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10 schools to lengthen their days

By Brian C. Mooney, Globe Staff | July 12, 2006

Ten schools in five cities will extend their school day this fall under a trial program supported by Governor Mitt Romney and pushed by Democratic candidate for governor Christopher F. Gabrieli, but opposed in some communities by teachers' unions and parents.

The \$25.2 billion state budget Romney signed Saturday includes a \$6.5 million item for "Expanded Learning Time" that would add 1 3/4 hours to three hours a day of instruction and enrichment programs for all students at selected schools in Boston, Cambridge, Fall River, Malden, and Worcester.

Under the demonstration program, schools must extend the school day by at least 30 percent for every student. The program is guaranteed funding for only a year and will be evaluated by an outside consulting firm.

The program is designed to increase time for what Department of Education officials call "hands-on experiential learning" in "core academic subjects," and also add time for art and physical education and for teacher planning.

In some cases, the school may increase individual class time from the current 45 to 60 minutes to 90 minutes.

"These districts are undertaking the enormous challenge of completely redesigning the school day," Education Commissioner David P. Driscoll said yesterday in a statement. "To do this right, they will have to not just add time to the school day, but rethink their teaching practices, curricula, and what they can do to better engage each child in their learning."

To cover the extra pay and other expenses, the five cities will receive an additional \$1,300 per student on top of their other state aid, but that will not cover all of the costs for some. Boston, for example, will dip into other funds to support additional busing and other costs resulting from the three-hour extensions at Umana/Barnes and Edwards middle schools, said Chris Coxon, deputy superintendent, and another hour to the school day at Timilty Middle School, which for 20 years has had a two-hour expanded program for all pupils.

Other schools approved for the program are Martin Luther King Jr. School and Fletcher-Maynard Academy, both K-8 schools in Cambridge; the K-8

Salemwood School in Malden; the K-6 Hiatt Magnet School in Worcester; and three Fall River schools -- the NB Borden and Osborn Street elementary schools and Kuss Middle School .

Backers of the longer school day say the schedule used by many schools is a throwback to an era when students had to work on family farms. They argue that other countries have much longer school days and that test scores would rise with a longer day.

But opponents said a longer day would affect everything from the cost of running the school -- including teachers' pay -- to the schedules of parents and children, who often would rather be participating in sports or other after-school activities. State education officials stressed that the principals at the affected schools could tinker with the schedule this fall, after hearing parents' reactions to the planned extended day.

Billed by advocates as a potential national model, the program could lead to a huge increase in the cost of education if it succeeds and grows. But Gabrieli said the money is worth it, to boost educational achievement, especially in poorer communities.

``If this is an innovation that makes a big difference, it's way cheaper than continuing to expand the system as it is," Gabrieli said in an interview. ``I feel very confident we can afford it . . . Just make it a higher priority than some of the other stuff we continue to invest in." He did not specify what he would sacrifice.

Twenty-one districts applied in September 2005 for planning grants of at least \$25,000 each: Sixteen were approved for grants, and in April, eight submitted detailed plans to redesign the school day with extra time for core academic subjects and programs such as arts and music. By last week, the Department of Education had approved 10 elementary and middle schools with a total of about 4,700 pupils.

``It's not necessarily a bad thing we are starting out small. This could be a national model," said Robert A. Antonioni , state Senate chairman of the Joint Committee on Education and the sponsor of an amendment that increased budget funds from \$5 million to \$6.5 million.

Romney initially requested \$15 million, but the Legislature reduced the figure, focusing instead on distributing more general state aid to school districts.

Gabrieli, a wealthy venture capitalist, is a longtime advocate of after-school programs, through a foundation he set up in 2000. He said parents and two city councilors ``testified vitriolically against" the initiative in Malden. Joan Connolly, school superintendent, said plans for a second Malden school were dropped

because of the objections by some parents who feared it would interfere with other activities.

The plan also got a poor reception in Rochester, a Plymouth County town, which eventually dropped out.

“I saw how many fell by the wayside, and I thought, ‘Boy this is tough.’” Gabrieli said.

In other communities, teachers or union leaders balked. After months of negotiations, however, the Boston Teachers Union hammered out an agreement on pay and other issues.

“We invested a lot of energy . . . to resolve loose ends,” said Richard Stutman , president of the BTU. He said he supports the concept of longer days for students who want them, but said extending the middle school day by three hours to 4:30 p.m. will create hardships because most Boston students face long bus rides . For many, it could mean 11-hour days away from home and conflict with out-of-school activities, he said.

“Let's see how it goes,” Gabrieli said. “The more successful it is, the more compelling the data, the more we should put pressure on other districts If the programs don't work, don't turn people on, and aren't exciting, then the experiment will have failed,” he said.

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