

Year-round School: Not the Solution for Failing Schools

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Abstract

Year-round school has been an option for many school systems seeking to increase school capacity or student academic achievement. Proponents of making a calendar change from the traditional nine month to a twelve month program argue that it can save money by eliminating the need for new building costs and increase student performance in academics. However, these claims have not been realized by all school systems that participate in year-round schooling. It is my contention that the decision to change the school calendar is not usually based on the belief that it will solve the problems our schools face but rather on financial considerations. Making such a drastic and unfounded change in the way our schools operate appears to be more of an attempt by politicians and school officials to give the appearance of doing *something* to save education.

When I was in high school during the early 1990's, our school system was considering making a change from the traditional school calendar to that of a year-round calendar. I remember being intrigued by the prospect of attending school throughout the year. I was always one of those students who bored easily, whether it was with school or vacation. Year-round schooling sounded like the perfect answer. I felt that by shortening both school and

vacation times into sections, it would be a great solution to my short attention span problem. However, I was in the minority. Many of my friends disliked the idea citing summer jobs, summer camps, spring training for various sports as things they would miss out on if a year-round school program were to be implemented at our school. We were not basing our opinions on test score statistical data or on financial spreadsheets, we just knew what sounded good to us at the time.

As I look back on those years, I am glad a year-round calendar was never implemented. I now know that my boredom could have been solved with more extracurricular academic activities during the school year and with a job during the vacation periods. I cannot say for sure that a change in the calendar would not have made a difference in how much or how well I learned as a student. However, I feel that my performance, as well as many of my friends' performances, depended more on our parents, our teachers and most importantly on who we were as individual students. This idea, however, is not what the proponents for a year-round calendar would have you believe. It is my contention that a change in the school calendar and increased retention are not related by causation. Year-round schooling cannot eliminate the problem of students not learning to remember. The purpose of this paper is to address both the advantages and disadvantages associated with year-round school calendars in hopes of showing that a calendar change is not the solution to a failing academic program.

Before inundating the reader with the specifics of year-round schooling, it would be beneficial to discuss terminology. The term year-round school (YRS) is not synonymous with extended school. A year-round school program does not lengthen the academic calendar, it merely breaks it up

into segments (Agron, 1993; Burgoyne, 1998; Warrick-Harris, 1995). YRS can be strictly defined as a reorganization of the school year because it is designed to utilize the school facility during all four seasons. There are also many forms of year-round schooling. A school that adopts a YRS calendar also has the option of creating different tracks. Multi-tracking refers to the practice where there are two to four groups of students attending the same school, but at any one time during the school year, a different group would be on vacation (Agron, 1993; Burgoyne, 1998). This essentially creates different schools within the same building.

There are many arguments for the implementation of year-round schooling. The basis for the decision by most schools to make the change to YRS is to alleviate overcrowding (Agron, 1993; Burgoyne, 1998; Eisler, 1997; "Quotes", 1999; Woodward, 1995). Multi-tracking can increase a school's capacity by as much as twenty-five percent because there would always be one-fourth of the student population on vacation. Therefore, the fundamental reason for the transition in most schools appears to be financial. However, it remains to be seen as to whether or not YRS can save money. In fact, a single-track YRS program can actually cost more than the traditional program. Single-track plans do not accommodate more students, there is more strain placed on the facilities because there is no true off-time and the school must stay in operation during one of the most expensive seasons of the year (Agron, 1993; Burgoyne, 1998; Wildman, et al., 1999). Using the school building during summer months adds another cost not usually incurred by traditional schools. It has been reported that the largest cost associated with preparing existing facilities for YRS is that of installing air conditioning (Agron, 1993; Rubin, 1998; Wildman, et al., 1999;

Gregory, 1994). Schools in Los Angeles recently voted to return to the traditional calendar after only three years of YRS, citing unbearable summer temperatures as one of the main reasons for their displeasure with the program (Agron, 1993).

Increases in utilities cost are only one increase that should be expected, however. Additional costs in the form of extra staff, increased operating costs, maintenance downtime, increased teacher salaries, building upgrades, and additional transportation have all been reported by school systems that originally adopted YRS in hopes of saving money (Agron, 1993; Burgoyne, 1998; Wildman, et al., 1999). For example, Houston, Texas schools abandoned the YRS program after eight years because of the added expenses and no true relief from overcrowding or improvements in achievement. The predicted savings from reinstating the traditional calendar reached approximately seven million dollars ("Quotes", 1999). One must wonder with all the extra expenses that would be incurred from implementing a YRS program if it would not be a more feasible to build an entirely new school building. Over time, a new building may actually be a more cost-effective alternative for school systems seeking to relieve overcrowded buildings (Burgoyne, 1998).

Year-round schooling is not only touted to be a solution for overcrowding, but also a means for increasing student academic performance. While the majority of the schools making the transition to YRS admit that the driving force is to increase school capacity, an alternative claim has been that it decreases learning losses experienced over the long summer vacations (Agron, 1993; Ballinger, 1995; Burgoyne, 1998; Eisler, 1997; Woodward, 1995). The reduction in learning loss would, in theory, decrease the amount of review time needed at the beginning of each school year

(Ballinger, 1995; Warrick-Harris, 1995). However, statistics to support this claim are inconclusive. One study that involved third and sixth grade students in San Diego, California shows that students who attended school year-round outscored their traditional school counterparts in seventeen of twenty-seven areas on a basic skills test (Woodward, 1995). There are other schools like those in San Diego that report similar results and yet year-round education has not been consistently proven to have a positive or negative effect on academic retention or achievement (Burgoyne, 1998, Wildman, et al., 1999).

Retention is a difficult problem to gauge because assessments cannot separate retention from learning (Burgoyne, 1998). It is an extremely arduous task to evaluate what students learn in a unit of time. Regardless of how retention is measured, many studies show that the greatest loss incurred by students, and adults alike, is that of short-term learning. It has been shown that a substantial loss occurs within an hour of instruction (Woodward, 1995) and the majority occurs within two or three weeks (Burgoyne, 1998; Wildman, et al., 1999). As a result, it seems only logical that by increasing the number of breaks throughout a school year, as YRS does, it would actually promote learning loss. As one Vermont middle school teacher commented, "Check out what happens to students' memories in the one week between Christmas and the New Year. Kids forget things every time school's out" ("Quotes", 1999). This would also tend to increase the amount of time needed to review because teachers would essentially have to restart the school year several times throughout the year (Woodward, 1995). However, the use of teaching strategies by capable teachers can decrease short-term learning loss regardless of the calendar. By teaching higher level thinking skills instead of

inundating students with details, they could retain information long after their test taking days are over.

Another argument in favor of year-round schooling is that it helps students whose first language is not English or otherwise at risk students. The apparent reason that a YRS program would aid these individuals is that the students would receive constant scholastic reinforcement throughout the school year. This reinforcement would probably not be received otherwise at home during the longer summer breaks associated with the traditional calendar (Ballinger, 1995; Burgoyne, 1998; Gregory, 1994; Wildman, et al., 1999; Woodward, 1995). While it is a valid point that returning English as a Second Language (ESL) students to their homes where they could possibly be bombarded with their native languages (Burgoyne, 1998), the question of aiding the minority at the expense of the majority remains. Perhaps voluntary, no-cost programs specializing in continual education for ESL students and their families could be implemented by communities that show a need for improvement in this area.

Opponents of year-round education can use some of the same studies and reports heralded by proponents to further their cause as well. Statistics can be molded to suit either side of the argument; however, there are some considerations that cannot be reflected with test scores and, as a result, are often overlooked. Teacher and administrator burnout, for example, is a rampant occurrence in school systems that practice year-round school (Burgoyne, 1998; Gregory, 1994; Wildman, et al., 1999).

Many administrators find that they lose opportunities for self and teacher evaluation and planning. In multi-track YRS systems, there are usually only two weeks per year, as opposed to two months, where there are no students in school

(Wildman, et al., 1999). Other factors include the effects YRS could have on band or sports programs (Burgoyne, 1998), internal communication and course scheduling ("FMHS", 1998). Less crucial, but still very valid problems could also arise as a result of YRS. Scheduling family vacations, summer employment for students and teachers who may need to supplement family income, arranging day care, dress codes for students attending school in the summer, and perhaps even seasonal tourist industries could all be greatly affected ("See", 1986).

The National Educational Commission on Time and Learning conducted research on the amount of time spent in school in the early 1990s. Their research alludes to the fact that learning is a complicated concept that is only partially attributed to time. While the commission recognized that American school children spend less time in classrooms than many other countries, they were unable to show a direct correlation between time and learning (DeBlois, 1997). With no concrete evidence to show the contrary, implementing a year-round educational program seems to be a very expensive gamble. A calendar change could cause more turmoil than improvements in most situations. As with any program, complete dedication and solid communication is needed to make it a success. The existing school calendar has worked in the past and can continue to work in the future.

Until politicians, administrators, teachers, parents and students decide to make improving education a priority, there will always be alternative "quick fixes" that give the appearance of being a solution to the overall problem. We must get to the core of the problem in our schools by re-training teachers, involving parents and community leaders, and providing the best educational experience we can offer. This is

a plan must be followed, regardless of the calendar.

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