section on conditions that allow for MBLT success, schools must continuously engage with new students, parents, and teachers who are joining the school but were not part of the MBLT planning stage. That discussion focused on school-level actors who move in and out of a MBLT or innovation school. However, stakeholders also shift at the district level. School board members may change after an election cycle and superintendents may move to other districts—when these education leaders leave a system, their replacement may bring different priorities.

As an example, in Denver, a change in one district-level leader changed the focus for West Generation Academy. Despite initial signs of a successful program, district-level priorities meant that the Generation Schools Network would not renew their contract with DPS. More specifically, in its first few years of operating, West Generation Academy had successfully used MBLT activities to improve student achievement—mainly focusing on increasing students’ reading skills. After realizing that incoming 6th graders at West Generation Academy were reading at early elementary school levels, the school’s leadership focused on engaging students with reading. Loloff Piersee explained that helping students to become lifelong readers meant changing the school’s culture. “The kids, probably because it was such a struggle, they just eschewed books. ‘We don’t read here.’ So we said, ‘How can we change it a culture of literacy where kids are really excited about reading?’” The school brought in an Accelerated Reader program and, with foundation support, purchased $30,000 worth of “high-interest” books in English and Spanish chosen by the students. The school dedicated 30 minutes of the 90-minute English language arts block to the reading program.

The cultural shift at West Generation Academy led to students reading 7,950 books in the 2013-14 school year and improved reading scores on a state approved interim assessment. Moreover, students had improved attendance and student engagement, and in 2013 the school was recognized by the district as a high growth school based on 9th grade students’ reading and writing scores on the state TCAP (Loloff Piersee, 2014). Additionally, once the school with the highest college remediation rate in Colorado, by 2015 86% of West Generation Academy students had earned college credit through dual enrollment.

However, district administrators who supported the Generation Schools Model left the district for new positions elsewhere in the country. Those officials were replaced by new people and new district
priorities. Under these new priorities, Loloff Piersee said that West Generation Academy was asked to make their school college preparatory and to change the school’s name to reflect its focus on preparing students for college. “A major emphasis on concurrent college enrollment was already well underway, but the leadership wanted a name and affiliation that they felt better reflected what was already happening.” Generation Schools Network and DPS were not able to find common ground with the new district priority and did not renew their contract. Today, West Generation Academy is gone and in its place is West Early College.

Student and teacher fatigue

Previous research on MBLT conducted by the Center on Education Policy found that teacher fatigue and student fatigue—especially in lower grades—was a practical concern for principals and district leaders implementing expanded learning time activities (CEP, 2015). Ely mentioned a Denver school that abandoned a “pretty aggressive” MBLT program because of a lack of results and the added fatigue for teachers and students. In addition, a report prepared for the Colorado Legacy Foundation and the Colorado Department of Education (Hazel et al., 2013) noted that “one of the major issues with adding additional time is the demands that it places on teachers and staff” (p. 20). To address these concerns, the report explained, schools have worked to increase student time within teachers’ contracts and have tried various strategies, including staggered teacher schedules, mid-year teacher breaks, rotating teacher teams, and working with community partners to provide students with enrichment opportunities. CEP’s 2015 report corroborates Hazel et al.’s findings.

The Future of MBLT in Denver

Local control of education policy is valued strongly in Colorado. The Innovation Schools Act exemplifies this philosophy by placing a great amount of autonomy with school leaders. As such, the future of MBLT in DPS lies with the school-level leadership. While the district has invested in ELO pilot schools and continues to provide the 11 remaining pilot schools with funds for their programs, interviewees said that the district’s focus was on other reforms. For example, Kirshner said that certain bureaucratic challenges, such as transportation “undermined” MBLT; he did not observe that “the specific language of MBLT got taken up in any meaningful way, and I feel unclear about where the ELT conversation is going from here.” Denver may have taken on new reform efforts, like charter schools or early college access, that have the potential for revamping learning time, but they do not prioritize MBLT in the way the ELO pilot schools did.

As for the ELO pilot schools, the program has not expanded beyond the original cohorts, and there is no indication that DPS is going to revive the program or add new schools. Funding for the pilot schools has declined in the past few years, and ELO schools are not able to count on district funds for their program. Magaña commented on this uncertainty: “The district [is] funding us that additional money every year. And I hope it continues. I’m always nervous and wary about it…”

Even without the district’s support, interviewees are still positive about the future of MBLT in Denver. Ely says that MBLT activities and ideas will continue take to hold in individual schools throughout the district, “I think it is going to be a slow process of spreading from school to school.” Beck has seen the use of positive MBLT examples influence other education leaders’ decisions about school reform—even if those reforms did not start out focusing on time.
Loloff Piersee said she has seen this shift in how educators talk about teaching and learning with a bend toward MBLT initiatives because they have seen the possibilities.

Magaña said that his two middle schools, Grant Beacon and Kepner Beacon, will continue to implement MBLT even if they lose the district funding for ELO pilot schools:

For me, if it all falls apart and they [DPS] say, “Alex, you’re not getting any more money,” then I’m going to continue the programming and just reduce the academic time and just intensify the academic time and still offer our kids enrichments...I’ll take 5 minutes over 7 periods and I’ll create an enrichment class because that’s how powerful I’ve seen some of the enrichment classes are. It’d be worth it.

Moreover, Ely said that the entire community has not embraced more time. Some schools and community providers have brought in MBLT because they wanted to do so, but until more of the DPS education community supports MBLT, it will remain a series of isolated initiatives. For Ely, that broader community means having the middle-class parents’ support. With the support of the middle-class families MBLT activities will spread more easily and quickly throughout the district.

Beck elaborated how MBLT will take hold in schools as leaders see successful MBLT programs within DPS:

As these other schools who are doing this redesign work get to the point where they start realizing that time is an important lever in being successful as a redesign effort, we have these examples that we can go back to to say, look at College View, look at Godsman, wherever. This is the way that they've rethought their schedule and rethought partnerships and human capital in their building so that they could provide additional opportunities for students and educators. So, there's a bunch of knowledge and expertise within the metro area that can now be used to apply to different efforts that are happening that, like I said, are all going to and are starting to get to this point of asking questions about time for their students and for their educators. It's a growing resource that can be an example. I think that's something that this has been a big impact.
References


South-West Teachers Union Reform Network. (2013, June). *SW TURN expanded learning opportunities.*