

Elementary School Day

In the early 1970's, elementary teachers and administrators were finding it increasingly difficult for teams of teachers to participate in professional development and to plan for instruction. There was also concern about the disparity between the time elementary teachers have for planning and the time allocated to planning for secondary teachers. At that time, a plan was developed to allow elementary schools to close about 2 hours early on Mondays and make up this time on Tuesday through Friday. At that time, the Virginia regulations mandated an average 6 hour school day, so by distributing the two hours of instruction lost on Monday over the remaining days of the week (one-half hour a day), Fairfax County was in compliance with state regulations. As a result of this initiative, elementary students attended school approximately 4 hours on Monday and 6 1/2 hours on Tuesday-Friday.

Prior to fall, 2006, the Standards of Accreditation mandated 990 hours of instructional time, spread over an average of 180 school days (which averages 5.5 hours of instruction each day). In addition, schools needed to provide time for lunch every school day (.5 hours each day). Recess was included as part of instructional time. Therefore, if school hours averaged 6 hours daily over the course of a week, schools were in compliance with state regulations.

In fall of 2006, the Standards of Accreditation were revised. One of the revisions involved removing recess from instructional time. While the new standards do not stipulate the amount of time required for recess daily, they do mandate 990 hours of instruction **not** including lunch and recess:

From 8 VAC 20-131-150, Standard school year and school day, p. 29:

The standard school year shall be 180 instructional days. The standard school day for students in grades 1 through 12 shall average at least 5 ½ instructional hours, excluding breaks for meals and recess, and a minimum of three hours for kindergarten.

In addition, 75% of this instructional time must be devoted to instruction in 4-core curriculum:

From 8 VAC 20-131-80, Instructional program in the elementary school, p. 20:

To provide students with sufficient opportunity to learn, a minimum of 75% of the annual instructional time of 990 hours shall be given to instruction in the disciplines of English, mathematics, science, and history/social science.

Since elementary school hours were an average of 6 hours daily over the course of a week, there was no time for recess. In summer, 2007, additional time was added to the bell schedules of all elementary schools so that the time students were in school totaled at least 5.5 hours for instruction, .5 hours for lunch, and an additional 10 minutes (minimum) for recess.

In Spring 2007, as FCPS leadership (Dean Tistadt and others) scrutinized school schedules, it was discovered that some elementary schools were in violation of Virginia Administrative Code 8VAC20-490-30, Length of the school day. The code reads:

The time for opening and closing schools shall be prescribed by the local school board upon recommendation of the division superintendent, provided that the daily program for students in grades 1 through 12 shall average at least 5 ½ hours, not including meal intermissions. If the required program length is maintained, the local school board may approve occasional shortened days for staff development, conferences, planning, and other activities designed to improve the instructional program, provided that no more than one day in each five-day week may be shortened to no less than 4 hours. The daily program for kindergarten shall be at least three hours, not including meal intermissions. The student day here described shall be considered a minimum day rather than an optimum day; a longer student day is encouraged to accommodate the instructional program and student needs.

As a result of the changes to the Standards of Accreditation and the recognition that some schools were not in session the minimum of 4 hours on Mondays, the bell schedules were changed to increase instructional time and allow time for recess daily. Schools that were in session less than 4 hours on Monday had their schedule adjusted to meet state standards, and then a minimum of 5 minutes was added to the daily schedules of all schools to meet the instructional requirements.

We can find no state regulations stipulating the amount of planning time required for teachers. However, there are two FCPS regulations dealing with planning time – Regulation 4422.7, Duties, Responsibilities, and Rights of Employees; and Regulation 3218.1, Standard Instructional Program. Regulation 4422.7 stipulates:

“Elementary teachers shall be allowed six and one-half hours over a two-week rotation when they are not required to be with their classes.”

Regulation 3218.1 states that one of the responsibilities of the principal in an elementary school is to:

“Construct a total school schedule for full-day kindergarten and grades one through six, in cooperation with the special-subject teachers, which provides a minimum of 380 minutes every two weeks for classroom teacher planning time.”

All elementary schools - those that have Monday early closing and those that do not have early release on Monday - meet these guidelines. However, when additional time (5 minutes) was added to the time students attend school daily (summer 2007), this time was taken from teacher planning time before or after school, with a net loss of 30 minutes planning time weekly.

Teacher Work Day Comparison

Although school schedules from school to school, this represents the time allotments for an average school.

	Elementary ¹	Middle School ²	High School ²
Instructional Duties	Monday – 2:49	4:00	4:00
	Tues. – Fri – 5:19		
Lunch	30 minutes	30 minutes	30 minutes
Planning/Meeting/Team Time	41 minutes	50 minutes	50 minutes
IPR	n/a	50 minutes	50 minutes
Before/After School*	50 minutes	45 minutes	45 minutes
<i>Weekly planning time</i>	91 (minutes/day) x5 (days) = 455 (minutes/week) +120 (early closing Monday) = 575 minutes/week	145 (minutes/day) x 5 (days) = 725 minutes/week	145 (minutes/day) x 5 (days) = 725 minutes/week

Using these average totals there is a planning time differential of 150 minutes between elementary schools and secondary schools (middle and high).

*Time used for professional development, parent conferences, staff meetings, supervising students, lesson preparation and planning.

¹ Times listed are for schools that have early dismissal on Monday.

² Times do not include transition time between classes which varies from school to school. During these times, teachers have hall duty.