

Oregon must make a deeper case for student 'seat time' requirements: Editorial Agenda 2015



Students tackle schoolwork in a first-grade room at Banks Elementary. The state is considering changing rules governing instructional time. (Betsy Hammond/The Oregonian)

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Thanks to a group of dedicated Portland parents, the **state Department of Education** last year found **Portland Public Schools** to be shorting students on classroom instruction time and in creating an environment in which students could take less than a full course load. The obvious price of the practice is that students ultimately graduate having had significantly less instruction than peers in other states, putting them at a disadvantage. PPS said it had reduced its capacity owing to funding cuts.

Since then, PPS has worked to change its ways and the education department has worked hard to strengthen instructional minimums with a decision on them by the state's **Board of Education** set for mid-January. But several discoveries about how things actually play out in Oregon public schools were made along the way.

At the time the parents filed their complaint against PPS, in late 2013, a state official noted that school districts statewide had enjoyed a pass for two years against submitting any paperwork to the state to document their compliance with instructional time requirements. More recently, at a state hearing in November, the **Oregon School Boards Association** claimed that the education department had in its possession data showing "around 70 school districts" were falling short of instructional time in the early grades. The OSBA went on to suggest that the apparent deficiencies "are likely linked to locally driven education decisions for funding insufficiency. For example, some districts have chosen to keep class sizes small (20-25) in the early grades. They may have chosen to keep art, music, PE, counselors or librarians instead of offering more class time. Or they may simply lack the resources to add more time." Separately, **The Oregonian's Laura Frazier** reported that several high schools near Portland – in Lake Oswego, Beaverton and Hillsboro – had been found also to be in violation of meeting state minimums. It's fair to say the Portland parents opened a can of worms.

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Instructional time is sometimes referred to as "seat time." It is valuable and represents the time a student is in class learning subject matter and participating in teacher-led discussions that deepen understanding. But many educators have found that seat time can be empty time if the class is poorly configured or oversized, and if the student is disinclined to learn because of problems at home or lacks an imperative to learn at all. The result is that best learning outcomes are sometimes fostered by non-class efforts that shore up a student's sense of purpose or allow teachers to ensure the instruction time they provide is cogent, compelling and lasting.

Steve Callaway, principal at **[Tobias Elementary School in Aloha](#)**, told state officials in November that financial strain on schools had forced difficult choices, and he asked that the state slow down and learn the terrain better to get things right. He argued that students at Tobias were seeing measurable achievement not only because of seat time but because teachers were planning together and, a hearing officer's report states, "receiving professional development that is targeted, specific and purposeful." Callaway also testified that a key predictor of student success at Tobias is the partnership between parents and teachers. More than anything, however, he went straight to the heart of what we mean when we talk about seat time. The hearing officer's report assigns to Callaway this summation: "If definition of instructional time does not include time for

professional development and collaboration or parent-teacher conferences, these things that are having the most impact on student achievement may be reduced or eliminated."

Several school districts, along with the OSBA, have asked the state to study more deeply the things that work and do not work before ordering up new instruction minimums or requiring that more students take full course loads. They also ask, predictably, for a delay by the state board to see how much money the Legislature ponies up for education in this year's session. The first request is alone sufficient for the state Board of Education to hit the brakes and drill more deeply. Money will always be in play, but no amount of it can turn empty time into time well-spent.

