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ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Heshan Berents-Weeramuni, with Lindsey Weeramuni and their children, supports the idea of longer school days.

By **Matt Rocheleau**

Parents of Boston public school children expressed broad support Friday for a plan to extend the school day, but some expressed concerns about how the additional classroom time will be used and the effect on teachers who already put in long hours.

“Any extra time kids have in school is always going to be a good thing,” said Heshan Berents-Weeramuni, cochairman of the Citywide Parent Council.

He said he hopes an additional 40 minutes each day would be used for more creative learning, rather than for rigid exam preparation.

“We can’t simply aim to bring up a generation of kids who know how to take tests but aren’t given the chance to learn to paint, learn about gravity, or sing, play sports, or the other things which make us human,” said Berents-Weeramuni, who is also cochairman of the School Site Council at the Curley K-8 School, where his 10-year-old daughter, Trudy, is in the fifth grade. His other daughter, Suki, 13, is a seventh-grader at Boston Latin Academy.

Several years ago, when Suki was a student at the Curley, the school was one of several in Boston that received extra money for new initiatives, including to extend the school day.



Walsh says schools, union agree to add learning time

The proposal would add 40 minutes of learning

time to the school day at elementary and middle schools in the city.

“You got more of a relaxed day,” Berents-Weeramuni recalled. “It seemed to really make a vast difference to the culture of the school and for building a good learning community.”

Now, with that longer school-day experiment over, he said, “there’s always a hurry and a sense that you need to get kids into a classroom and seated and settled. It’s just a mad scramble.”

The proposal to extend the school day in Boston was unveiled Friday by Mayor Martin J. Walsh and leaders of the Boston Teachers Union who hashed out the deal, which will require approval from the union’s full membership and the School Committee.

Anneta Argyres, who was cochairwoman of the Curley School Parent Council when the school had longer days, remembered how teachers could use the final hour each Wednesday to teach less-traditional classes.

Her daughter, Nicole Levenson, who is now 15 and a sophomore at Boston Latin School, would come home raving about taking classes on fishing, yoga, and photography.

Argyres said those classes showed students and teachers “that learning happens in different settings and also helped to develop a deeper sense of community.”

“What we need is to bring back the richness and the diversity of education,” Argyres said. “Not just pile on 40 minutes more of the same.

“I’m not sure it’s worth doing something if they’re not improving and diversifying the school day along with lengthening it,” she said.

Berents-Weeramuni said Friday’s announcement took him by surprise.

“A lot of parents have been wondering where the mayor has been [on the issue of longer school days]”, he said. “We’ve been waiting to see if he’s an education mayor or not, and this is a really positive step.”

He and other parents said the move could help make Boston a more attractive option for families considering a

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“It seemed to really make a vast difference to the culture of the school and for building a good learning community.”

Heshan Berents-Weeramuni, cochairman of the Citywide Parent Council, referring to experiments with an extended school day at the Curley School several years ago

move to the suburbs in search of higher-performing school districts.

Zoe Sherman, treasurer of the School Parent Council at the Edison K-8 school in Brighton, said the extra time will make life easier for parents who juggle work and school schedules.

“Every additional bit of child care where they know their child is somewhere safe is hugely helpful,” said Sherman, whose 6-year-old daughter, Matilda, is in first grade at the Edison.

But she said she is not sure making the day longer will necessarily be better for students.

“Depending on how the time is used, it could be too much for some kids,” she said. “I feel like you could definitely get to a point of diminishing returns.”

But, she said, there would be real value in adding time to encourage play, especially in the early grades, or expanding arts education or sports and recreational activities in the middle grades.

Sherman, who teaches at Merrimack College, said she also worries how a longer day might affect teachers.

“The six hours the students are there is not the full workday for the teachers,” she said. “It’s really hard to ask teachers for longer days. I worry about the level of fatigue and the kind of energy they can sustain over the school year.

“If the teachers object, I certainly would understand the reasons,” she added.

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