

# CRRERO

CENTER FOR RESEARCH, REGIONAL EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT NEW PALTZ



## Erosion of Instructional Time

Discussion Brief #14 – Spring 2015

# Time Lost in School

How much instruction do children receive in New York State schools each year? This question is not easily answered. A precise quantity is almost impossible to calculate. But consider this: Across New York State, children between the ages of 6 and 16 must go to school. That's the law.<sup>1</sup> There are approximately 2,579,011 students enrolled in public schools.<sup>2</sup> The school day must be at least 5 hours long for primary school students (grades 1-6) and 5.5 hours long for secondary students (grades 7-12) (NYSED, 2013). Just one missed day of school means, in aggregate, a loss of 13,539,808 student-hours of instruction across New York State.

Or think about this. Almost four of every five dollars spent by schools *buys* time – the time of educators and others working to advance learning. The time thus purchased, together with the time of the children required to be in school, is then *spent* in teaching and learning.

Little wonder therefore that when it comes to schooling, New York State pays a lot of attention to time. There is a mandatory floor under the amount of time purchased: schools must be in session for 180 days (NYSED, 2014). And there are requirements about the time frame within which the spending must occur; that is, when the school year may begin and must end, as specified in regulations by the State Commissioner of Education (NYSED, 2014).

Within these boundaries, local school districts make decisions about time. They decide: what dates will mark the first day of school and the last; how many days will be dedicated to the instruction of students; how many school days will be used, in whole or in part, for purposes other than instruction of students (for example, for professional development); and what days off there will be, if any, in addition to federal holidays.

Decisions made at the bargaining table contribute to these local determinations. New York adopted public sector collective bargaining in 1967, almost a half century ago and far after the 180 day school year standard was adopted. Many decisions about the time that school districts purchase – how many hours in a day, how many days in a year – involve classic questions of the terms and conditions of work, settled together by managers and worker representatives.

Although stated as a minimum, the 180 day mandate has become the norm through a combination of state regulation and local decision-making. Whether 180 days of school time for students is enough has been extensively debated and studied. We do not revisit that question here. Rather, our focus is on how the 180 days that are available are actually spent.



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We find that allocating time in school is an intricate balancing act of instructional needs of students, professional development for teachers, communicating with families, and accommodating the demands of statewide initiatives (testing, for example). In New York, time for the balancing act is found within the 180, not added to the total. Even quite officially, the “180 required days of instruction” (NYSED, 2014, pp. 2) are not all real days of instruction; instructional time is lost in the balance. Up to four superintendent’s conference days – during which school is closed to students, but open for teacher participation in professional development – may be scheduled within the 180. Up to four “shortened instructional days,” (half-days) may be used to compensate teachers for time spent conferencing with families or as additional time for professional development.<sup>3</sup> Also, at the high school-level, the Commissioner allows students to be excused from instruction during the administration of Regents’ exams. These days can be applied toward the 180 requirement (NYSED, 2014).<sup>4</sup> (Many teachers spend this time proctoring exams.)

In this policy brief, we begin to explore how much instructional time is really “allocated” to instruction in our region by looking at the

published calendars of five selected school districts in the Hudson Valley. (On the concept of “allocated time,” see Berliner, 1990; Smith, 1990.) In a sixth school district we take the additional step of documenting time commonly lost to “extraordinary conditions,” often weather (NYSED, 2014), mandated state testing for grades 3-8, and school-wide, non-instructional activities (i.e., holiday shop, fire safety day, book fair).

A note before proceeding: All lost instructional time is not created equal. Sometimes factors beyond a school’s control, the weather for example, contribute to lost instruction. No one advocates running school buses on dangerous snow-and-ice covered roads. Moreover, some school-wide, non-instructional activities, such as anti-bullying assemblies and fire safety day, convey critical messages – and in some cases fulfill state requirements. The celebration of summer readers or the homecoming pep-rally build and nurture community within a school. Nevertheless, instructional time is lost each time school pictures are taken (and retaken) or there is a delayed school opening. Regardless of the legitimacy, or value, of its alternative uses, lost instructional time adds up. It is important to measure how much.

## Research on allocated time

In 1894, U. S. Commissioner of Education William T. Harris noted the negative effect of the persistent reduction in the number of days in the school year. His specific concern was the decline of the urban school year to 191 days: “[T]he constant tendency” Harris wrote, “. . . [has been] . . . toward a reduction of time. First, the Saturday morning session was discontinued; then the summer vacations were lengthened; the morning sessions were shortened; the afternoon sessions were curtailed; new holidays were introduced; provisions were made for a single session on stormy days, and for closing the schools to allow teachers . . . to attend teachers’ institutes . . . The boy of today must attend school 11.1 years in order to receive as much instruction, quantitatively, as the boy of 50 years ago received in 8 years.... It is scarcely necessary to look further than this for the explanation for the greater amount of work accomplished . . . in the German and French than in the American schools....” (as cited in NCTL, 1994, pp. 8).

More than a century later, time in school remains a concern, and has persisted as a focus of national school reform movements (US Department of Education, 1983; NCTL, 1994; NCEE, 2007). Scholars often cite the fact that students in the United States spend less time in school than many of their international peers, and suggest that this may be one reason for the lower test achievement of United States’ students (Barrett, 1990; Abrams, 2015).

Time in school is a dynamic concept with multiple dimensions; *engaged time* is a measure of the time that students are – or appear to be – giving attention to academic endeavors, regardless of whether real learning occurs. *Academic learning time* refers to the time that students are engaged meaningfully and successfully with academic material; real learning is happening here. *Transition time* is the non-instructional time between instructional activities (i.e., attendance taking, switching between classes), and *allocated time*, is defined as the time scheduled for instruction, as determined by the state, school district, and school (Berliner, 1990).

Researchers examining allocated time have found the amount devoted to instruction to be significantly less than usually assumed (Smith, 2000; Berliner, 1990; Wiley, 1974). One early study of allocated time found great variability in students’ exposure to instruction in school, with a range from 710 to 1,150 hours in a year (Wiley, 1974). In a turn of the century study in several public elementary schools in Chicago, Betsy Ann Smith (2000) reported swaths of lost allocated time. After accounting for planned and spontaneous interruptions in the school calendar as well as the school day, she found that only 13 weeks in the school year were “reliably and continuously focused on teaching the grade-level curriculum outlined by the district” (p. 668). The remaining weeks were plagued by stalled learning and interruptions stemming from: the start-up and wind down of the school year, morning announcements, special activities (book fairs, school pictures), celebrations of multiple holidays (in particular the weeks of and following Thanksgiving and leading up to the Christmas holiday and winter break), “down-time” (i.e., movies and parties) after standardized testing, and end-of-the-year award ceremonies, plays, concerts, assemblies, moving-up days and other celebrations. In sum, Smith estimated that, on average, students received 60% of the claimed instructional time.<sup>5</sup> And this was for “well-managed classrooms;” the total for those less well-managed was lower.

State-sanctioned allowances to the school calendar are one source of lost instructional time (Abrams, 2015). Non-instructional activities are another. A 1990 survey of Missouri principals indicated that special events may subtract the equivalent of seven school days in the course of a school year (NCTL, 1994). The National Education Commission on Time and Learning report, *Prisoners of Time*, noted: “The traditional school day, originally intended for core academic learning, must now fit in a whole set of requirements for what has been called “the new work of the schools” – education about personal safety, consumer affairs, AIDS, conservation and energy, family life, driver’s training. . . . The school day, nominally six periods, is easily reduced at the secondary level to about three hours of time for core academic instruction” (NCTL, 1994, pp. 13). Twenty years later, this “new

work” looks a bit different – lockdown drills, anti-bullying assemblies – but the effect is the same.

Massachusetts specifies a 180-day school year that includes 900 hours of instruction for grades one through five, and 990 hours for grades six through twelve (Rowland, 2014; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Using data compiled from ten school districts in that state, a recent study found that that, on average, teachers in grades 1-6 teach for 811 hours, grades 7-9 for 722 hours, and grades 10-12 for 672 hours, after the impact of half-days, early-release days, time lost to state-testing and time dedicated to teacher planning and professional development are taken into account (Abrams, 2015, pp. 14).

The inescapable conclusion from the body of work on time in school, only part of which has been cited here, is that formal requirements far overestimate the actual use of time for instruction (Wiley, 1974; Rossmiller, 1986; Smith, 2000; Abrams, 2015). We know that many factors beyond the reach of educators are critical to learning. In contrast, the time dedicated to instruction is one input over which there is some measure of control (Rossmiller, 1986, pp. 50). This makes how we use the time that we have even more critical.

## Research sample

To examine allocated time, this research team randomly selected five school districts in the Hudson Valley of New York.<sup>6</sup> We used a stratified sampling technique: Counties were randomly selected first and then districts within those counties were randomly selected.

Sample School District A is an average need district,<sup>7</sup> located in a small town, with an enrollment of 1,700 students. School District B is a suburban district with a student enrollment of 2,000 and is classified as a low need district. School District C is a rural district with approximately 1,500 students. School District C

is classified as an average need district. Sample School District D is located just outside of an urban area and serves over 9,000 students. It is an average need district. School District E is a larger suburban school district with enrollment levels reaching almost 5,000 students and is also a low need district.<sup>8</sup>

A sixth school district, School District S, served as a case study district. It was chosen because researchers were granted access to school district administrators and school-level schedules, which permitted a more thorough analysis of allocated time at the school-level. This district is located in a rural area with an enrollment of approximately 5,500 students. It is an average need district.

## Methods

For school districts A-E, researchers analyzed calendars that were posted on school district websites. We also analyzed teacher contracts, which are publicly available, for additional information about allocation of time, particularly about the uses of teacher time on shortened instructional days.

For School District S, researchers analyzed the district calendar and teacher contract. We also examined school-based calendars for an elementary, a middle, and a high school in this district. Finally, we interviewed school administrators to learn more about the allocation of instructional time in this district.

## Analysis

New York school districts often include more than 180 days in their calendars to account for “extraordinary conditions” for which schools may close, for example, for inclement weather or an emergency need to close a facility (NYSED, 2014). If a school district requires more extraordinary condition days than are planned in its calendar, the corresponding number of days are deducted from scheduled vacation time. Conversely, if not all scheduled extraordinary condition days are



used, the corresponding number of days are added to scheduled vacation time. Remember also that New York State allows school districts to include up to four days for teacher professional development within the required 180-day school year, even though students do not receive instruction on these days. This holds for shortened instructional days as well, which are often used to compensate teachers for evening time dedicated to parent-teacher conferences.

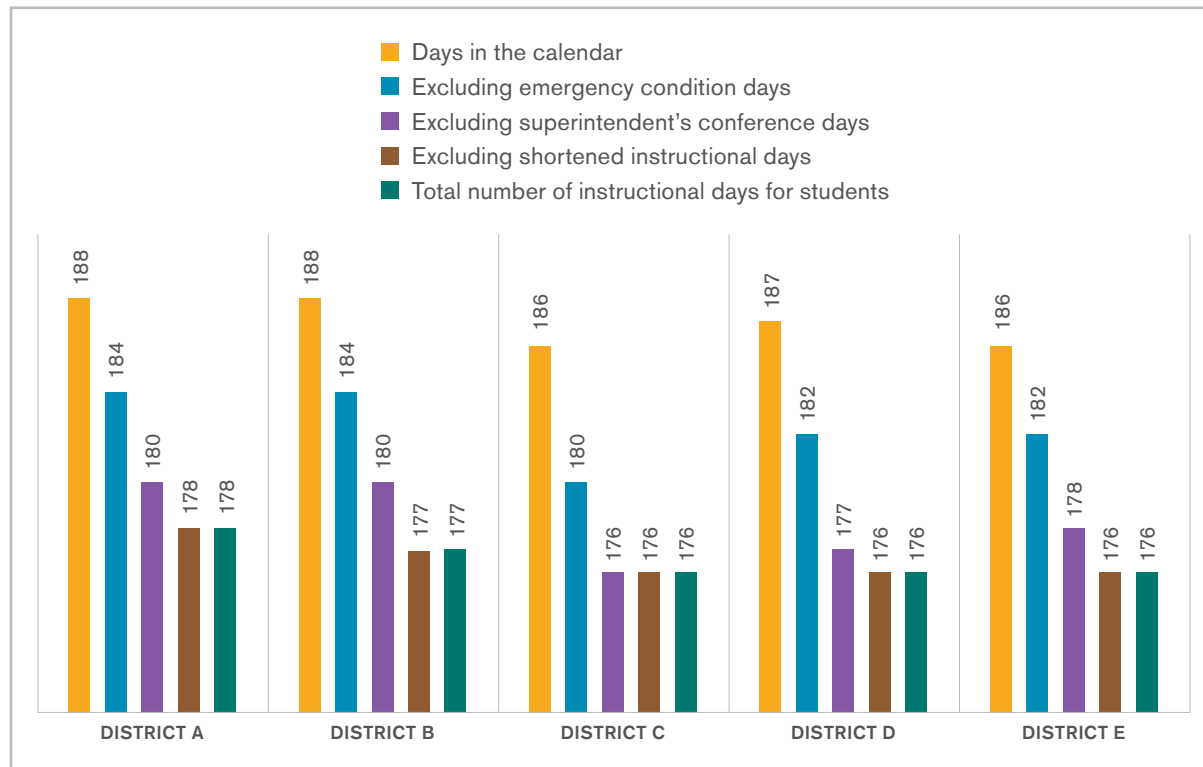
Our method is simple and straightforward. We begin with a count of the number of days specified in the published school calendar. We then subtract the number of days allotted for extraordinary conditions, the number of superintendent’s conference days, and the number of shortened instructional days (aggregated to full days, for ease of representation).

Figure 1 depicts instructional time for elementary schools in our five sample districts. Accounting for state sanctioned uses of time for other than instruction, extraordinary condition days, superintendent’s

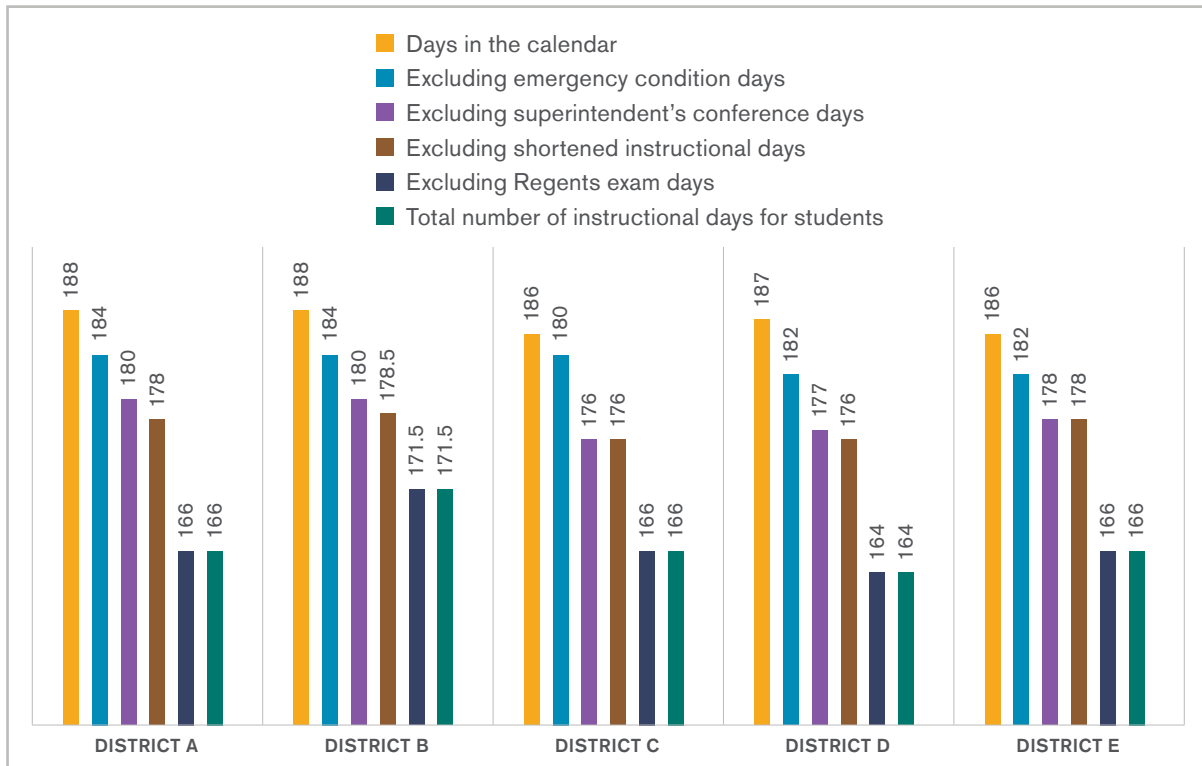
conference days, and shortened instructional days, we see that elementary schools in our sample offer between 176-178 days of instruction. In three of our sample districts, elementary students lose four days – almost a full week – of instructional time to New York State-sanctioned allowances within the school calendar. Thus for the “worst case” scenario, 2.2% of the required 180 days were expended for non-instructional purposes (for students).

Our analysis of instructional time in high school, as seen in Figure 2, followed the procedure detailed above and then also accounted for instructional time lost to the administration of Regents’ exams. For districts in our sample, administration of the Regents totaled between 7-12 days; exams are administered in January and in June. High schools in our sample school districts offer between 164 – 171.5 days of instruction. For the “worst case” at the high school level, 8.8% of the required days in school was directed toward purposes other than instruction.

**Figure 1: Allocated time in five Hudson Valley school districts, in elementary schools**



**Figure 2: Allocated time in five Hudson Valley school districts, in high schools**



## Case study analysis

To further investigate the realities of instructional time, we conducted a more in-depth analysis of a sixth school district – School District S. We begin with an accounting of this district’s allocated time as it appears on the school district calendar, following the same method used for the other five sample school districts. We then added delayed openings and early dismissals to this analysis; in the 2014-15 school year, School District S delayed opening seven times (six were 2-hour delays and one was a 3-hour delay) and dismissed early three times. This equates to four days of instructional time for secondary students and four and a half days for primary students that are lost to weather.<sup>9</sup> As noted, weather is beyond the school district’s control. Nevertheless, delayed openings are not a unique phenomenon in New York, and the time lost to these delays, or early dismissals, counts toward the required 180 days. It is not recouped.

For this district, we also examine instructional time lost to the administration of required state tests at the secondary and primary levels. New York has a long tradition of testing to affirm that the results of high school instruction in key subjects meet a statewide standard. Regents exams are named for the centuries-old independent policy making body for education in New York, the Board of Regents. Historically, their successful completion was required to achieve a more prestigious Regents high school diploma; now students are required to pass Regents’ exams in several content areas in order to graduate at all. In most high schools across New York State, classes are not in session during the administration of Regents exams, which may occur in January and always occurs in June.<sup>10</sup> Some school districts, including School District S, choose to administer local mid-term examinations during Regents week in January and final exams in June. During this time, students attend school only to take exams. Instruction is not provided on these days for students, whether or not they are being tested.

Teacher time is dedicated to proctoring the Regent exams. For the 2014-15 school year, School District S spent eleven days administering the Regents in January and in June.<sup>11</sup> This amounts to 6% of the instructional days mandated by New York State.

Then there are the other tests required by the state. In grades 3-8, students take exams in both English Language Arts and math over the course of six days in the spring. School District S estimates that 2 hours are dedicated to preparing for (setting up the classroom, reading instructions, ensuring students have eaten breakfast), and then administering, these tests.<sup>12</sup> Two hours over six days amounts to two and a half days dedicated to testing for students in grades 3-6 and a little more than 2 days for students in grades 7-8.<sup>13</sup> This accounts for 1.4% and 1.2%, for grades 3-6 and grade 7-8, respectively, of the 180 instructional days mandated by New York State.

This estimate of time used for testing in earlier grades is a minimum; for many students testing consumes more than these two and a half days. For example, students in grades 4 and 8 also take a science performance test and a science written test, which consumes instructional time. Additionally, most English Language Learners must take the ELA and math exams as well as the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These are four separate modules. There is no time-limit on the NYSESLAT, so estimating its impact on instruction is difficult. Nevertheless, a teacher of ELL students told us that, “in my experience, the tests take longer than stated. I have to test every one of my students individually on the speaking test. It takes a LONG time! Generally speaking, during the NYSESLAT testing window, I am practically unable to do anything but test for about 3 weeks.”<sup>14</sup>

Students with special needs are often subject to longer duration of testing than their general education peers. Some students with special needs are permitted twice as much time to complete each test. While this appears to be a gracious accommodation, the effect is that these students lose up to four hours of instructional time for each of six tests, assuming that they are not in grades 4 & 8 and using school districts’ estimate of time given to testing. This equates to more than four and a half days of instructional time.

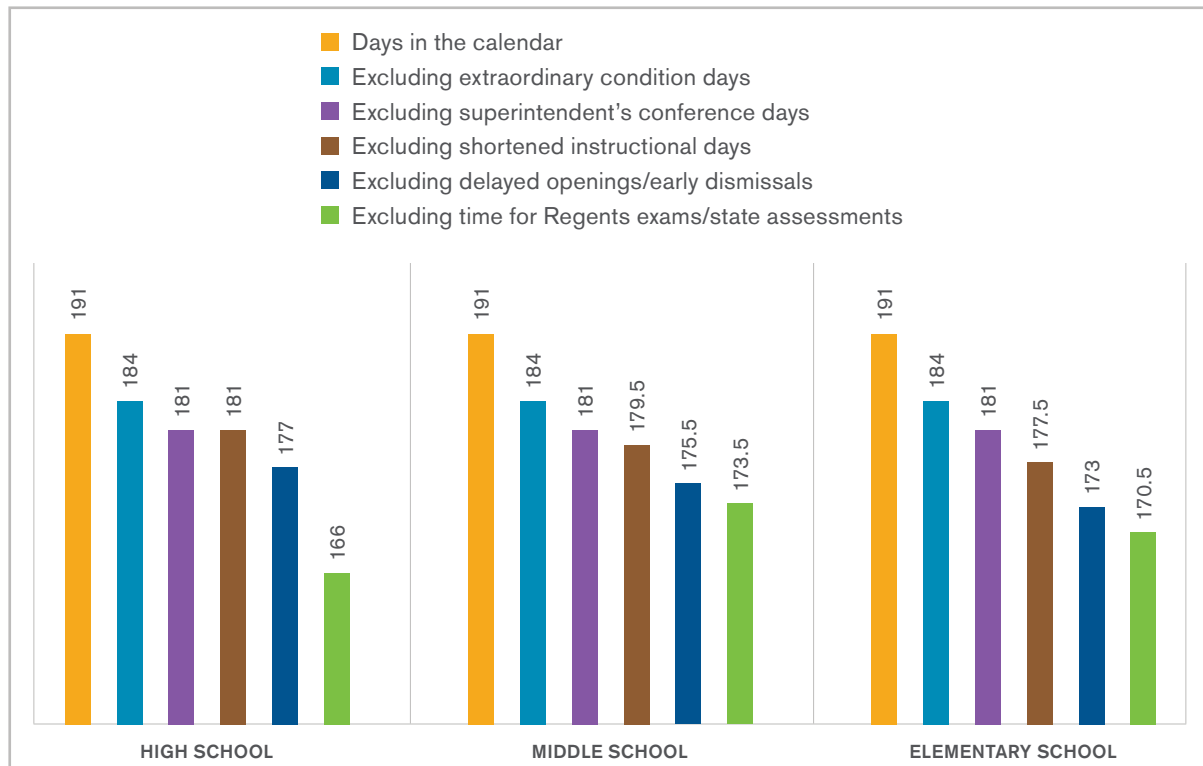
Figure 3 draws these phenomena together – superintendent’s conference days, shortened instructional days, delayed openings, early dismissals, time dedicated to state testing – to illustrate their cumulative effect on instructional time for School District S. We see that allocated time in school is reduced from the mandated 180 days to 166 days for high school, 173.5 days for middle school, and 170.5 days for elementary school (state testing grades only). That is, respectively, 8%, 4%, and 5% of the mandated “180 days of instruction,” (NYSED, 2014, p. 2) are being allocated for purposes other than instruction of students.

For School District S, we also examine another dimension of lost time: interruption to the flow of teaching and learning for special events during the school day. For this analysis, we use a taxonomy, developed by Smith (2000), which separates allocated time into good, special, and bad days.

- Good days are those in which the school day proceeds without interruption. There are no special events or assemblies. Students are in classrooms for the expected amount of time.
- Special days are those in which an unusual activity takes time away from classroom instruction. These activities can impact the entire school, a whole grade, or just one class. Such activities include assemblies, the holiday shop, book fair, picture day, watching the holiday concert, fire safety day, anti-bullying assemblies, etc. In some instances, these activities are required by New York State, such as assemblies associated with the Dignity for All Students Act, fire safety day, or physicians’ visits to perform physical exams. In these instances, it becomes clear just how much falls within the charge of our schools. Smith (2000) estimates that students in one of her study schools experienced 35 special days in the course of one year and that on these days, instructional time was reduced by between 20%-100% of the standard school day.
- Bad days are days in which unforeseen events infringe on instruction. Capital issues that impede instruction, mischief (student fights, bomb threats, false fire alarm), injury and tragedy.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 3: Instructional days for students, including all sanctioned exemptions, School District S, elementary, middle, and high school**



Because School District S was fortunate not to experience any bad days during our study period, we focus only on special days and good days. Below we list special activities for one elementary, middle, and high school in School District S and note the amount of time dedicated to these special activities, where possible. Not all students participated in all activities. Recognition for the Summer Reading Program at the elementary school was only for those children who participated in that program. The Veterans' Day breakfast at the middle school was for select students, about 90 school-wide. We specify numbers of student participants where possible. At the high school, participation in the many activities varied depending on students' participation in academic courses or extracurricular activities. Thus we account for only those events that impact the entire school or an entire grade. In addition, schools in this district made an attempt to schedule special activities during

non-instructional times, such as homeroom or lunch, so as to minimize the impact on instruction. Still, the list is long, especially for elementary school students. Moreover, this is likely an underestimation of the number of, and time dedicated to, special activities. Activities shift throughout the school year to accommodate extraordinary conditions, some activities are added, or cancelled, throughout the course of the year, and some events are not documented at all (see also Smith, 2000).

## Variety of Special Events

Again, the purpose of listing special events here is not to suggest that these are all superfluous activities, but rather to acknowledge both their institutionalized place in the annual calendar (Smith, 2000, p. 667) and the multiple sources of infringement on instructional time.

## Elementary School

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September 18 – Dictionary Project (3rd grade) (30 minutes)	Feb 23-27 – Diversity Week
October 9/10 – Fire Safety Day (45 minutes)	Feb 23 – Special Places Posters
October 15 – School pictures (30 minutes)	Feb 24 – Wear Many Colors Day
October 22 – Ventriloquist	Feb 25 – Wear Patriotic Colors Day
Oct 20-24 – PTA book fair (30 minutes)	Feb 26 – Walking Museum
Oct 27-31 – Spirit Week	Feb 27 – Diversity in music assembly (45 minutes)
November 19 – Picture retakes (30 minutes)	May 8 – Mother’s Day plant sale (15 minutes)
December 9-12 – Holiday store (20 minutes)	May 18 – 21st – PTA book fair (30 minutes)
December 22 – Career Day (4th grade, 2 hrs)	May 20 – Student Council, Act out Book (30 minutes)
January 21 – Polka Dot Day	June 16 – Field Day (all day)
Jan 20-23 – Kindness Week	June 19 – Moving Up Day (5th grade; 2 hours)
February 20 – 100th Day (K-2)	

## Middle School

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Sept 16-18 – PTA book fair (30 minutes)	November 12 – Veterans Day Breakfast (90 students; 2.5 hours)
September 19 – School pictures (30 minutes, during homeroom)	March 3-6 – PTA Book Fair (30 minutes)
Sep 20-24 – Spirit Week	March 19 – Anti-Bullying Assembly (84 minutes)
Oct 27-31 – Kindness Week	May 13-15 – Class trip (Grade 8)
October 30 – Anti-Bullying Assembly (30 minutes)	June 5 – Field Day (half day)
October 30/31 – Fire Safety Meeting (6th grade, during recess)	

## High School

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Sept 25/26 – School pictures (30 minutes)	April 23 – Scholar Athlete Recognition Breakfast
October 30 – Anti-Bullying Assembly	May 1 – Awards Breakfast
November 7 – Picture retakes (30 minutes)	May 21 – Senior Class Picnic (12th grade)
February 12 – Freshman Seminar (9th grade)	

A visual representation of good and special days, as represented below, along with sanctioned exemptions to the school calendar mentioned previously, clearly depicts the point.<sup>16</sup> Because activities and testing vary by grade, we present here a school calendar for just 4th grade.

There are numerous interruptions of the instructional flow of the school year for 4th graders: 23 special days, 20 weeks with time off from school<sup>17</sup> and 6 weeks with time off and a special event. There are 9 weeks

comprised only of good days. The remaining 31 have some kind of interruption, sometimes small (the week of May 4 has only one short special event) and sometimes significant (the week of November 17 has two shortened instructional days and a special event). Instruction in school, as Smith (2000) notes, “is nothing like the steady flow of learning we like to imagine and that students need to meet the new standards set for them. More accurately, it is a series of stop-and-go learning opportunities that compete with one another for scarce time” (p. 672).

## School calendar, School District S, elementary school, 4th grade

September 2014				
M	T	W	TH	F
1	2	3	4	5
8	9	10	11	12
15	16	17	18	19
22	23	24	25	26
29	30			

October 2014				
M	T	W	TH	F
		1	2	3
6	7	8	9	10
13	14	15	16	17
20	21	22	23	24
27	28	29	30	31

November 2014				
M	T	W	TH	F
3	4	5	6	7
10	11	12	13	14
17	18	19	20	21
24	25	26	27	28

December 2014				
M	T	W	TH	F
1	2	3	4	5
8	9	10	11	12
15	16	17	18	19
22	23	24	25	26
29	30	31		

January 2015				
M	T	W	TH	F
			1	2
5	6	7	8	9
12	13	14	15	16
19	20	21	22	23
26	27	28	29	30

February 2015				
M	T	W	TH	F
2	3	4	5	6
9	10	11	12	13
16	17	18	19	20
23	24	25	26	27








March 2015				
M	T	W	TH	F
2	3	4	5	6
9	10	11	12	13
16	17	18	19	20
23	24	25	26	27
30	31			

April 2015				
M	T	W	TH	F
		1	2	3
6	7	8	9	10
13	14	15	16	17
20	21	22	23	24
27	28	29	30	

May 2015				
M	T	W	TH	F
				1
4	5	6	7	8
11	12	13	14	15
18	19	20	21	22
25	26	27	28	29

June 2015				
M	T	W	TH	F
1	2	3	4	5
8	9	10	11	12
15	16	17	18	19
22	23	24	25	26
29	30			

### Key

-  Vacation day
-  Snow day
-  Conference day
-  Half day
-  Delays/early dismissals
-  Special event
-  Testing

## Hidden Lost Time

A final point. We have not discussed how lost time “hides” in a school schedule: in transition between classes for students in upper grades, in a schedule that could be more efficient, or in buses that depart the school premises at the designated school-end time – which means students, particularly young students, are packing up and boarding buses before the stated end of the school day. Students have to get from class to class and children need to pack their belongings at the end of the day. Still, the cumulative effect can be large.

Chart 1 below shows hours in a school day compared to actual instruction time. This analysis includes only high schools in all of our sample districts, as discrete academic periods are easily quantifiable. For this analysis, we multiply the number of minutes in each period by the number of scheduled periods each day, excluding time for lunch and time for transition between periods.

We include all periods as instruction, even though some periods are used for “supervised study activities” as allowed by NYS education law.<sup>18</sup> Recall that New York State regulations require 5.5 hours of instruction for students in grades 7-12.

Though the instructional day in high schools in our sample ranges, on paper, from 6 to 5.5 hours, the real time for instruction, when calculated in the number and duration of scheduled periods, ranges from 4.9 hours (district E) to 5.6 hours (district A), excluding time for lunch and transition between classes. Students in school district A have 45 minutes more instructional time each day than students in school district E; over the course of a school year, high school students in district A receive a total of 997 hours of instruction while high school students in school district E receive a total of 872 hours of instruction. This is a difference of 125 hours, or about 23 days, using the state mandated 5.5 hours as a day, almost 14% of school district E’s school year.

**Chart 1: Instructional hours, all sample school districts, high school**

School	Daily schedule	Number of periods (lunch excluded)	Minutes in a period	Minutes for transition	Hours in daily schedule (lunch excluded)	Hours of instruction time/day	Hours in a week/year**
A	7:35 am-2:17 pm	8	42	3	6	5.6	28/997
B	8:12 am-2:44 pm	8	40	3	5.7	5.3	26.5/946
C	8:07 am-2:36 pm	8	40	3	5.8	5.3	26.5/933
D	7:30 am-2:10 pm	7	45*	5	6	5.3	26.5/933
E	7:40 am-1:53 pm	7	42	4	5.5	4.9	24.5/872

\* One period is 50 minutes.

\*\* This analysis uses the number of weeks calculated for each school district in Figure 2.

## Creative Scheduling

As demonstrated, lost instructional time in a school day accumulates – to great effect. Some school districts attempt to maximize time by rearranging their schedules to increase instructional time, for example through the reorganization of instructional sessions or block scheduling. One district in our sample created a “pre-first” period; high school students who play an instrument arrive early to school for lessons and ensemble practice. This permits an additional core academic period for all students during the school day. Another school district (not in our sample) estimated that moving from a traditional to a block schedule added 8 instructional days to the school year. And another school district (not in our sample) restructured its schedule to increase the time in its middle school instructional periods from 41 to 49 minutes; it was able to accomplish this, in part, but reducing the time dedicated to lunch. Counting seven instructional periods, this school district added 56 minutes of instructional time to its schedule each day, amounting to an additional 30 days of instruction over its original schedule (assuming a 180-day school year). To be sure, some educators would argue against the reduction of lunch period, which many view as an important social time – and break – for students in the school day. Nevertheless, it remains an option exercised by some school districts.

These examples demonstrate that time in school may be allocated more efficiently; that creatively scheduling the school day, within the current parameters, can yield more time available to instruction. Such creative scheduling offers one way to recapture time that is lost in the school calendar. Block scheduling is one way to accomplish this; lengthening academic periods is another. Moving some electives outside of the instructional day is yet another. Each involves a trade-off; time for lunch in exchange for more academic time, a specials period which may not be as accessible to all students as it had been when scheduled during the school day (plus additional transportation costs). Nevertheless, some school districts have found ways to gain instructional time for students while accepting the current parameters of the school day and year.

## Discussion

Education law and regulation cause us to think that New York State schools provide instruction for 180 days. This is not the case. Our analysis – like those done by others – demonstrates that instructional time is eroded by multiple factors. Many are sanctioned by New York State, including superintendent’s conference days, shortened instructional days, extraordinary condition days, and required state testing. Special events take even more time away.

Often, the use of school time reflects a series of trade-offs; instructional time for students versus learning and planning time for teachers, or versus teacher-time spent communicating with families about student progress, or versus time for state-mandated assessment or state-mandated activities. We must be clear, in these instances, that this is a financial trade as well; on a superintendent’s conference day, we are buying time for teacher training and not for student instruction, and on shortened instructional days we are, often, buying the time of teachers to conference with parents the evening before. Teacher professional development is critical and itself contributes to student learning, and communication with parents is important to student learning. These trade-offs are permitted by the state, but their application is determined at the local level.

The exchange between teacher time and student time is, for the most part, a local decision. For example, School District S contracts for teacher availability for 184 days. This locally-negotiated number diminishes the impact of state-sanctioned exemptions and time for teacher learning. This district can convene its superintendent’s conference days without impinging on the 180 days of student instruction. School district C, on the other hand, begins at 180 and so must detract from instructional time for students in order to accommodate teacher professional development. Regarding this set of tradeoffs, Smith (2000) acknowledges that teachers do “require opportunities . . . to plan, coordinate, and reflect together. But they should not trade student time for teacher time. And in the end,” she says, “the crux of both agendas is to find ways to separate the design of teachers’ work and learning from that of students” (p. 675).



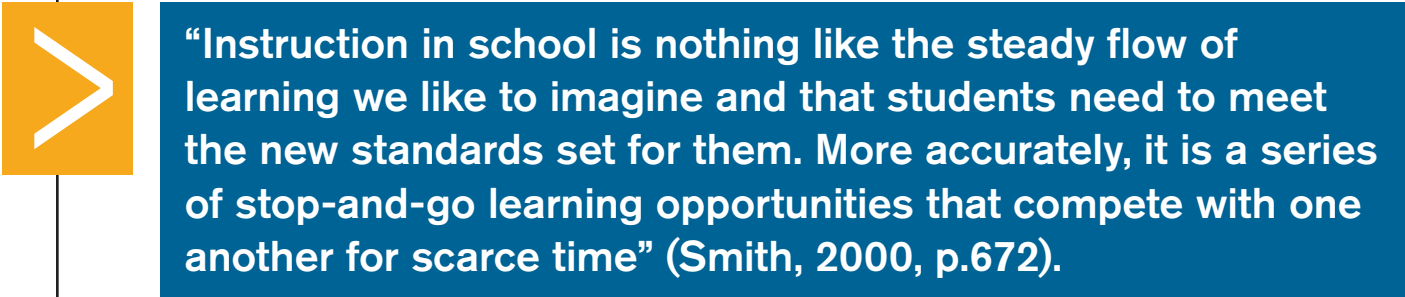
Of greatest concern are the instances where there appears to be no clear rationale for lost student instructional time. For example, in some school districts the last few days of elementary and middle school are shortened instructional days during which students are dismissed but teachers are not. School district A has four shortened days during the last week of school; this contractual obligation does not specify how the time will be used. The same holds in School District S. When queried about this practice, administrators said that this time is used for report cards and closing down the school year.

Decisions made at the school-level have more of an impact on the flow of instruction, as opposed to substantial time lost. Most activities on our list of school-based events take only 30-45 minutes. And many, though certainly not all, add value by building community or imparting critical (sometimes required) information. However, it should be noted that this analysis is conservative. Instructional time lost to special activities at the school level is likely much greater than our research methodology was able to capture. We have heard many stories, and read much research (Smith, 2000), about unplanned interruptions that wreak havoc on a teacher's attempt to implement a carefully-developed and deliberately scheduled lesson plan. Such unplanned interruptions come in many forms, from the Santa who walks up and down the halls before winter break to the fire truck demonstrating its siren on fire safety day and disrupting students even when it is not their class's turn to visit with the fire safety officers. Transition time – the time that it takes to get students to the special event and then resettled afterwards – is also not measured here. Finally, classroom-based activities are not accounted

for in our analysis, even though a look through teacher pages on some school district websites across the state indicates that parties and celebrations are a regular occurrence.

Consideration for – and acknowledgement of – such instructional interruption should shape the development of the school calendar. This may happen to some degree, though special events sponsored by parent organizations, book fairs for example, are usually planned around the schedule of the sponsor. Nevertheless, school-based conversations that include parents, teachers, and administrators in decisions about the kind of activities that are valued and how they are placed in the calendar are important, especially considering the context of all of the other disruptions of instructional time. Should retakes of school portraits, or the Holiday Shop during which students purchase small gifts for their families, or arranging students in the shape of the numerical year (i.e. 2015) for an aerial photograph for the yearbook trump instruction because they build a school's sense of community? Are they worth the disruption – and the time lost – to the instructional day? Such questions should be considered in the planning of the school year.

We know that we appear to be curmudgeonly here. We know it is a special treat to watch the occasional movie in class or to have parties to celebrate the many holidays that occur throughout the year. We believe that there is a place for those special events. Nevertheless, we also believe that these special events are sometimes too plentiful. And we persist in believing that effective use of the scarce and expensive time resource, and therefore effective education, requires that school communities be more careful about the number – and timing – of such activities.



**“Instruction in school is nothing like the steady flow of learning we like to imagine and that students need to meet the new standards set for them. More accurately, it is a series of stop-and-go learning opportunities that compete with one another for scarce time” (Smith, 2000, p.672).**

## Conclusion

In none of the school districts in our study sample are students receiving the promised 180 days of instruction. An initial look at school calendars suggests that the loss is minimal; 2 to 4 days, depending on the district. A closer look shows that far more time is lost; elementary students in School District S lost 9.5 days (in the testing grades), middle school students lost 6.5 days, and high school students lost 14 days as a result of delayed openings and early dismissals, shortened instructional days, superintendent's conference days and required state testing. This amounts to 5%, 4%, and 8% of the promised instructional time in a school year, respectively. The time lost increases when special events are added to the list. And, just as important is the flow of instruction which, our research demonstrates, is regularly interrupted by non-instructional events.

Causes of lost instructional time can be traced to different levels of decision-making; New York State allows student time to be traded for testing or teacher professional development; school districts agree with local bargaining units to permit shortened instructional days at the end of the school year; and schools schedule a myriad of special activities during the day. The key is the aggregate effect: significantly less focus on instruction than is required by law. Each departure from the schools' primary mission may seem attractive, even important. But it is crucial to adopt a systemic perspective of school time and view the whole picture when determining the schedule of district and school-based activities. These are the key questions: Which activities support and enhance the educational process – either by providing information or building a school culture – and which are just a function of tradition? Which offer the best educational environment for students and teachers? Are there ways to support teacher growth and learning without infringing on student learning time?

It is possible to recapture some time through creative scheduling of the school day, as indicated above. Transitioning to a block schedule gave one district eight more days – this accounts for 4% of instructional time, which could, in essence, negate the effect of time lost to state-sanctioned allowances. Likewise, lengthening the time in each academic period can also compensate for instructional time that is lost in the calendar. Or, we could think about both the calendar and the school schedule in tandem; being creative about scheduling the school day and deliberate about the placement of professional development and special events could yield substantially more instructional time than is traditionally given to students.

We have only 180 days. Time lost cannot be regained. We can work within the current framework to gain more instructional time. Let's make sure we use what we have well.

## Why 180 days?

In the early days of public education, the length of time in school was locally-determined. Rural school schedules were built around the economic (often agricultural) needs of the community, open often for only 3 to 6 months out of the year. Urban schools tended to be “open” for 11 to 12 months out of the year, though students did not attend all of that time (Virginia State Department of Education, 1992). Industrialization, immigration, and urbanization, along with other social and demographic forces, created a demand for an educated workforce; in the late nineteenth century, compulsory school attendance laws became commonplace across the country. At the same time, professional educators, as part of the progressive movement, sought to standardize the school year and school day (Coppell et al., 1992). Under the influence of these forces, rural schools began to increase the length of their school year to 140 days and urban schools began to decrease the number of days in the calendars to 195 (Johnson & Spradlin, 2007).

The familiar September to June school schedule was shaped by agricultural demands and also the determination to keep children – and teachers – out of school during the hot months of summer (Virginia State Department of Education, 1992; Barrett, 1990; Coppell et al, 1992; Cuban, 2007). By the end of World War II, school calendars across the country ranged from 170 to 180 days; this persists today, with most states requiring 180 days in the school year (Coppell, 1992; Rowland, 2014). Despite the diversity of educational and economic character of local communities and the value placed on local control of education, the 180-day school year and the 8 to 12 week summer break is standard and expected.

The 180-day school year has been a fixture in New York State for over a century. An 1874 law required most children to attend school at least 70 days a year, although this measure was not well-enforced (Finegan, 1914, p. 222). In 1894, concern about child labor and the “menace” of the “prevailing extent of illiteracy” instigated the passage of a stricter compulsory attendance law, which required children ages 8 to 12 to attend school for 130 days (Finegan, 1913, p. 78; see also Folts, 1996). Universal School Attendance laws increased this requirement to 160 days in 1896. In 1913, the requirement was increased yet again to 180 days; this number has remained ensconced in law ever since (Folts, 1996, p. 16; see also Universal School Attendance Law, Laws of the State of New York 1913, chapter 511, p. 1354).

Concern about the “dissemination of education among all classes and in all sections of the state” (Finegan, 1913, p. 78) and the prevalence of child labor (Folts, 1996) resulted in compulsory school attendance laws and the standardization of the school year. However, it is unclear why or how policymakers arrived at the figure of 180. Moreover, there appears to be no pedagogical rationale behind this number. After an extensive search, we queried a colleague from the Education Commission of the States who conducts research about the length of the school year. Her response: “I can’t say that I have run across anything defending the 180-day school year in particular from a pedagogical viewpoint” (personal correspondence, January 22, 2015).

## Author Bios

Robin Jacobowitz, PhD, is the director of education projects at the Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach (CRREO) at SUNY New Paltz. Previously, Robin worked with Janice Hirota and Associates on an evaluation of school reform initiatives in New Orleans, Washington DC, New York City, and Dallas. She also worked at New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy, where her research centered on the growth and development of charter schools in New York State, the organizational structures that facilitate teaching and learning in New York City small high schools, and leadership transitions in new schools in New York City. She worked with the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children, where her research focused on the relationship between constituency building and policy work in effecting systemic school reform in New York State. Prior to beginning her career in research, Robin worked with the Public Education Network in Washington DC, where she provided technical assistance to local education funds around the country on issues of school governance, school health, and public engagement. Robin holds a MEd in education policy from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, and a Ph.D. from the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University. She is currently a trustee on the Kingston City School District Board of Education and serves on the executive committee of the Ulster County School Boards Association.

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**Editorial Staff:** Gerald Benjamin, Janis Benincasa

### Sources

For a complete list of works cited for this paper please reference the electronic version at [www.newpaltz.edu/crreo](http://www.newpaltz.edu/crreo)

### Citation

Jacobowitz, Robin, Kayser, Micaela (2015), Erosion of Instructional Time (CRREO Discussion Brief 14, Spring 2015). New Paltz, NY: State University of New York at New Paltz Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach.

### Comment

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## Acknowledgements

Many people contributed to the development of this report. Several administrators in School District S gave generously of their time and provided documentation and school-based calendars that aided in our analysis of instructional time in their school district. Stephanie Barrett, education specialist with the New York State Library, helped trace the history of the length of the school year in New York State. Gerald Benjamin and Janis Benincasa provided much appreciated substantive and editorial guidance.

Finally, this work would not have been possible without the support of the Community Foundation of Orange and Sullivan, John Christopher Smith Fund, The Ralph E Ogden Foundation, Jay Anthony, Richard J. Smith, and the Ottaway Family.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/lawsregs/3205.html>

<sup>2</sup> New York State Education Department, Information and Reporting Services. Figure is for the 2012-13 school year. [http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/statistics/enroll-n-staff/2013-14/School\\_District\\_Enrollment\\_1994-95-to-2012-13\\_Statewide\\_Totals.pdf](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/statistics/enroll-n-staff/2013-14/School_District_Enrollment_1994-95-to-2012-13_Statewide_Totals.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Within this, school districts must still abide by regulations that dictate a certain number of instructional hours per week. “***During the week in which the shortened instruction days occur, the minimum number of hours of instruction for the week still must be provided:*** 25 hours for elementary schools and 27.5 hours for secondary schools, excluding lunch. . . This means that only districts that normally provide more than the minimum hours of instruction per week can conduct shortened instruction days that count *toward* the required 180 days” (NYSED, 2014, pp. 4, emphasis in original). Many schools operate each day for more than the required 5/5.5 hours, even after accounting for lunch – although this is not all instructional time, as we demonstrate later. The “extra” time creates a buffer so that in weeks where there are shortened instructional days students are still receiving the weekly hourly minimum required by the State. But at the same time, the State prohibits the use of extra hours for fulfilling the 180-day requirement. “Since statute requires a minimum of 180 days of session, school districts cannot extend the regular school day and count extended times as additional days of session to make up lost days” (NYSED 2014, pp. 2). This suggests that extra “buffer” hours can be applied in only certain circumstances.

<sup>4</sup> These days count toward fulfilling the 180 required days of instruction, however, attendance, for the purpose of claiming State Aid, cannot be assumed on these days (NYSED, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> This figure is for “well-managed” classrooms where little time is lost to problems associated with classroom management, and so is, in essence, an analysis of allocated time. Smith estimates greater losses for students in poorly-managed classrooms (p. 670). See also Rossmiller, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> The Hudson Valley includes the counties of Columbia, Dutchess, Greene, Orange, Putnam, Rockland, Sullivan, Ulster and Westchester.

<sup>7</sup> This is a measure of poverty and local resource capacity, specific to New York State. It is a ratio of estimated poverty and Combined Wealth Ratio (CWR), relative to other school districts in New York State. <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/accountability/2011-12/NeedResourceCapacityIndex.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> The average enrollment of school districts in New York is 2,268; 26% of New York public school districts enroll between 1001-2000 students, 20% enroll between 501-1000 students, and 15% enroll fewer than 500 students. Overall, student enrollment has been declining in New York’s public schools. Enrollment declined in 83% of New York’s districts over the past decade; 1/3 of these districts experienced declines of between 10-20% (New NY State Reform Education Commission, 2012, pp. 14-15).

<sup>9</sup> This analysis uses a 5.5 hour-a-day mandate for grades 7-12 and the mandated 5 hours for grades k-6.

<sup>10</sup> School districts are not required to administer Regents exams in January, but many do because it increases the pass-rate (Otterman, 2011; see also King & Grey, 2011). Regents exams are also administered in August.

<sup>11</sup> This district originally planned 12 days for Regents’ administration, but one day was lost to weather. In our 5 sample districts, the number of days of Regents’ administration spans 8-12 days in January and June.

<sup>12</sup> The time allotted for tests varies by grade – 420 minutes for grade 3, 440 minutes for grade 4, 540 minutes for grade 5-8 (math and ELA only) (Feeney, 2013). School district S estimates that it takes 2 hours to administer these tests for all grades, given time to prepare the classroom, ensure children have eaten breakfast, settle children in seats, distribute test materials, read directions, etc. These activities likely take longer for younger grades.

<sup>13</sup> This analysis uses the state-mandated 5-hour school day for grades 3-6 and the 5.5 day mandate for grades 7 & 8.

<sup>14</sup> Personal correspondence, February, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Smith (2000) notes five such days in one year in her research (p. 664).

<sup>16</sup> Again, following Smith’s analysis (2000).

<sup>17</sup> Including extraordinary condition days and delayed openings/early dismissals due to extraordinary conditions; excluding winter and spring vacation periods.

<sup>18</sup> Education Law, section 175.5, [www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/lawsregs/175-5.html](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/lawsregs/175-5.html)



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