Expanded Learning Time in Virginia: Initiatives Varied Depending on Resources and Local Context *

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

- **The definition of expanded learning time in Virginia has changed, in part because of federal ELT initiatives.** One district leader explained that as a result of federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) guidance, the definition was simply out-of-school time but now it is defined as expanding the school day, week, or year so that all students receive the extra instruction.

- **Schools across the state have used different resources to successfully implement ELT.** One school that state leaders pointed out drew on different sources of funding to expand the school day by 90 minutes. Other schools that were successful worked with outside contractors who provided differentiated instructional support and tutoring.

- **State officials mentioned two challenges to implementing ELT across the state: sustainability and transportation.**
  
  **Sustainability:** To combat the loss of funds schools are taking different approaches. Some schools are trying to expand time within their school day by shortening non-academic time, others are trying to expand the school day, week, or year by 300 hours but not many have hit the goal. Some schools are expanding instructional time by adding learning opportunities on Saturday or during the summer. Many of these ELT initiatives are also supported by Virginia’s Standards of Quality funds, a portion of which can be used for interventions like ELT. Few of the state’s school districts are using the

* 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.
flexibility with federal funds for ELT, instead the money is going toward maintaining personnel.

Transportation: State leaders said that transportation was mostly a problem in rural Virginia where students have long commutes already.

- **Quality of time is more important than quantity of time.** Both state officials interviewed said that many students in the state need strong teachers before ELT is going to help them improve academically. One state official promotes the use of SIG funds to improve teacher quality in hard to staff schools in the first two years of a SIG through teacher professional development so that instructional time is used well and then, in the third year, expand the learning time.

**State Overview**

With funds from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), Virginia awarded three-year School Improvement Grants (SIGs) to a first cohort of 58 schools beginning in the fall of school year 2010-11 and a second cohort of 16 additional schools beginning in the fall of 2011-12 (Virginia Department of Education, 2011; Hurlburt, Therriault, & Le Floch, 2012). On June 29, 2012, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) was granted a waiver of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act requirements by the U.S. Department of Education. Following this approval, 5% of Title I schools in Virginia were identified as priority schools for school year 2012-13, based on their low overall student performance on state reading and math tests and graduation rates in the case of high schools (see Appendix X for more information on SIG and priority school identification). Virginia had 37 priority schools for school year 2013-14 (VDOE, n.d.a), of which 13 received SIG funds. According to federal waiver guidance, priority schools must expand learning time as one element of their improvement plans.

In 2013, Virginia awarded 52 grants through the 21st Century Learning Community Center (CLCC) program in amounts ranging from roughly $105,000 to $200,000 (VDOE, n.d.b). Two of the schools participating in this study received a 21st CCLC grant, either directly or through a community-based partner.

**Virginia Case Study Districts and Schools**

CEP conducted case studies of four schools in three Virginia districts for this report (see table 1).

All four schools receive or received SIG funds, and in 2013 all were labeled priority schools under Virginia’s ESEA waiver. Two schools, Patria and Pythagoras, receive 21st CCLC funds but use them in different ways, as explained below. More detailed information about these schools and districts is included in the case study narratives accompanying this report on the CEP website at www.cep-dc.org.
Table 1: School information for Virginia case study districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grades served</th>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>SIG intervention model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corum</td>
<td>Romulus</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>Moore</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Artisan</td>
<td>PreK-6</td>
<td>Gibson</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minerva</td>
<td>Pythagoras</td>
<td>PreK-7</td>
<td>Vargas</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutima</td>
<td>Patria</td>
<td>PreK-8</td>
<td>Anderson</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
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As noted in the study methods description on the CEP website, pseudonyms are used throughout this report for schools and districts and for individuals interviewed at these schools and districts, in order to encourage frank responses.

**ELT in Virginia**

Virginia’s approach to ELT has changed in recent years, according to VDOE officials. Duane Sergent, VDOE coordinator for the 21st CCLC grant, said that prior to the ARRA SIG requirements and federal ESEA waivers, expanded learning time was considered out-of-school time—evenings, mornings, weekends, holidays, summers—which is what the 21st CCLC program has traditionally supported. Under the SIG guidance, however, ELT means expanding the length of the school day, week or year. In addition, Virginia’s ESEA waiver permits schools with a 21st CCLC grant to expand the school day; they may now use these grant funds for activities during that time, Sergent explained. VDOE now asks 21st CCLC grant applicants if they would like to implement the option to use these funds for ELT activities. The state has taken a neutral position, he said, and leaves it up to the applicants to decide. But since the option became available in 2012, only one applicant has taken advantage of it, and none of the applications submitted in the latest competition in 2013 requested to use 21st CCLC funds for ELT during school hours.

Kathleen Smith, VDOE’s Director of the Office of School Improvement, elaborated on how the state defines ELT. Schools in Virginia are allocated state funds based on a school day of 5.5 hours and a school year of 180 days. Any time beyond those amounts would be considered expanded time for SIG and priority schools. This expanded time may take the form of restructuring non-instructional time, such as decreasing pass time between classes, or adding time to the school day, week, or year. Although Virginia’s SIG and priority schools vary in their approaches to implementing ELT, the state requires that the extra instructional time is offered to all students at the school.

Many SIG-funded and priority schools have implemented the ELT requirements by extending the school year, said Smith, such as increasing the days students must attend from 180 days to 210 or more. Other schools have added instructional time to the current school day or added summer or Saturday programs. The VDOE encourages SIG and priority schools to increase learning time by adding a minimum of 300 hours. However, funding these initiatives is a real challenge for schools, Smith said, and few schools have hit the goal of 300 additional hours.
The Virginia districts and schools participating in this study illustrate the various ways in which local leaders have approached ELT in SIG and priority schools. Corum School District added time to the school day and days to the school year for all district schools. Minerva School District added 15 minutes of instructional time in the morning and 15 more minutes in the afternoon at Pythagoras School, which was done to accommodate long commutes and ensure that students do not have to leave home too early or get home too late. In the Tutima School District, Patria School added 90 minutes to the instructional day on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and an extra 90 minutes of teacher professional development on Monday.

**Funding for ELT in Virginia**

Smith and Sergent agreed that although SIG funding may be used for ELT, these funds are not enough to truly expand the school day and sustain these changes beyond the three-year grant. Smith explained this issue:

> Even with the SIG grant, I think it’s been a challenge to get [schools] to expand the learning time. Even though they’ve done it, they haven’t done so willingly, and to be very honest with you, I don’t have the money to extend the school day. The U.S. Department of Education recommends 300 hours. There’s no way I can support a school with the funding that US ED gives me. We’re not a Race to the Top state; we can’t afford to provide every school the amount of funding it would take to do that, so that would fall on the local [district]. They don’t have the funding to do it—so it’s a funding issue.

School leaders also voiced concerns about the sustainability of ELT initiatives after their federal funding expired. “We were always keeping sustainability in the front of our minds because if we enact new policies that can only be supported through the SIG grant, then what are we going to do when it’s gone?” asked Principal Vargas of the Pythagoras School.

Sergent agreed that funding is one reason why 21st CCLC applicants have not chosen to use the ELT flexibility option. Virginia’s 21st CCLC grant amount has not increased, so if applicants chose to shift the focus of their awards, schools would have to take funds away from their afterschool programs for targeted groups of students and dilute that money to serve the entire school. One school in the study, Patria, did collaborate with its community organization partner to expand the learning day using 21st CCLC funds. For the last 90 minutes of the instructional day, tutors come into 5th through 8th grade classrooms and assist the lead teacher. Minerva, the other school in our study with 21st CCLC funds, wanted to keep using that grant for targeted afterschool interventions for low-achieving students.

Under Virginia’s ESEA waiver, school districts are also permitted to use the Title I “20% set-aside” funds to expand learning time. (The No Child Left Behind Act requirement to reserve these funds for supplemental tutoring services and public school choice has been waived.) Some schools are using the set aside for ELT, said Smith, but a majority of schools
must use that funding to maintain personnel—particularly after the mandated sequestration of federal funds that affected FY 2013 allocations. “They really do need their set aside to help offset costs,” she said. Of the schools in the study, only Patria used the Title I 20% set-aside for ELT; the school used a small portion of the money to pay for the state-mandated turnaround coach, and the rest went toward expanding the instructional day.

Virginia’s largest program of state aid to school districts, called Standards of Quality (SOQ) funding, offers another potential source of money for ELT. (See box A for more information.) SOQ funding supports remedial summer school programs and other initiatives to help at-risk students. School districts receive this funding based on their total number of students who did not pass the state assessment the previous year and their number of students from low-income families. Districts may use this funding to provide extra time and support for students before, during, and after the school day and in the summer months. One district leader in our study said that the district has come to rely on SOQ funding to sustain programs started with SIG funds.

Box A. Standards of Quality Funding

Virginia’s Standards of Quality (SOQ) funding is the state’s largest direct aid program to K-12 education. The SOQ budget of $5.3 billion in fiscal year 2014 amounted to 88.5% of all state education funding. The SOQ funds require a local matching effort that equaled $3.3 billion in FY 2014; remedial summer school is the only SOQ program that does not require a local effort. Local education agencies are allowed to exceed their minimum local effort requirement, and most do so.

SOQ funding is provided through 11 different state budget accounts. These accounts include a prevention, intervention, and remediation account. The Virginia constitution explains that prevention, intervention, and remediation funds “may be used to support programs for educationally at-risk students as identified by the local school board” (22.1-253.13:2.E).

Note: The information in this box was collected from the Virginia Department of Education (2013), the Virginia General Assembly Legislative Information System (n.d), Verstegen & Jordan (2007), and Verstegen & Barclay (2011).

Smith of the School Improvement Office explained that she puts a strong emphasis on directing SOQ funding to SIG schools. Districts used to spread the SOQ across schools in the district and not necessarily “in the schools that needed it most.” Now, Smith said she pushes districts with SIG schools to use the SOQ funds alongside the SIG funds:

I’m asking them, “How are you directing that funding to the SIG schools in particular to extend that learning day?” And that has forced them to think about using that funding differently. I’m requiring them to show me how they’re using that in that particular school—not let’s just buy this as a school division . . . So by forcing them to show me how they’re spending it in those schools, those schools are actually getting more intervention than they normally would have received if we wouldn’t have asked them to show that.
The state’s SOQ money may be targeted to specific groups of students in non-SIG schools. In SIG-funded schools, however, the intervention, remediation, and summer school services provided through the SOQ state funds must be offered to all students. District leaders in Minerva noted that they relied on the SOQ funding to sustain some of the initiatives started with SIG funds. “We really, really rely upon that money [the SOQ funding]. It’s a good part of the sustainability piece that we were challenged with at the beginning of the grant . . . we needed to sustain a lot of the programs that we had in the SIG grant,” said a district leader.

**Progress with ELT**

Virginia state education officials described notable successes with a SIG-funded school that extended its school day by 90 minutes; students stay for this period on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, while Mondays are an extended school day for teachers. Friday is not an extended day. Sergent noted that this particular school is using a combination of federal 21st CCLC funds, state SOQ funds, and local money to fund these ELT initiatives.

Some non-SIG schools in Virginia use their state SOQ prevention money—with or without 21st CCLC money—to provide expanded learning opportunities for students, Smith said. These schools are successful, she added, because they have “the right people in front of the kids.”

Smith reiterated that the intent of the federal ELT requirements under SIG is good. “Honestly, we do need more time, but it’s got to be quality time,” she said.

One area in which Smith feels SIG grantees and other Virginia schools have had the greatest success has been with “turnkey providers” in high schools. These providers are outside education companies that provide differentiated support, tutoring, and instructional support services for students. Schools may use SIG or 21st CCLC funds to help pay for these support services. Some of these programs are working “extremely well in our high schools,” Smith commented, but “we’re finding that other programs might work just as effectively as a turnkey intervention program in our elementary schools.” Turnkey programs are an option worth exploring “in SIG schools where we know the teaching capacity isn’t what it should be, while we improve the professional development of the teachers,” she added.

Some school and district leaders were able to point to instances of success with ELT but were hesitant to attribute any achievement gains specifically to the initiative. The principal of Pythagoras said that “there’s just a multitude of things that we have put in place before, during, and continuing after SIG…I think [the academic success is because] of multiple factors.”

Not all interviewees thought that ELT was successful. A district leader in Corum noted that their schools had not seen academic gains after implementing ELT, although the additional learning time did not hurt their academic achievement either.
A district leader in Tutima, Ms. Anderson, attributed academic gains in kindergarten and 3rd grade to ELT. "I think there is no way you can deny that an additional 90 minutes a day is not having an impact on [kindergarteners]," she said. Anderson also explained that 3rd grade students have made strides in reading skills:

There's no question that we can see the impact of the extended day . . . Those students began their third grade year as . . . non-readers. And they are native English speakers . . . They have gained two, three, four years since ELT started. We're finally starting to see it register.

Challenges

State leaders said that ELT might pose transportation challenges for rural school districts. Two of the Virginia districts studied, Corum and Minerva, were considered rural, but they approached this challenge in different ways. District and school leaders at Pythagoras Elementary School in the Minerva School District were concerned about students having to leave their house well before 6:30 a.m. to get to school on time because of long commutes. To address this challenge, Minerva kept the existing bus schedule and added instructional minutes before and after school. At Pythagoras, school leaders reduced some of the extra time between bus drop-off/pick up times and the school's start/end times to make extra space for instruction. The other rural district, Corum, instituted ELT for all schools in the district and changed the bus schedule for all students.

The other challenge cited by state leaders, as well as most local interviewees, was sustainability of ELT initiatives after federal funds expired. As noted above, school and district leaders in Minerva were cautious with implementing initiatives that they couldn’t sustain. One district leader in Tutima, who favored ELT, also expressed concern about a sustainable ELT program: “We really like [ELT]. We really think it is working, and so it would be fantastic to keep it. But one of the issues with that will certainly be the funding. It's tremendously expensive.” Smith and Sergent agreed that ELT is expensive—and that funding is a challenge for schools.

Other challenges that district and school leaders faced with ELT implementation included rescheduling instructional time that was lost due to inclement weather; finding qualified teachers for the extra instructional time; soliciting teacher buy-in to ELT initiatives; addressing logistical issues with parent work schedules and afterschool activities; and providing transfer opportunities to students and parents who did not want ELT.

State and Local Perceptions of ELT

As noted above, the decision on whether to apply 21st CCLC funds to expand learning time during the regular school day or before or after school is a local decision in Virginia. Many of the 21st CCLC grantees target their awards to programs for particular students, explained Sergent. If these schools and community centers decide to change that focus to expand learning time during the school day, then they would have to serve the entire school. Often
there is not enough 21st CCLC funding to serve the whole school, so ELT during the school day would dilute the award money that would have been used for more targeted programs. School leaders at Pythagoras agreed with Sergent’s assessment and kept their 21st CCLC programs after school. They noted that the 21st CCLC funds have provided students with academic support even when other state and federal funds have diminished.

Beyond funding, Smith and Sergent also pointed to concerns about quality versus quantity related to ELT in SIG and priority schools in Virginia. SIG-funded schools are often hard-to-staff schools, with significant proportions of new and less experienced teachers. Both Sergent and Smith emphasized that it is important that extra time for students is used for high-quality learning activities, not filled with “more of the same.” Nearly all participating district and school leaders concurred with this idea. For example, a district leader in Tutima made this observation:

*I’m not in favor of extending poor instruction. But in the case where we’re talking about additional, structured learning time with assessments and data analysis, additional opportunities to provide intervention, additional opportunities to carve out time to do small groups and one-on-one instruction to really get those targeted interventions going, there’s no way that can’t be good.*

If the quality of the current teaching staff in these schools is poor, said Smith, an extra hour of instructional time is not going to improve student achievement.

Sergent explained how this concept also guides the 21st CCLC programs:

*One of the values of the 21st CCLC grant is that it’s not more of the same--different activities, different types of things that the law allows the funds to be spent for... Then those types of activities bring the children back into a little more engagement and then help them engage in the regular school day... without engaging, they’re not going to learn.*

Smith added that federal SIG guidance allows schools to focus ELT on professional development and collaboration time for teachers, in addition to expanded instructional time for students. She endorsed the value of this approach in SIG schools:

*[SIG schools] are really hard to staff schools... And I really honestly believe we have to put more on professional development with a lot of these schools in the first and second years, and then at the third year start looking at extending the school day for students... If I were a kid sitting in some of these classes and then you told me I had to sit in there another 50 minutes each day in that class, I’d probably die... Until teachers can really engage students--well, I don’t think we’ll have a lot of success, and unfortunately, in these schools, that’s not the case.*
Both state officials interviewed agreed that schools should consider expanding the school day to improve student achievement. However, there should be a strong emphasis on “not just expanding the learning time—but expanding the learning time with a very good teacher,” said Smith.

Most school and district leaders echoed this idea. In Pythagoras, professional development has become a centerpiece of school improvement to ensure that students are engaged in the classroom. At Romulus High School, professional development has been used to align teacher-developed assessments, such as tests, essays, or projects, to state Standards of Learning assessments and then plan curriculum and lessons backwards so that students would be getting the quality of instruction they would need to be academically successful.
References


