Grenchen Elementary
Breitling School District, Connecticut*

This is one of four state and 11 district case study papers from the Center on Education Policy (CEP) describing expanded learning time (ELT) initiatives. The major findings from all of the case studies are presented in the CEP summary report *Expanded Learning Time: A Summary of Findings from Case Studies in Four States.*

Key Findings

- **Grenchen Elementary School, with assistance from the Breitling district, has established strong partnerships with external community organizations that allow for an expanded school day for all its students.** School officials reported that staggering teacher schedules and including both morning and afternoon blocks for interventions, enrichment, and other programs for students with community partners was a successful marriage that reduced costs of implementing expanded learning time.

- **Implementing ELT initiatives at Grenchen has been successful and challenging, in the view of school leaders.** Working with the TIME Collaborative gave the school a source of expertise in redesigning the school schedule and encouragement for creative approaches to expanding learning time. Collaborating with community partners to facilitate enrichment and intervention programs added a layer of complexity, however, by requiring school officials to coordinate, juggle, and oversee the various staff who work with students.

- **Grenchen used a grant from the federal 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) program to fund portions of the ELT initiatives during the regular school day.** Other 21st CCLC grants in the district are still operating under the traditional structure—for a targeted group of students during non-school hours.

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* To encourage frank responses from local interviewees, we have used pseudonyms for the case study districts and schools and for individuals interviewed in these sites. For the state-level interviewees, however, we have used the individuals' real names.
Background

Grenchen Elementary School is one of more than a dozen schools in the Breitling School District. The district enrolls roughly 6,000 students, and Grenchen Elementary serves approximately 500 students in kindergarten through grade 6 (see table 1 for more school information). Grenchen school staff work with the National Center on Time and Learning’s TIME Collaborative to plan and implement ELT initiatives at the school, which included a transition from a 6½ hour to an 8½ hour school day. The school is not considered a “turnaround” or priority school—the lowest 5% achieving schools in the state—under Connecticut’s waiver from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Grenchen has received a federal 21st CCLC grant and uses these funds for programs during its expanded school day.

Table 1. Grenchen Elementary School information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades*</th>
<th>K-6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Locale*</td>
<td>Small city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial demographics**</td>
<td>African American, Hispanic, white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage free and reduced lunch**</td>
<td>Roughly 40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total students</td>
<td>500 students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student to teacher ratio*</td>
<td>Fewer than 15 students per teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has or had a school improvement grant</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIG intervention model</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title I school*</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st CCLC funds in 2013-14</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has been or is a priority school under state waiver</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*From CCD Public school data, 2011-12 school year.

**From Connecticut Education Data and Research’s district and school snapshots, 2011-12 school year.

Note: To protect the anonymity of schools all figures are approximations.

School and District Context

The principal and instructional coach at Grenchen Elementary have more than a decade of experience each in the Breitling School District, as does the district official who oversees the school. Of the teaching staff at Grenchen, roughly half have 10 or more years of experience and the remainder are relatively new to teaching. Principal Leon described the school staff as “very cooperative, collaborative, and hard working.” He added: “I think this is the first program I’ve worked in that I feel like everybody will help out everybody. If you ever need anything they are there. It doesn’t matter what position you are, they’re just a staff that works together.” Ms. Colt, an instructional coach at the school and a member of the staff leading its ELT initiatives, agreed that “everyone in the building is always really trying to do what’s best for the kids.”

The Breitling district central office staff—whom Principal Leon described as “a member of our team”— has also been very supportive and helpful in planning and implementing the
school’s ELT initiatives, according to Grenchen school officials. The central office staff has
directly assisted school officials with organizing community partners, navigating
requirements, and securing federal, state, and local funds, while the district human
resources department has provided general support in helping the school understand
contractual obligations. “[T]here is no way we could have organized this schedule on top of
our other duties,” said Assistant Principal Bentley. “So, we have some really good people
doing this. And without them, I don’t think we could make this work, honestly.”

Although Grenchen serves a particular neighborhood attendance area, parents throughout
the Breitling district may also choose to enroll their child at the school under the district’s
choice policy. School officials said that many Grenchen students have needs that place
them at risk of learning problems. For example, the principal estimated that roughly 50%
of the students are not performing on grade-level, and about 60% received free or reduced-
price lunch in school year 2013-14.

Expanded Learning Time Strategies

The Breitling School District has built in expanded learning time during the regular school
day at two elementary schools. One of these schools is centered on the arts and includes an
integrated core curriculum alongside a robust fine arts and performing arts program with
courses in music, chorus, orchestra, drama, art, and world languages. Grenchen
Elementary, the second school with an expanded day, has an International Baccalaureate
(IB) program and is a TIME Collaborative school.

A Breitling district official, Ms. Schneider, explained the rationale for implementing ELT at
these two schools:

*Part of the rationale around . . . the selection of those schools was the theme
off the school bringing additional expectations into student learning. To
broaden the opportunities for students, you’re adding coursework in World
Language. You’re adding coursework in the one school in art and music. You’re
adding coursework in the other school on global studies, and you are also
enriching their experience by bringing in different cultural learnings and a
different learning style that takes longer to work the student through.*

While other Breitling schools have ELT opportunities, including afterschool programs,
Saturday programs and other enrichment activities, these activities do not necessarily
involve all students. The district is considering extending the school day at a third, theme-
based elementary school focused on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.
Currently, this school offers afterschool enrichment and targeted intervention programs
for students who need them.

The arts-themed school has a regular staff of instructors who teach “specials” courses
(music, art, etc.). The school extended the day by staggering the schedules of its special and
core teachers, so that students can still take all of their core content classes but have
additional time during the regular school day for the arts-focused classes. The total hours for teachers are the same, although their starting and ending times vary. Grenchen Elementary has embedded additional coursework, enrichment, and intervention programs throughout the day with the help of outside partnerships and community organizations.

Grenchen leaders explained that the school used to have a more traditional schedule that was driven in large part by the availability of the district’s shared itinerant specials teachers and the lunch schedule. When the school partnered with the TIME Collaborative, they shifted this focus from planning around specials and lunch to determining school priorities first, based on students’ needs, and incorporating these priorities into the schedule before other activities or courses. District officials encouraged the school to work with the TIME Collaborative, and the first year was really exploratory, as Principal Leon explained:

We had no idea what it was all about other than, Hey, we’re looking at extended learning time for students. We all agree that, of course, extended learning time is going to help benefit the kids. So, there were two schools [in the district that were] originally asked to participate and then in the end it was just, Okay, Grenchen, let’s just go through the process and see what we can learn. As we’re halfway through the process, we all agreed how great this was. I think there’s no turning back . . .

As of January 2014, Grenchen had completed its initial year of planning with the TIME Collaborative and had begun its first school year of implementing the new schedule. Before Grenchen began working with the TIME Collaborative, the regular school day began a little before 9 a.m. and ended around 3:30 p.m. Under the expanded day, the regular school day begins at 8 a.m. and ends around 4:25 p.m.

The extended schedule is being implemented for grades 3 through 6 at Grenchen. For grades K through 2, the regular day also begins at 8 a.m. and ends a little before 3:00 p.m. This split was a purposeful compromise with parents and community members who were concerned the longer school day was not entirely appropriate for the younger students. School officials said, however, that they still incorporated aspects of the TIME Collaborative initiatives at these grades.

More specifically, school and district officials said they work with a wide range of community partners and outside organizations to provide both enrichment and focused interventions to Grenchen students during the school day. Grenchen works directly with a district official who helps the school organize and maintain these community partnerships. These partnerships also make it possible to stagger the regular teachers’ schedules, so that even with the longer school day for grades 3-6, the teacher work day did not have to be extended. Students in grades 3 and 4 participate in their specials and differentiated support classes in the mornings and then in enrichment with community partners in the afternoons. The schedule is reversed for students in grades 5 and 6, who have enrichment in the mornings and differentiated supports and specials in the afternoons.
Principal Leon said that working with their community partners has enabled teachers to spend more time on direct instruction. Paraprofessionals and tutors provided through these partners work with students on various interventions and other programs, which frees up teachers’ time so they “can really focus on the instruction,” Leon said.

Expanding the school day in the two Breitling schools also gave teachers more time to collaborate on planning, reviewing student achievement data, and participating in professional development. Grenchen school officials said that reserving time for teacher collaboration was a major focus of their planning for ELT with the TIME Collaborative. The school schedule was revamped to create a block of time in which students receive differentiated support, led by staff from the community partners, and attend specials classes. This change allowed the school to reserve a 90-minute block of time for teacher collaboration twice a week for grades 3-6 and once a week for K-2, said Ms. Colt, the instructional coach.

Principal Bentley said these extra 90 minutes have made a noticeable difference:

> [A]t the meetings, [teachers] don’t feel as rushed, and I feel like we’re getting a lot more depth in conversations because you don’t have to get out of there in 45 minutes . . . a 45-minute prep period really turns into 30, 35 minutes when you drop [the students] off . . . I think we’ve seen some really powerful benefits just having that stretch of period of time with teachers, just the depth of conversations that are occurring are amazing.

Leon noted that these longer planning blocks are especially important for planning units of study under the school’s IB program.

**Funding and Support**

The Breitling district uses a combination of local, state, and some federal funds to pay for ELT at its two schools with expanded days. Ms. Schneider, a district official, noted that although this pooling of resources has been sufficient to pay for the current initiatives, “if we’re going to look at extending the day at additional schools, it would not be sufficient, and if those funds go away, we do have some sustainability questions.” None of the Breitling district schools are categorized by the state as “turnaround” schools, as Connecticut calls its priority schools (see box 1), and none receive federal 1003(g) funding under SIG.

**Federal Funds**

Some Breitling schools receive federal 21st CCLC grants. Typically, these funds are used to expand learning time before or after school or during the summer, but the federal ESEA waiver provisions also allow the funds to be used to expand learning time during the school day. Grenchen Elementary applied for and received a 21st CCLC grant with the ELT
flexibility and is using these funds both for programs provided during extended hours with community partners and to pay some staff members for working extra time which means they stay in the school for the entire staggered schedule day, according to one district official. She said that the other 21st CCLC grants in the district are still operating the way they were—“for a targeted group of students, which is a subset of the school as opposed to the entire school”—during non-school hours.

The arts-themed school in Breitling receives federal Title I funding, but this money is not used to extend the school day. Schneider said that ELT initiatives at the arts-themed school were covered “by collapsing areas where we could consolidate [district funds] and save some dollars and to just redirect funding—there was no additional funding.” The district allocates some state money for summer school and afterschool programs at the arts-themed school.

State and Local Support

Breitling has been designated as an Alliance District by the state (see box 1) and uses some of its state Alliance funding for ELT initiatives at Grenchen. Additionally, Schneider noted that some community partners—especially at Grenchen—provide courses to students at no charge to the district because the partners receive grant funding from elsewhere.

Box 1. State programs for district and school improvement in Connecticut

Priority School Districts. The priority School district program was established to provide support for school districts “with the greatest academic need” (CSDE, 2013a). The program funds an array of activities, such as dropout prevention, early reading interventions, and instructional technology, as well as initiatives to strengthen parent involvement and school accreditation. (Priority School Districts are different from “priority schools,” which Connecticut refers to as “turnaround schools.”)

Alliance Districts. This program is a targeted investment in the state’s 30 lowest-performing districts. Connecticut General Statute Section 10-262u established a process for identifying Alliance Districts and allocating increased Education Cost Sharing funding to support district strategies to “dramatically increase student outcomes and close achievement gaps by pursuing bold and innovative reforms” (CSDE, 2014). The districts must apply to the state for a formula grant and outline their proposed use of the funds. These districts submit plans to improve student achievement, which are approved by the Commissioner. During the 2014-15 school year, 14 Alliance Districts also qualify as Priority School Districts.

Commissioner’s Network Schools. This program provides resources to the lowest-performing schools in the state. The state Commissioner selects these schools, and all of the state’s turnaround/priority schools are eligible. Although Network schools remain a part of their local district, they receive greater flexibility and autonomy than other schools “in exchange for heightened accountability” (CSDE, 2013b). As of August of 2014, there were 11 schools participating in the program.

Breitling district officials are very supportive and helpful with the school’s ELT initiatives, said Grenchen’s Principal Leon. “The district’s really good about saying, okay, I can take this
amount from this grant to help support you [Grenchen], and I can take this amount from that grant to support you.” Assistant Principal Bentley added that the district human resources department is a very valuable source of information about teacher contracts.

School officials confirmed that they have saved money by taking advantage of free community partner programs and staggering teacher schedules. Leon explained:

One way we were able to do lots of things is just staggering staff time. [It] didn’t cost us anything . . . Are there costs for everything else we do were doing before and after that? Absolutely. But the costs are less—instead of paying a teacher, we were using parents and tutors to do things.

Finally, district and school officials said the TIME Collaborative helps the school find funding. The Collaborative does not provide direct financial support for ELT, aside from some initial startup money secured through a local foundation that covers planning and substitute teachers while staff attend training and planning sessions. However, NCTL does help schools apply for funding through the 21st CCLC program and other federal, state, or local programs.

**Challenges**

The year-to-year variability of funding sources is a challenge in implementing and sustaining ELT according to Schneider. The state department of education provides funding on a two-year budget cycle, which means that state funding for schools can change every two years, and the district has its own fiscal limitations. Schneider noted that the district is constantly looking for other grant funds to supplement “what’s missing” because the base funding is not enough, especially when “you’re asked to do new things as an Alliance district.” Recently, however, state-level Alliance funding has increased, and the additional flexibility available under federal waivers has helped alleviate some of funding challenges. She explained:

But you’re talking about a high-poverty district. Recently, with the influx of Alliance funding and new support, federal waivers that [enable us] to move things around a bit, things have been a lot better. But I will tell you that previously we went through four years in a row of a zero increase budget, which . . . is actually negative because your costs go up but you’re getting the same money. We were cutting programs. We were cutting staff. We were cutting everything.

For Grenchen leaders, the biggest challenge of ELT has been implementing the new schedule and programs. Particular challenges range from coordinating transportation and communicating schedule changes with school staff and parents, to planning meaningful and purposeful activities that are aligned with the school’s overall mission and goals. School officials reported that although they received assistance from the TIME Collaborative in planning for ELT, implementation was ultimately the responsibility of school official. Leon
explained:

*Trying to get things up and running was very challenging... [The TIME Collaborative is] always willing to help, but realistically it's like you telling me I can help you with whatever you need, and I may never call you because I'm too busy doing the work.*

Both district and school officials also reported challenges in collaborating with community partners and noted that it is time consuming for district- and school-level staff to determine appropriate activities and find people to help with enrichment, intervention, and support programs at the school. Further, there is a wide range of skills and experiences among volunteers and community partners' staff. Assistant Principal Bentley explained:

"[O]utside partners aren't certified teachers—they do not necessarily have the experience of classroom management that our certified teachers do... We have a lot of students with many different types of needs—academic, emotional, you run the whole gamut, just like you see in other schools. So those students present difficulties, and uncertified teachers sometimes have difficulties with them. And so those are always challenges, too, trying to support them and make sure that everything is going fine in those classes."

Bentley added that planning and arranging meaningful and purposeful activities with the teachers who work in these partnerships is time consuming.

Once partnerships are formed, it is time-consuming for district and school staff to manage the programs. For example, it is especially difficult when teachers brought in by a community partner—such as a cooking or karate instructor—are sick. "It's not the same as pulling up a sub[stitute] from our sub roster because they're not going into a traditional classroom," said Schneider. "Besides your 35 teachers you're managing throughout the day, you're managing almost an additional number of partners throughout the day, and their commitment or understanding of how school works is different."

Finally, Ms. Colt explained that it is challenging for coaches, instructional leaders, and school principals to juggle the responsibilities of managing ELT alongside their traditional responsibilities.

Progress with ELT

District and school officials said they have seen many benefits from the ELT initiatives. Schneider cited the benefits of giving students access to professionals in a field through community partners. For example, she explained, students obtain information beyond what a classroom teacher can provide "when Junior Achievement comes in and teaches the kids about financial things or savings or what the business world does and how to set up a business." Principal Leon agreed that the range of experiences found among the community partnership instructors is beneficial to students. The tutors and community
instructors include certified teachers who serve as tutors, people with degrees in business, and paraprofessionals with associate’s degrees who relate well to children, he explained.

Through the community partnerships, the district has been able to offer nontraditional instructional activities that are “really engaging to students and are educationally sound and supportive,” said Schneider. Examples include a local theater that is coupled with the literacy program and a Department of Defense aerodynamics program that is paired with the science curriculum. She described the impact of these programs in this way:

_These kids remember [the aerodynamics program] for a long time, and it’s aligned with our science curriculum. It’s aligned with the national standards in science and math. And it supports what they’re learning in the classroom in a way that’s different from the teacher who’s teaching in the classroom . . . Those are huge successes._

Grenchen school officials felt it was a little early in the process to see complete success of ELT. However, a few benefits are already apparent, said Colt:

_[S]ome of the things that are really apparent, though is the ability to have all students receive enrichment, and then to have increased intervention time. I think that’s, without a doubt . . . the most positive thing that’s come out of this for our students . . . Kids are exposed to things that they wouldn’t have had the opportunity to be exposed to before, like robotics._

Assistant Principal Bentley saw a benefit in “the sheer number of kids that are getting interventions that we couldn’t do before.”

Initial formative assessments show improvements in learning, according to the staff interviewed. They noted that although they can’t say definitively that these improvements are a result of ELT, they do feel the literacy and math interventions in place during the block of time for differentiated interventions have helped.

School officials reported that staggering teacher schedules and including both morning and afternoon blocks for interventions, enrichment and other programs with community partners was a successful marriage that reduced costs of ELT.

Finally, school officials emphasized that the planning process with the TIME Collaborative was valuable for successful implementation. “Seeing different schools and learning from how they design things and getting some ideas” was helpful, said Leon. Bentley said that working with the TIME Collaborative “challeng[ed] my thinking of what a school could be in a lot of ways . . . they shifted our thinking a little bit to create the schedule.” Ms. Colt noted that the Collaborative “forced people to really think out of the box and to think differently about how we can make different things happen for kids.”

**District and School Leadership Perceptions of ELT**
Both district and school officials viewed ELT as a worthwhile initiative for school improvement if it is done thoughtfully. Schneider explained:

*It is [worthwhile] if you do appropriate things with [the time] . . . I think that you have to be very careful about that in terms of listening to your constituency and weighing what’s the tradeoff. I don’t think an extended day for the sake of keeping kids in school longer to do more of the same thing is going to—in and of itself—improve everything. But that said, some of our children don’t come from print-rich environments. They don’t come from situations where people have the means to take them to cultural things and enroll them in additional activities, and to have that option at a school is worthwhile . . . [A] six and a half hour day is insufficient to start with, but to give kids just a longer day with the same stuff in it isn’t enough.*

Schneider also felt that policymakers and the public should look beyond the classroom teacher to other members of the community to provide interventions and enrichment for students. The school buildings are open for such uses but the funding may need to come from sources other than school and district budgets. “We’ve got to look at expanding the model if we’re going to really provide this vision that people have about what it would look like to give kids all of these opportunities,” she said.

School officials at Grenchen said that ELT has been beneficial and that they plan to expand and improve their programs. They cautioned, however, that ELT must be done in a thoughtful and purposeful way, with ample focus on leadership and collaboration and with the right people who are dedicated to the process. Principal Leon emphasized this point:

*You can’t decide today that we’re going to just add 300 hours and just say, okay, this is our school day. You’ve got to plan. You have to make sure that you have the proper supports in place. And realistically, you have to be fully prepared. This doesn’t happen over a year. You go through the training then you actually have to do the work.*
References


