



DENISON MONTESSORI SCHOOL EXPANDING LEARNING TIME FOR THE WHOLE CHILD



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INTRODUCTION

In the classrooms at Denver Public Schools' Denison Montessori School — one of the oldest Montessori-based public schools in the country — students are deeply engaged in their own personalized learning experiences. Using a mix of hands-on learning tools, learners choose their own activities and determine how best to move on to the next stage of learning based on the standards they need to achieve. Even though Denison Montessori students were performing well academically, Principal Katy Mattis knew that more could be done to support all students to be successful.

“The fundamental component of a Montessori education is a three-hour, uninterrupted exploration period,” Mattis says, “but many of our students with high needs were less likely to receive their three-hour period due to various interventions.” So when Mattis heard about the opportunity to expand the school day through the TIME Collaborative, she jumped at the chance. “We realized we could give as many students as possible their three-hour work period and at the same time, expand the collaborative time for students and teachers,” she says.



SNAPSHOT OF DENISON MONTESSORI SCHOOL (2015-2016)



408

Total students



59.8%

Students receiving
free and reduced lunch



14.5%

English language
learners



100%

Choice school

WHY EXPAND LEARNING TIME?

The framework at Denison Montessori is based on the fundamentals of a Montessori education. Each classroom contains three grade levels where students work with a teacher and topic of their choosing. Each day, students spend three hours in a free-form, exploratory period. Students typically use this time to collaborate with teachers or peers, dive deeper into the concepts they are pursuing, or explore complementary topics. With a large population of high-needs students, Mattis and her

team recognized that very few students actually received their three-hour individualized period due to frequent interventions and time for special services. The ultimate vision for expanding the school day was to ensure a larger percentage of students received their three-hour free period while also providing more opportunity for collaboration among staff and intervention for high-needs students.



A Denison first-grader is learning how to tell time.

UNDERSTANDING THE TIME COLLABORATIVE

One of the most valuable resources in education is time and how it is used. Next generation learning environments intentionally use time to personalize learning, provide deeper interventions, and create learning opportunities beyond the classroom.

The TIME Collaborative is a partnership of the Ford Foundation and the National Center on Time & Learning (NCTL), the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), and The Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) to help three Colorado districts and 12 schools, including Denison Montessori, rethink the role time plays in their learning environments.

These teams worked closely with NCTL, CEI, and CDE to design a school day and year that is personalized to the unique needs of their students and community. The redesign process involved technical assistance and targeted coaching with each school team. Plans focused on integrating NCTL's Seven Essential Elements for more and better learning time with school and district priorities.

IMPLEMENTING THE MODEL

DESIGNING THE NEW SCHOOL DAY

Following meetings with TIME Collaborative partners, Mattis hoped to expand the school day by 90 minutes to align with the goals set forth by NCTL. After many conversations among staff, parents, and the community, they decided that a full 90-minute addition to the school day wasn't needed. By adding 45 minutes, 96 percent of students could receive three hours of uninterrupted individualized time without violating teachers' contracts.

With the school day now expanded to 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., the Denison Montessori team began restructuring the day around three goals: deepening the classroom experience, enlarging student-driven time, and expanding opportunities for enrichments.

RESCHEDULING BLOCK PERIODS & PERSONALIZED LEARNING TIME

With an expanded day, the first logistical step the Denison Montessori team made was to shift all of the classroom block periods to the afternoon. When students are in their classroom blocks, they are working entirely on their selected lesson material. Shifting the blocks to the afternoon freed up the morning for a three-hour, self-directed learning period for all kids.

ADDING ENRICHMENTS

On a daily basis, students now had an afternoon block to cycle through a five-enrichment rotation that includes physical education, technology, visual art, music, and library. Once or twice per week, depending on a student's age cohort, students also participate in a 45-minute enrichment block with community partners. Students select the enrichment they would like to participate in, with options including tennis, yoga, chess, drama, gardening, cooking; or

Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). Denison Montessori works to align enrichments with Denver cultural initiatives, such as offering Shakespeare enrichment during the annual DPS Shakespeare Festival.



BOOSTING COLLABORATION

The shift in enrichment periods allowed Denison Montessori to restructure intervention and teacher planning periods. While students are in enrichments, teachers are engaged in uninterrupted block planning periods. Teachers are allotted 300 minutes of uninterrupted planning per week, or about one hour per day. In addition to collaborative planning blocks, teachers spend one period per week in a data meeting to ensure students are progressing through their Montessori choice work. Expanded learning time has, in many ways, allowed Denison Montessori to better fulfill its vision of providing a collaborative, student-driven learning experience with flexible time for diverse student interests.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS



Getting Community Buy-In.

Enrollment at Denison Montessori is purely by family choice, an aspect of the school's culture that has created unique challenges and opportunities during the expanded learning time efforts. When Denison Montessori first presented the idea of expanding the learning day and adding enrichments and more learning time to its schedule, parents had mixed opinions. Some felt strongly that it would be a great opportunity for their kids, while others were hesitant about lengthening the school day.

To help ensure the parents felt like they had a voice in the plans, the Denison Montessori team invited a parent representative to the school's design committee, provided parents the opportunity to vote on large shifts in school design, and created a broad communication campaign to keep parents informed. Frequent communication has helped guarantee that all parents have the opportunity to be heard, regardless of schedules and other obligations. "I try to survey the community as much as possible," Mattis says. Bringing parents into the process has helped Denison Montessori build a strong base of community support for its work.



Funding Enrichments.

Funding enrichment activities for students continues to be one of the most significant challenges at Denison Montessori. A combination of grants from the TIME Collaborative and Denver Public Schools helped with the initial implementation, but many of these grants ran out following the first stage of the process. As a result, the enrichment coordinator position was eliminated and other resources were shifted to enrichments to continue providing these activities to students. Ensuring that transportation is also available to allow for the expanded school day has also been a challenge. Mattis is optimistic that additional community partnerships and more creative funding sources will help Denison Montessori to continue providing exciting enrichments for students.



Denison students participated in the spring field day potato sack races.

IMPACT

At Denison Montessori, the impact of expanded learning time is most visible in the positive cultural changes for teachers, students, and parents. “I’ve seen a huge growth among teacher teams as far as collaboration and communication around student work are concerned,” Mattis says. “We just didn’t have the time for that kind of collaboration before.” Access to unique enrichments has created a noticeable sense of excitement around learning in the student body. The additional time has also created more opportunities for small, character-based interventions led by the local 4-H organization, helping many younger students gain a greater understanding of school-appropriate social character traits.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Denison Montessori has successfully implemented expanded learning time to fulfill its core mission. So what does the school want to focus on next? “If I had all the money in the world, I would hire back our enrichment coordinator because that was an amazing position,” said Mattis. Denison Montessori plans to leverage its existing resources to continue to improve the enrichment experience and create more opportunities for community partnerships and learning.

Perhaps the most significant impact of the expanded learning time has been allowing Denison Montessori to fulfill its goal of providing every student three hours of uninterrupted, self-directed exploration. “I’m most proud of the fact that 100 percent of our students are getting a 90-minute, uninterrupted work period five days a week, and 96 percent of our students are getting the full three hours,” Mattis says.



Field day activities had kids working together in teams to complete various challenges.

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- Katy Mattis, Principal

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THANK YOU
TO ALL THE DENISON MONTESSORI STAFF, FAMILIES, COMMUNITY MEMBERS,
AND STUDENTS WHO SHARED THEIR STORIES WITH US.

YOU'RE AN INSPIRATION FOR WHAT
THE FUTURE OF LEARNING CAN HOLD.



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