

St. Petersburg school makes time for variety of classes

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[SCOTT KEELER | Times]

Students at Academy Prep in St. Petersburg start their day Tuesday with the Pledge of Allegiance. School ends for many at 6 p.m., two hours after public middle schools in Pinellas County close.

At 3:39 p.m., a half-dozen middle school students at Academy Prep, a private school in south St. Petersburg, tie on aprons. Eggs crack. Pots rattle. Bouillon cubes plunk into hot water.

"If we're doubling the recipe, how many do we need?" asks the teacher, Shan Anderson.

"Six," a student says, adding three more cubes to the broth.

For the Academy Prep kids, today's cooking lesson is chicken soup and corn bread.

For the rest of us, it's what public schools could do if they had more time.

By 3:39 p.m., Pinellas County middle school students are watching the final minutes tick down on a 6-hour, 20-minute school day. But the low-income, minority students in grades 5-8 at Academy Prep start the day two hours before their public school peers, and most stay two hours later.

It is a long day. But unlike some public school students, the academy's 62 students still get full helpings of physical education, music and social studies. They're still taking field trips. And they're enjoying a suite of enrichment activities that would make many middle-class parents swoon: Golf. Dance. Karate with Master Kim.

Their teachers don't have to follow schedules that tell them what to teach and when.

A 10- to 11-hour day is crucial, says Academy Prep principal Keturah Mills. "We're concerned about the whole child — academically, spiritually, emotionally. We need that longer day."

Slowly but surely, public educators are saying the same thing.

At a committee meeting in Tallahassee last week, frustration spilled over during debate on a bill mandating 30 consecutive minutes daily of physical education. Last year, Gov. Charlie Crist pushed 30 minutes daily in elementary schools, but many schools skirted the law by counting walks to the lunchroom and a few minutes of stretching.

The lawmakers didn't blame the schools.

"We are, in fact, trying to shove 25 pounds of sugar into a 5-pound sack," said Rep. David Simmons, R-Altamonte Springs.

Simmons believes a longer school day and better teacher pay are needed to push Florida into the top tier of education. Evidence emerging from Miami to Massachusetts may back the claim.

"The children in Florida schools have too much to learn in too little a time," Simmons says.

There's no chance of expanding the school day this year — not when the Legislature is slashing school budgets by hundreds of millions of dollars.

But even when state coffers were brimming, a significantly longer school day was rarely seriously raised.

"We're creatures of habit," said Christopher Gabrieli, a former venture capitalist who co-chairs the National Center on Time & Learning in Boston.

Accountability may be forcing the issue.

Florida's high-stakes accountability system — like the federal system imposed by the No Child Left Behind law — has forced schools to focus on reading and math like never before. More time on the basics often means less time for everything else.

A national survey of school districts released last year by the Center on Education Policy found 44 percent had cut back on science, social studies, art, music and physical education. Lunch schedules and field trips are casualties, too.

And yet, in Florida, schools continue to face new demands. Last year, former Gov. Bob Graham began pushing for more civics. Now, Crist wants more physical education in middle schools.

"The incredibly obvious conclusion," Gabrieli said, "is not, 'My God, which one do I cut?'"

Across the country, more than 1,000 schools have lengthened their school day. They're a tiny minority, but supporters see the beginning of a movement.

Many are charter schools like the KIPP chain, which has enjoyed positive publicity from the likes of *60 Minutes* for its success with low-income kids. Its students typically attend school from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

In Miami-Dade, superintendent Rudy Crew expanded the school day by one hour in 39 struggling schools. The results have been striking enough for the district to be named a finalist for the prestigious Broad Prize in education for the last three years.

In Massachusetts, test scores shot up at 10 schools that expanded the day by two hours. But the gains didn't come cheaply: Massachusetts spent \$1,300 more per student in the pilot schools.

At that rate, giving every school in Florida two additional hours would cost \$3.5-billion.

At Academy Prep, the cost per student is \$14,528 a year, nearly twice what it costs the state for public school students. But for that price, students make impressive leaps on standardized test scores. And many go on to elite private high schools or to rigorous public programs. Students attend the school on scholarships paid for by individual and corporate donors.

Like their public school counterparts, many Academy Prep students need remedial help in reading and math. But the longer schedule gives the school flexibility to work that into the mix, either during 75-minute reading classes or an hourlong study hall.

The students don't lose other core classes or electives.

Public schools have "cut out all the things that give you culture, just to concentrate on the reading and writing and arithmetic to pass the FCAT," said Lisa Speights, a single mother whose son Styles is an eighth-grader at the academy. "That leaves the kids with a limited base of what they can do with their lives."

But a longer day alone isn't a panacea, either. Does more time make a difference if the curriculum is still heavy on test prep or there are too many unruly students and subpar teachers?

"Improving the quality of instructional time is at least as important as the quantity of time," said a widely discussed report last year from the think tank Education Sector.

Or, as one education blog sarcastically put it, "Bore me more."

4:12 p.m. Back in cooking class, corn bread muffins are rising but not yet done.

Anderson tells her students, "You decide how golden you want them."

Times staff writer Jeffrey S. Solochek contributed to this report.