

Year-Round Schools Don't Boost Learning, Study Finds

ScienceDaily (Aug. 14, 2007) — Students in “year-round” schools don't learn more than their peers in traditional nine-month schools, new research has found.

A sociologist at Ohio State University found that, over a full year, math and reading test scores improved about the same amount for children in year-round schools as they did for students whose schools followed a traditional nine-month calendar.

“We found that students in year-round schools learn more during the summer, when others are on vacation, but they seem to learn less than other children during the rest of the year,” said Paul von Hippel, author of the study and research statistician in sociology at Ohio State.

The problem with year-round schools may be that they don't actually add more school days to the 180 typically required, von Hippel said. Instead of a three-month summer vacation, year-round schools typically have several breaks of three to four weeks spread throughout the year. The total number of school days and vacation days remains unchanged, but they are distributed more evenly over the calendar.

Although school districts often adopt year-round schedules to help alleviate overcrowding, some educators have claimed that eliminating the long summer vacation will provide academic benefits for students.

“The results don't support that claim,” von Hippel said.

Von Hippel presented his results Aug. 11 in New York City at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.

One supposed benefit of year-round calendars is that they do away with the slowdown or loss of learning that students commonly experience over the summer. But “year-round schools don't really solve the problem of the summer learning setback – they simply spread it out across the year,” von Hippel said.

The study used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, a national survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education. Von Hippel examined reading and math test scores of children in kindergarten and first grade in 748 public schools and 244 private schools from around the country.

Scores from students in 27 public schools classified as year-round (none of the private schools had a year-round calendar) were compared to scores of students in schools with traditional calendars.

Nearly all of the year-round schools were in urban and suburban areas, and most were in the West. Children attending year-round schools were mostly Hispanic and tended to be somewhat poorer than average, but their poverty was moderate rather than severe. Year-round schools also tended to have problems with overcrowding. In fact, year-round schedules are often adopted to cope with crowding. By staggering students' schedules, year-round schools can arrange for some students to be in session when others are on vacation; in this way, schools can accommodate more students than they could on a traditional nine-month calendar.

Von Hippel said he was able to take into account issues such as poverty and overcrowding when comparing scores to ensure that comparisons between test scores in year-round and traditional schools were fair.

Reading and math tests were given to students at the beginning and end of kindergarten and first grade; comparing these test scores allowed von Hippel to estimate the amount learned during kindergarten, during the summer between kindergarten and first grade, and first grade.

Over a twelve-month period, average test score gains were less than 1 percent larger in year-round than in nine month schools – which von Hippel said is “an absolutely trivial difference.”

Some proponents of year-round schools argue that they may do the most good for students that come from especially poor families. This study found mixed results for that argument, he said.

Compared to other students, disadvantaged children did seem to gain slightly more in reading test scores in year-round schools than they did in nine-month schools.

However, these students from poor families saw no increase in math scores in year-round compared to traditional schools.

“There may be a slight advantage for students from the poorest families in attending year-round schools, at least when it comes to improving their reading,” he said.

While the results of the study contradict one major argument for year-round schools, von Hippel said this should not be taken as an argument against year-round schedules.

“On purely academic grounds, I wouldn’t advocate a year-round calendar, but I can’t recommend against it, either,” he said.

If a school has a non-academic reason for adopting a year-round calendar – such as coping with overcrowding – it can do so without any major harm to academics. And if it already has a year-round calendar, there is no academic reason to switch back.

“On the other hand, if a school is considering a year-round calendar in hope of boosting academic achievement, it seems unlikely that those hopes will be realized,” von Hippel said.

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