

In early education, 'half day' is wholly harmful ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In public policy, the words used to frame a debate shape the debate itself. In the world of early education policy, we debate the merits of "half-day" versus "full-day" pre-K and kindergarten. But these terms don't mean what we think. A half-day program can be as little as two hours per day, and a full-day can be as little as four hours per day. The terminology is inaccurate and misleading. Advocates of longer days in early education should stop using it, and replace it with something that shifts the debate in their favor.

The solution is to describe a program by hours per week. Advocates should ask policymakers, parents, and voters to choose between a "10-hour-per-week" and "32-hour-per-week" early education program for students. While there are no innate negative or positive value judgments in the wording, people will likely associate the measurement with ones they are already familiar. Since most people think about 40-hour work weeks, this framing naturally favors those advocating higher-quantity programs.* After removing the nebulous "half-day" label, it would be much more difficult for a politician to speak in favor of "10-hour per week" preschool given the way people traditionally think about the allocation of time in a work week. Not everyone will suddenly argue for a 40-hour school week, but it probably means fewer will feel comfortable arguing for a 15-hour one (the quantity of a great many "half-day" programs). Advocates should take advantage of the power of the artificial "40-hour work week" time construct in order to gain high ground in debates to increase quantity in early education.

Similar framing could theoretically shift the debate about summer vacation as well. Currently, we talk about the total number of school days a year-usually 180. But do most people know how many days they work a year? Probably not. Instead, we know how many work days we have off per year (usually 10-20). Children get approximately 80 school days off. To be clear, this framing does not imply that children should "work" as hard as adults, it's simply that 180 days means nothing to most people, whereas 80 school days off at least offers a familiar comparison to the working world. For instance, parents may argue that they don't want their children to be in school all the time, but 80 days off still may sound like quite a lot. Indeed, the point of both of these recommendations is to add perspective about where school times fits into society's other clocks, with the expectation that this perspective will lead to more support for longer school days and years.

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