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The Flexible Policy for the Seventh Period/ Extended School Day in Florida

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ABSTRACT. Between 1983 and 1985 the Florida Legislature enacted legislation which increased the credits required for high school graduation and the closely related length and configuration of the school day. This study examined the perceptions of members of the Superintendents' Task Force on the Seventh Period/Extended School Day, members and staff of the Florida Legislature's Education Committees and Appropriations Committees, and personnel from the Florida Department of Education regarding the flexible nature of the implementation policy. Specifically, it addresses the following considerations: the rationale and goals for the current policy, its anticipated effects on students, parents, teachers, and administrators and the anticipated impact of mandated implementation requirements.

Between 1983 and 1985 the Florida Legislature enacted a number of educational initiatives for improving the quality of education and the academic performance of the students in the state. These initiatives have generated interest and debate among educators within Florida and nationally. Many of the legislative actions were aimed at the high school-level. At the

center of these changes was an increase in the credits required for high school graduation, and the closely related seventh period or extended school day. The manner in which school districts meet the graduation requirements has been the subject of continued discussion since the initial legislation in 1983.

Following a summary of relevant legislative initiatives pertaining to graduation requirements and the seventh period or extended school day policies, this study examines the flexible nature of the state's policy for the seventh period or extended school day for grades 9 through 12. The phrase "flexible nature" refers to the differentially funded options for the length and number of periods in the school day, grades 9 through 12, as provided in Florida's 1984 and 1985 General Appropriations Acts.

1983-1986 Legislative Initiatives

In 1983 the Florida Legislature passed Raising Achievement in Secondary Education (RAISE), (Chapter 83-324, Fla. Laws) which mandated that high school students earn a minimum of 24 credits in order to graduate, beginning with the 1987 graduating class. RAISE also specified the content areas in which most of these credits were to be earned. Prior to RAISE, district school boards had the authority to set the number and kinds of graduation credits. Clearly, these new graduation requirements have necessitated substantial academic credit shifts, additional courses, and greater numbers of classroom periods in many school districts.

Although the full 24-credit graduation requirement would not take effect until 1986-1987, RAISE did require students graduating in 1984-1985 to fulfill the requirements for three credits in both mathematics and science. The 1984-1985 class was therefore given only two years to earn the newly required six credits in mathematics and science. Consequently, the 1983-1984 Legislature appropriated additional funds to encourage districts to provide the increased instructional time for students to take the science and mathematics courses needed to graduate.

A companion bill to RAISE, also passed in 1983

(Chapter 83-327, Fla. Laws), redefined an FTE from 900 hours of student participation to 1,050 hours, and it required that a school day for grades 9 through 12 consist of a minimum of seven periods per day. This legislation was later amended to take effect only to the extent that appropriations for the requirements were authorized. For most districts, compliance with the 1,050 hours and seven period requirements would mean increasing the total number of annual hours of instruction, increasing the number of periods in the school day, or increasing both the hours of instruction and the number of periods. The statutory requirement for 900 instructional hours/FTE is based on the assumption that a student would be enrolled in six class periods of 50 minutes each for a 180 day school year. The 1,050 hours can be met by a 50 minute, seven period day for a 180 day school year or by an extended day with six, sixty minute periods for the 180 day school year.

During this same session, the Legislature also required that, starting with the 1983-1984 ninth graders, students would be required to maintain a 1.5 cumulative average on a 4.0 scale in all courses required for graduation. The same grade point average was required in all courses for which graduation credit was earned in order for a student to participate in interscholastic extracurricular activities.

During the 1984-1985 session, the Legislature chose to provide additional funding as an incentive for districts to choose to increase instructional time by including in its appropriation for the Florida Educational Finance Program (FEFP) additional funds for the extended school day. However, the appropriation language differentiated between the districts already meeting the 1,050 hour requirement with six 60-minute periods and the districts meeting the requirement with seven 50-minute periods; additional funds were designated for districts implementing the latter strategy. In addition, the Legislature also provided additional categorical dollars for transportation and instructional materials to help implement the required high school graduation requirements and expenses required for a longer school day. During this session, the Legislature also man-

dated the seven period/1,050 hour requirement for the 1985-1986 academic year.

The 1985-1986 Legislature continued the differentiated FTE funding for the six 60-minute or seven 50-minute periods and categorical supplements for instructional materials and transportation. In addition, the Legislature repealed the earlier provision mandating the seven period/1,050 hour high school year.

Current Policy

At the present time, although the 24-credit graduation requirement continues, there is no requirement of districts to implement a 1,050 hour FTE. For districts that do require 1,050 hours per year, the methods of implementation are within their authority to establish. However, the differential funding favoring the seven 50-minute periods is still in effect.

During the 1984-1985 and 1985-1986 school years, school districts received additional differentiated funding to implement a six period school day with 60 or more minute periods and/or a seven period school day with 50 or more minute periods for grades 9 through 12. The funds were distributed on a membership basis to provide more dollars per full-time students attending seven 50-minute periods. Students in grades 9 through 12 attending less than six 60-minute periods or seven 50-minute periods during the school day did not qualify for additional funding. The differentiated funding options provided money beyond the regularly funded Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP). This flexible policy resulted in implementation strategies which differ among and within school districts. According to the Florida Department of Education (1986), as of January 1986, 63 of the 67 districts had one or more schools implementing the seven 50-minute period strategy; only one school district (Lee County) did not participate in either option for the 7th period/extended school day. Differentiated funding was continued by the Legislature for the 1986-1987 school year.

Purpose of the Study

In anticipation of continued debate during the 1986-1987 legislative session, the Florida Association of District Superintendents (FADS) requested an examination of present attitudes of key groups about continuing the flexible seven period/extended school day policy. The study was designed to address:

1. The rationale for the current flexible policy.
2. The intended goals of the policy.
3. The anticipated effects on students of seven periods versus extended six periods.
4. The anticipated effects on teachers, administrators and parents of seven periods versus extended six periods.
5. The anticipated impact of mandated implementation requirements.

Methods

To determine whether there is sufficient support for a flexible seven period/extended school day policy, members of the Superintendent's Task Force on the Seventh Period/Extended School Day, members of the Florida Legislature (House and Senate members and Education Committee and Appropriations Committee staff), and officials from the Florida Department of Education were surveyed. A total of 17 individuals responded to survey/interviews during February 1986. A preliminary draft of the findings was completed in March 1986, and it was sent to members of the Superintendent's Task Force for validation and final review purposes. Each member of the Task Force was asked whether the report reflected what they believed to be the consensus of the Florida Association of District Superintendents in terms of: (1) the rationale for current policy; (2) intended policy goals; (3) anticipated effect on students of seven 50-minute verses extended six periods; (4) anticipated effect on teachers, administrators, and parents; and (5) impact of mandated requirements. Without exception, Task Force respondents agreed that they believed the report reflected the consensus of the Florida

Association of District Superintendents. In addition, several comments were offered to help clarify or add additional information, and the substance of all such comments were incorporated in the report.

There may be important sampling biases in the sampling procedure. As a result, the findings should not be construed to necessarily reflect the views of all superintendent's in the state, although the superintendent's task force validated the study with the other districts in mind. Additionally, this study should not be construed to reflect the views of the average policy maker or Department of Education official in the state. The data describe the opinions of active and informed members of the state's educational policy-making community who currently occupy positions of influence or authority. While this limitation is real and important, the primary interest was not to predict what all superintendents and state policy community people believed about the flexible policy.

In reviewing the responses by group, e.g., superintendents, legislators/legislative staff, and DOE officials, there did not appear to be any group that held a distinctly different view from another, although there were individuals who differed. For this reason, the responses from all groups were combined in the presentation of the results.

Results

Rationale for Current Flexible Policy

Respondents were asked what they believed to be the rationale for the current flexible policy, i.e. why a flexible policy was thought to be more desirable than a mandated implementation strategy such as requiring a seven period day and 1,050 hour/FTE for all districts. Virtually all respondents believed the flexible policy had been preferred as an effective compromise between conflicting opinions. The conflict centered on differing proposed strategies for increasing school time, accommodating the unique conditions that exist among school districts, and accommodating other considerations such as the adequacy of legislative appropriations for new policies and the lack of imple-

mentation time between the close of the legislative sessions and the beginning of the school year.

Approximately one-half of the respondents commented on the permanent/temporary status of the flexible policy. These respondents noted tension between the proponents of the seven periods, who view this strategy as clearly desirable and consider the flexible policy as transitional to increase school districts' acceptance and adoption of the increased school day, and other groups who prefer to maintain the flexibility of the policy. Respondents representative of the latter view prefer the state to maintain a role in setting educational goals, in this case increased time in school, and the school districts to establish their own strategies for attaining the goals.

Intended Goals of the Policy

Respondents were asked to indicate what they saw as the intended goals of the seven period/extended school day policy. A list of possible goals were offered based on findings from earlier interviews (Berger et al., 1985). Respondents were also asked to identify perceived goals not included in the list.

Generally, respondents believed that there was a two-part goal: (1) to increase the quantity and variety of academic classes for students, 13 of the 17 respondents; and (2) to implement the 24-credit high school graduation requirement, 13 of the 17 respondents. A fewer number of respondents, 9 of the 17, indicated that a goal of the policy was to increase the quantity and variety of non-academic classes such as art and music for students. Only one-third of the respondents, 6 of the 17, cited the goal of the policy as increasing academic class time for students without increasing the variety of academic classes per student.

Other goals identified by respondents included: (a) increasing non-academic class time for students without increasing the variety of non-academic classes for students (3 respondents), (b) making the school day and school year generally more rigorous (3 respondents), and (c) implementing the Academic Scholars Program by increasing the amount of student

participation in academic courses (1 respondent).

Anticipated Effects on Students for Seven Periods Versus Extended Six Periods

One question in the survey/interview asked respondents to assess the relative effects on students of the two major implementation strategies (the seven periods and the extended six periods). In a related question, respondents were asked to cite the primary advantages and disadvantages of the two strategies. The responses to these two questions overlapped considerably and thus were combined.

A particular concern expressed by several superintendents dealt with the potential dropout problem which could result from the combined impact of the 24-hour graduation requirement, the extended school day, and the 1.5 point grade point average requirement. Depending upon the ability of students and their disposition toward school and graduation, a number of new dropout-related scenarios could result from these policies. For example, the following types of students might be more inclined to consider or to actually drop out: (a) the students pressured or bored by an increased number of periods or longer periods on top of a day already perceived to be too long, (b) the hard working, below average students who want to stay in school but either lack the ability or the motivation to achieve a 1.5 average, and (c) the hard working students who enroll in a variety of academic classes and find that their grade point average has dropped below the 1.5 minimum graduation point average set by the state.

Advantages of extended six periods. By far the most frequently cited advantages of the extended six period day were more time in class and school for students and more in-depth exposure within subjects. At least three respondents noted that more time in class was especially meaningful in laboratory situations, and one respondent commented that the six period strategy would place greater emphasis on required subjects. Other advantages of this strategy, which were not directly related to student effects, included: (a) the transition to the extended six-period day is

easier for many school districts than the transition to the seven-period day, (b) the strategy is less costly than the seven-period alternative, and (c) the assignment of more teaching time per teacher is more efficient.

Disadvantages of extended six periods. The disadvantages of the extended six period day were more numerous and more frequently mentioned than were the advantages. Foremost among the disadvantages was that the extended six period day did not provide enough opportunities for electives, other courses, or learning. This disadvantage was cited more than twice as often as any other. Other disadvantages, in descending order of frequency of mention, included: (a) little or no room for failure, especially given the 24-credit graduation requirement and the 26-credit Florida Scholars requirement; (b) harm to vocational education programs, (c) increased time on task is a debatable issue since more time may be wasted; (d) increased length of school day maybe too tiring for students; (e) increased retention rates and summer school enrollments; (f) decreased flexibility for students; and (g) increased benefits for only a select group of students.

Advantages of the seven period day. The advantages of the seven period day were somewhat more numerous than those mentioned for the extended six period day. The most frequently mentioned advantages related directly to student effects. Foremost among these was that this strategy allows students to meet the 24-credit graduation requirement with allowances for both variety in their courses and for possible "slippage," i.e. failing or not completing a course. The increased variety of coursework associated with the seven period day is the basis for the next two most frequently cited advantages of this strategy, namely that there are more learning opportunities available, and the added flexibility better meets students' needs, including opportunities for vocational education and electives. Other advantages of the seven period day mentioned included: (a) students are better able to meet college entrance credit requirements, (b) the time in class may be more "quality" time, (c) it may save some academic programs, and (d)

additional money will be available for programs.

Disadvantages of the seven period day. The disadvantages of the seven period day were less numerous and less frequently mentioned than were the advantages. They tended to be split among the effects on the students, the administration, and the teachers. The most frequently mentioned disadvantage was that it requires more resources such as physical space, teachers, and materials, not all of which are recovered by State allocations for the program. The second most frequently mentioned disadvantage was that the seven period day represents extra work and homework for the student. In this vein, the seven period day is difficult for students who hold after school jobs as well as those who are involved in extracurricular, personal (e.g. church groups), or family activities. This strategy is expected to have adverse effects on the teacher supply, especially in rural areas and, where online teachers are asked to pick up the increased teaching load, there will be more teacher preparation required and more teacher burnout expected. Transportation and scheduling difficulties were also cited, especially where junior high schools which include the ninth grade are on different schedules than the associated high schools. A possible increase in the drop-out rate was also mentioned.

Anticipated Effects on Teachers, Administrators, and Parents

In addition to describing effects on students, respondents were also asked to identify effects of the two implementation strategies on teachers, administrators, and parents.

Effect of Extended Six Periods. In terms of the extended six periods strategy, the most notable positive effect on teachers cited by the respondents was more actual teaching time. On the negative side respondents noted that (a) it may be more difficult to sustain quality instruction for 60 minutes, especially for the marginal teacher; (b) there will be less planning time for teachers; and (c) there will be less time for faculty meetings and parent conferences.

For administrators, anticipated effects of the extended six period day included only negative effects. They were: (a) scheduling problems, with increased summer school participation; (b) possibly greater discipline problems if students are bored with the longer period; (c) transportation problems related to offcampus vocational education participation; (d) problems by weakening vocational education programs; (e) difficulties communicating with teachers if less time is available for faculty meetings; and (g) problems related to hiring of new teachers.

For parents, the extended six period days may mean different schedules for children within the same family and opportunities for fewer conferences with the teacher.

Effects of seven periods. On the positive side of seven period days for teachers, if more teachers are hired to cover the additional teaching load, teachers may have more planning time if they teach five out of seven classes, or they may receive extra compensation for an increased teaching load if they teach six out of the seven classes. Additionally, there could be increased flexibility in the special use classrooms, such as science laboratories and music rooms.

Seven period days may adversely affect teachers if teaching assignments are extended to cover seven periods rather than hiring new teachers to cover the additional periods. Adverse effects on teachers may also include teacher burnout, lower quality of teaching, and morale problems. There could also be more classes per teacher with an accompanying increase in preparation, papers to grade, and fatigue from additional teaching time. There also may be some inequity in compensation if some teachers are paid to prepare for six classes while others are required to teach the same amount of time yet do not receive the extra compensation.

Positive aspects of the seven period days for administrators include more flexibility in student scheduling and the ability to maintain the viability of vocation programs.

Significant problems for administrators related to seven period days include: (a) transporting students with schools operating on different schedules; (b)

supervising students waiting for buses if teachers leave before students; (c) locating and hiring additional qualified teachers; (d) providing elective courses for students; (e) maintaining an acceptable student to teacher ratio, space, and scheduling for additional classes; (f) evaluating teachers and monitoring their certification requirements related to greater course variety; (g) locating funds when costs exceed state appropriations for the program, and; (h) diverting district funds from other priorities when implementation costs exceed state appropriations for the program.

For parents, the benefits of the seven period days include a greater variety of courses for their children and greater availability of teachers for conferences during the school day. On the disadvantage side, seven periods may interfere with their children's after school work schedule. Parents additionally will be affected to the extent that their children can handle the increased requirements and class loads Both extended six period and seven period days are expected to affect parents since they must face the previously mentioned problems that affect students, such as a longer, more tiring day and different school day and busing schedules than younger siblings.

Impact of Mandated Requirements

Respondents were asked what they believe would be the impact of a policy which did not allow districts flexible implementation, i.e. a policy that mandated or prescribed implementation requirements for each district. The problematic aspects of a mandated policy were noted most frequently. They included the political difficulties of removing district prerogatives and the practical difficulties, especially in the rural districts, of transportation, teacher supply and reassignment, and grade organization. Some respondents felt a mandated policy would force districts to make choices not in the best interests of their students and to respond to the requirements with minimum compliance measures. Specifically, it was commented that a mandated policy would be devastating to voca-

tional education programs. On the positive side, a fewer number of respondents indicated that once the transition period was over, there would be no serious problems with a mandated policy. One respondent pointed out the fact that uniformity in school districts would benefit students transferring within the state.

Other Comments from Respondents

Respondents were asked if they had other comments regarding the current flexible policy. Their comments are summarized below:

1. There is no need to mandate since the goals have been achieved, i.e. more hours.
2. All of the arguments for flexibility of implementation indirectly relate to the credit requirements. If we need flexibility regarding periods, we need flexibility regarding credits.
3. The main issue with the current flexible policy is the uncertainty of future legislative direction. Year-to-year planning is very difficult and leaves parents, students, teachers, and especially administrators in a position of being unable to make multi-year program commitments.
4. It is better to allow the flexibility, then learn from what the districts do.
5. The State should mandate performance and then let the districts establish means. This would help keep school districts from using their energy fighting the prescription.
6. The 24-credit graduation requirement should have been 22 hours. Seven periods are desirable basically because of the 24-credit requirement; if it were 22, then other options would be available for districts.
7. If the 24-credit requirement stands (which is okay), greater emphasis and incentives should be placed on seven period days by increasing the appropriation for seven periods by 50 percent.
8. If the 24-credit requirement remains, most schools will come around to seven periods.

Overall, this study indicates that a sample of district school superintendents, legislators and their staff, and Department of Education officials believe that the purpose of the extended school day is related to the increased high school graduation requirements and to the desire to increase the quantity and variety of academic courses for students. An apparent consensus favors continuing a flexible implementation policy, with increased funding for eligible 50-minute seven period FTE student, so that the districts' uniqueness may be accommodated and district autonomy can be maintained. Current patterns and comments made in response to this survey indicate that the seven 50-minute period option is likely to remain the predominant implementation strategy unless the Legislature modifies the current 24-hour high school graduation requirement.

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