

Schools to be given power to set their own day

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The United Kingdom coalition government has announced that they are going to give all schools in England the power to set the start, end and length of their school day. A sensible measure? Well, I can see two issues here.

First, a clear negative one. This move seems firmly linked to the idea that increasing educational attainment requires increasing directed teaching time. The School's Minister for England, Nick Gibb MP, cites the example of Milton Keynes Academy which has recently altered its school day and,

... added five hours to its weekly timetable, which now totals 30 hours per week. Lessons begin at 08:30 every morning and this has allowed the school to teach an hour of both literacy and numeracy every day."¹

The Academy's website makes a point of reminding parents that this new regime has resulted in a school day that is three hours over the national norm.² A move like this is reminiscent of the reaction by the Irish Government to the consistent underperformance of its schooling when compared across the European Union. Rather than increasing the school day however the Irish solution to this has been a proposal to increase the time spent teaching some subjects by reducing the time allocated to others.³ The premise however is the same – educational outcomes are fostered by additional teaching time.

In both of these initiatives there has been no mention of the role that a freely-chosen playtime/breaktime could have in achieving the same end or any suggestion that non-directed time could be increased in support of teaching. In fact, Milton Keynes Academy makes it clear that lunchtimes and breaktimes have not been reduced in order to find the additional hours. But by effectively increasing the school day the proportion of time allocated to them has been reduced.

Secondly, a more positive one ... perhaps. Suggestions from friendly play consultants that those important non-directed times of the school day (playtime in primary schools and breaktime in secondary schools) should be increased for both educational and pastoral reasons (in real times and as a proportion of the school day) are often met with the argument that it is only by reducing them that a school can allocate additional time to meeting the needs of the curriculum. However, even now there are currently no restrictions on any school in the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland increasing the length of its school day. Across all five nations the board of governors has had the power to start and end the school day when it wishes for decades. But there are regulations limiting the number of teaching hours in any given day – and it is this that the new measure is set to remove.

The question is, now that it is going to be possible to both increase playtimes/breaktimes *and* teaching hours how many schools are we likely to see attempting both? My money is on 'not many'. In fact, if the numerous stories of the rising popularity of 'brain-breaks' to

¹ 'Freedom to control school day rolled out to local authority controlled schools' (13th September 2011). *Association of Teachers and Lecturers* [online] <<http://www.atl.org.uk/education-news>> [accessed 14th September 2011].

² 'Changes to day-to-day running of the Academy: Your questions answered (2011). *Milton Keynes Academy* [online] <<http://www.miltonkeynesacademy.co.uk/getfile/206>> [accessed 14th September 2011].

³ Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People: A draft national Plan to improve literacy and numeracy in schools' (November 2010). *Dept. of Education and Skills (Ireland)* [online] <<http://www.education.ie>> [accessed 14th September 2010].

support learning at the expense of unstructured playtimes are true then the situation may simply get even worse.⁴

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⁴ 'What's the Word: Brain breaks' (8th May 2005). *The Guardian* [online]
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2005/may/08/features.magazine27>> [accessed 14th September 2011]