

Opinion: Full school day doesn't make the grade

By Joe Mathews

Many mornings, I think my state senator has the best policy idea in California.

At other times, I think he's missing the point.

The idea involves the sleep of schoolkids, and the state senator is Anthony Portantino, who represents the San Gabriel Valley.



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Portantino has won plaudits for a bill requiring middle and high schools to start the school day later—no earlier than 8:30am. The bill is grounded in research showing that a later start would reduce tardiness and absenteeism, thus increasing school funding (which is tied to attendance) and improving academic performance.

My two older sons' school starts at 8:10am. So, at 8:02am on many days, Portantino's bill has such obvious appeal that I wonder why he doesn't extend its protection to elementary schools.

Some days, just eight minutes before school starts, I must climb to the top bunk to wrestle my oldest son, a second-grader, out of bed, so we can race three blocks to his

classroom. Sometimes I dive deep into the lower bunk to pull out my middle son, a kindergartner. I've strained my back with both maneuvers. Yes, I could wake them earlier—but this causes conflict, and doesn't necessarily get them out of bed. I try to get them in bed at 8:30pm so they'll wake up earlier, but they just stay up reading Harry Potter and Captain Underpants books. So another 20 minutes of wiggle room, courtesy of state law, sounds pretty good.

But then I remember that the real problem in California education is not how early the school day starts.

It's how early the school day concludes.

Put simply, California's idea of a full day of school is—in reality—far less than a full day. The state requires only half-day kindergarten, which amounts to just three hours and 20 minutes, about the length of a pro football game. And the full day for higher grades doesn't equate to a full work shift for parents and other caregivers. First- through third-graders are required to have only four hours and 40 minutes per day. It's five hours for grades four to eight, and six hours for high schoolers.

School districts are free to do more. But given funding challenges, they often can't. The calendar at our local elementary school is thus typical. My kindergartner is with his teachers from only 8:10-11:30am. My second-grader is in class until 2:25pm four days a week; on Friday, there's often early dismissal at 1:05pm. These shorter school days happen in a California that, following American tradition, guarantees just 180 school days a year.

This has the feel of hypocrisy (are children really our top priority?) and missed opportunity. Despite the low reputation of California education, our teachers and schools have made big gains in achievement over the past generation. So many of the teachers I've encountered in California schools are

nothing less than magicians. Why can't we give our kids more time with them?

The biggest answer is money: more days and hours of school would cost more, and California's rickety school funding regime struggles to pay for the instruction we currently have. But extensive research shows we should find a way to fund more instructional time. Dozens of studies of campuses with longer school days and school years have found that such schools do better, especially in serving students considered to be at-risk. The chain of charter schools known as KIPP has become a national model by increasing learning time with a school day that extends more than eight hours, typically from 7:30am to 4pm.

Extending the school day would help address the state's shortage of reliable childcare and might even blunt the effects of inequality, since better-off parents can fill off-school hours with enriching activities. My wife and I are fortunate to be able to spend more than \$700 a month to put both boys in our district's after-school program, and to plunk down another \$1,500 for after-school enrichment classes in robotics and Mandarin. It's unfair that other parents can't do this.

Up in Sacramento, there's talk about legislation to exempt teachers from some taxes. That's fine, on one condition: it comes with an increase in the length of the school day and school year.

What would that look like? Well, 9 to 5 was good enough for Dolly Parton. And if a longer day means the kids come home tired, so much the better. Maybe they'll get to bed on time, and wake up early enough that I don't have to wrestle anyone out of his bunk.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.