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What Research Says About... / Year-Round Schooling

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After the long, lazy days of summer, students traditionally return to school to repeat the process of acclimating to new teachers, new classmates, and new classroom procedures. Students also struggle to remember skills and content they often have not used for several months.

To combat this summer learning loss, many schools have implemented year-round schooling. The National Association for Year-Round Education reported in 2007 that 3,000 year-round schools enrolled more than 2 million students in the United States. But does the research show that year-round schooling raises student achievement?



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What We Know

Research indicates that summer learning loss is a real problem for students—especially for economically disadvantaged students. In one study, Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007) found that low-income students made similar achievement gains to other students during the school year; the widening of the achievement gap between the two groups occurred over the summer. Another study found that summer learning loss is more pronounced for math facts, spelling, and other academic material that is concrete rather than conceptual (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay & Greathouse, 1996).

Unfortunately, research is inconclusive on whether year-round schooling is an effective solution to this problem. Two major meta-analyses of studies on year-round schooling have shown that the findings are mixed and that many studies suffer from weak research designs or methodology—for example, failing to account for family socioeconomic level or parental education. However, both of these meta-analyses—Worthen and Zsiray (1994) and Cooper, Valentine, Charlton, and Melson (2003)—did find support for the following conclusions:

Students in year-round schools do as well or slightly better in terms of academic achievement than students in traditional schools.

Year-round education may be particularly beneficial for students from low-income families.

Students, parents, and teachers who participate in a year-round school tend to have positive attitudes about the experience.

The research also indicates that when year-round schooling has resulted in higher academic achievement, the schools in question are usually doing more than just rearranging the school calendar. These schools are also providing remediation and enrichment for students during the breaks so that students have opportunities to relearn material, practice skills, catch up, or experience nonacademic enrichment activities continuously throughout the year (McMillen, 2001).

What You Can Do

Schools considering changing the annual calendar should be aware that year-round schooling takes different forms. The calendar can be single-track with students and school personnel all following the same schedule, or multitrack with students and teachers divided into two or more groups following staggered schedules (usually used to reduce overcrowding).

The length of sessions and breaks varies. For example, in the 45-15 model, students attend school for 45 days and then have a 15-day break; in the 60-20 model, students attend school for 60 days and then break for 20 days. How schools use the breaks, or intersessions, for remediation and enrichment varies. And finally, some schools keep the school year the same length overall, whereas others use the shift to add more total days to the school year.

Because year-round schooling takes so many forms and the research is inconclusive, it is important to communicate directly with other schools and districts that have long-term experience with year-round calendars—including schools that adopted a year-round calendar only to eventually return to a traditional one. Educators and administrators in these districts can give you insights into the aspects of year-round schooling that would be most important for your school or district.

As educators considering the shift to year-round schooling—and the kind of year-round schooling that would be best for their school—they should also be sure to identify and articulate exactly what problems they expect a modified school calendar or additional instructional days to solve. Just as with implementing any new program, schools should invite staff, parents, and community members to participate in the discussion and planning before committing to the change.

Educators Take Note

The most conclusive finding of the research is that students from lower socioeconomic levels can benefit from a year-round calendar—if the school intentionally plans to include extra learning opportunities during the breaks. Therefore, schools should consider the needs of their student population before deciding whether year-round schooling is a wise school reform strategy for them.

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