

Monday, October 11, 2010 – Green Bay Press Gazette

Editorial: Innovation in education always appreciated

President Barack Obama's call for a longer school year is fraught with potential problems, yet there may be limited ways to address this type of proposal without undue stress on budgets or tradition.

State and local education officials say paying for kids to be in class for greater amounts of time — whether through longer school days or more of them — is the greatest single hurdle in implementing fundamental change. Unsurprisingly, educators say increased class time would improve learning, especially for children from poverty who may be struggling to catch up.

In addition to budgetary challenges, attempting to lengthen the school year would present a host of logistical problems, from negotiating teacher contracts to changing athletics schedules and interfering with family vacations. Our country's long-held tradition of summers off school — logical in a bygone, more agrarian age to coincide with farming and harvest schedules — would not be easily altered.

Yet there's little doubt our kids could benefit from more time in class, so educators are pursuing at least limited ways to make it happen. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Evers on Thursday told the Green Bay Press-Gazette his plan to revamp Wisconsin school funding will include a re-examination of categorical aids.

Some of those could help certain school districts target persistent achievement gaps, possibly through a limited extension of the school day or year, he said.

A targeted approach toward underperforming schools would make more sense than a broader, statewide mandate for longer days or more of them, Evers said.

He plans to announce more specifics about his plan in mid-November.

For Green Bay School District superintendent Greg Maass, the answer may not lie in hours or days spent in class — at least not in the traditional sense.

"I think the electronic and virtual opportunities are what's going to change the school year," Maass said Thursday. ... "I really think that there's going to be, within the next 10 years, a huge change and shift in where kids go to school."

Technology will enable students to spend more time engaging in virtual or offsite learning, Maass said, allowing additional flexibility as well as additional hours as the methods by which students learn continue to evolve. These opportunities have potential, especially for students who may not learn best in the traditional school environment.

The time may not be right for a large-scale lengthening of the U.S. school year, but the benefits of more time in class are clear.

We're glad state and local educators are considering innovative ways to make this happen, and we urge a continued vigilance toward improving learning for our kids.