

Year-Round Schooling

The beginning of a three-month break from school seems to be as much a harbinger of summer as barbecues and beach vacations. But, according to the National Association for Year-Round Education, more than 2.3 million U.S. public school students attended year-round schools in the 2002-03 school year. The number has steadily grown since the 1986-87 school year, when only about 360,000 students were enrolled in year-round schools. NAYRE also reports that 3,181 public schools now function year round, compared with 408 schools in 1986-87.

Year-round schooling generates strong feelings, both positive and negative. A 1994 report, "Prisoners of Time," released by the National Education Commission on Time and Learning, argued that a departure from the traditional school calendar could better meet the needs of contemporary society and result in increased student achievement. Groups like NAYRE push for a movement away from the traditional calendar that they see as rooted in economic, instead of educational, concerns. But other groups, such as Summer Matters, believe just as strongly that the traditional calendar is best. Summer Matters contends that year-round schooling is disruptive to family life, provides little or no academic benefit, and impedes different kinds of learning that children often experience on their summer breaks. Proponents and opponents both point to research to support their respective views. The research, however, is spotty and often poorly designed.

Unlike their peers in schools with traditional schedules, students in year-round schools do not have a long summer vacation. To complicate matters, in some of those schools, not all students are on year-round schedules. A number of schools and districts allow parents to choose their children's schedules. So while some schools are completely year-round, others have one group of students on a traditional calendar with another group of students on a year-round schedule.

Most often, year-round schooling is not an extension of the school year, but, rather, a reorganization of it. The summer break is usually broken up and redistributed throughout the year in relatively regular intervals. Sometimes, however, schools with extended-year

calendars, in which students attend for more than the traditional 180 days, are lumped into the definition of year-round schools.

Multi-track year-round schooling is a specific type of year-round education with the primary purpose of alleviating overcrowding in schools. In this system, students and teachers are divided into groups, or tracks, of about the same size. Each track follows its own schedule, so that one track is on vacation while the others are in school. According to NAYRE, implementing a four-track system increases the capacity of a school by 33 percent. Research shows that multi-track year-round schooling can significantly save money if it is used in place of building costly new school facilities (Shields & Oberg, 2000; Bradford, 1995; Brekke, 1992).

Unfortunately, research that attempts to measure the influence of year-round education on student achievement is inconclusive and contradictory. Reviews of the existing literature on this subject generally contend that the achievement of children in year-round schools is as good as, or slightly better than, that of their peers in traditional schools (Palmer & Bemis, 1999; Kneese, 1996). However, a number of recent studies have found no significant connection between year-round schooling and improved student achievement. For example, a review of 39 studies found that modified school calendars have a very small, insignificant, effect on achievement (Cooper, et al., 2003). But the review also states that the students, parents, and staff that participate in year-round schools are quite positive about the experience.

One longitudinal study of six elementary schools, three on traditional calendars and three on year-round schedules, discovered positive effects of year-round education. It found that, in most cases, the sample of students in the year-round schools posted overall test-score increases that were higher than those of their traditionally schooled counterparts (Kneese, 2000).

A recent report from NAYRE analyzed Advanced Placement Index scores for California traditional and year-round public schools. While the study found that schools with year-round calendars did not score as high as those with traditional calendars, it also found that, over time, there was greater progress in schools with certain kinds of year-round calendars (Stenvall & Stenvall, 2001).

Bradley McMillan, from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, examined achievement differences between year-round and traditional-calendar students using data

for more than 345,000 North Carolina public school students. He found that achievement in year-round schools was no higher than in traditional schools (2001). A much smaller study compared the mathematics performance of 44 students in 5th and 6th grades on a year-round track with that of 40 students on a traditional track in the same school. Again, there were no significant achievement differences between the groups (Ferguson, 1999).

Some research contends that year-round schools can have more positive effects on students who are deemed at risk for academic problems, such as children from low-income families or other students who might typically be low performers in school (Cooper, et al., 2003). A 1994 study of three year-round California elementary schools showed that each of the three schools demonstrated significant achievement gains for its highly targeted at-risk students, including low-performing students and English-language learners (Gandara & Fish, 1994). The results should be interpreted with caution, though, because the schools added instructional days to the calendar, and the year-round initiatives also resulted in lower class sizes.

Even less research has been done on why year-round schools appear to be beneficial for some students. The common belief is that a three-month summer break contributes to students' forgetting what they have learned the previous year. The result is that teachers need to review material at the start of the next school year, wasting valuable instructional time. A review of 39 studies confirmed that summertime learning loss, specifically indicating that student test scores drop over summer vacation and that mathematics performance deteriorates more than reading performance (Cooper, et al., 1996).

Others believe that year-round schooling boosts performance because the more frequent but shorter breaks allow struggling students extra time for remedial help (Ballinger, 1995).

Despite a lack of conclusive evidence showing that year-round schooling is able to dramatically raise student achievement, the approach is becoming an attractive strategy for more and more schools and districts. In 2002, 18 states had policies regarding year-round schools (Potts, Blank & Williams), and NAYRE reports a 441 percent growth since the mid-1980s in the number of students receiving a year-round education.

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National Association for Year-Round Education

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