

Pros and Cons of Year-Round Education

Introduction

A traditional school calendar in the United States of America provides 180 days of instruction and a lengthy summer vacation. In efforts to raise achievement, reduce costs, or better serve their communities, many schools have altered the traditional school calendar. Year-round education (YRE) programs (also called modified calendars or balanced calendars) do not extend the amount of time students are in school, but rather distribute the 180 school days more evenly throughout the year. These schools may have voluntary enrichment, remediation, or acceleration opportunities during the “intercessions,” or regular breaks. Approximately 3,000 schools that enrolled over two million students in the United States followed YRE schedules in 2007 (National Association for Year-Round Education, 2007). Given these figures and the use of YRE as a strategic mechanism to improve academic achievement, it is appropriate to characterize YRE as a reform effort. Therefore, it is equally appropriate to examine the extent to which this reform effort is associated with student outcomes including equity and academic achievement. This research brief unpacks the definition of Year-Round Education and then presents the current thinking and research about its adoption and impact on students, teachers, and families.

Defining Year-Round Education

Schools that adopt YRE are often classified as single-track or multi-track. In single-track schools, all students attend school at the same time and have the same two to three week intercessions. Single-track year-round education (ST-YRE) programs do not alleviate overcrowding, (Ready et al, 2004) a common rationale for adopting YRE. In a 2007 study of year-round schools, Evans noted that all of Indiana’s ST-YRE programs have adopted alternative calendars because of academic concerns and public support for the plan (Evans, 2007). Multi-

track year-round education (MT-YRE) programs divide students into groups, then assign each group its own schedule. MT-YRE models are often used in overcrowded schools to avoid the cost of building new facilities. For example, Cooper et al (2003) estimated that 40% of schools switch to YRE to alleviate overcrowding or avoid new capital expenditures.

Student Achievement

Proponents of YRE schedules frequently argue that this is a mechanism for improving student achievement. The basic premise is that YRE will improve student retention, alleviating “summer learning loss” (Evans, 2007, p.17). There is long-standing research citing that more economically advantaged students tend to lose less, particularly in reading, after summer break as compared to less economically advantaged peers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007; Cooper et al., 2003; Hayes & Grether, 1969; Heyns, 1987). Literature related to summer learning loss indicates that students of low socio-economic status (SES) are more likely to be impacted by time away from school than their economically advantaged peers (Evans, 2007). In his analysis of standardized math test scores, Evans (2007) found that third grade students on free/reduced lunch and minority students in YRE programs performed better than students in the same categories who were enrolled in traditional calendar programs.

Research on year-round schools does not provide a clear consensus on the relationship between year-round schooling and student achievement. Studies that reported more robust effect sizes demonstrated gains among low-income students (McMillen, 2001) and/or upper elementary students (Palmer & Bemis, 1999). In a comprehensive review of three decades of research on year-round schooling and achievement, Palmer & Bemis (1999) concluded that “much of the empirical data regarding the effects of YRE on student achievement and other related outcomes suffers from poor research designs or incomplete data making it difficult to draw conclusions”

(p. 9). In a more recent meta-analysis of research conducted on YRE, Cooper et al (2003) noted that “weak research designs” prevent us from making “strong inferences about the effects of modified calendars” (p. 37). The overall effect size reported was positive but resided in the “trivial” range (p. 45). Similarly, the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center (2004) characterized the available research on year-round schooling as “inconclusive” and “contradictory.” It is noteworthy that even though YRE continued to grow in the first decade of the twenty-first century, there is scant research on its impact.

In addition to the relatively insignificant effect sizes reported in the research, studies tended not to distinguish between schools that extended the school year and did not offer intercession programs and those that provided education to a limited number of students during the intercession (Cooper et al, 2003). This is essential as intercessions may be a key mechanism that boosts student achievement. Evans (2007) showed positive test score gains amongst third graders in a ST-YRE program when compared to traditional schools with similar characteristics. Further he noted that “much of the rationale for year-round schooling hinges upon intercession times that enable teachers to target and remediate students throughout the year with short intensive developmental assistance” (p. 2). Byrd (2001) found that a shortened school year with an added intercession period for low-achieving students enhanced both overall student achievement and achievement among economically disadvantaged students. Unfortunately, very little peer-reviewed research is available on the use of intercessions in YRE. Without more research in this area, it is difficult to predict how students will respond to intercession opportunities as compared to traditional summer school or other remediation and enrichment opportunities.

In contrast to ST-YRE programs, two recent studies of MT-YRE schools in California reported negative effects on student achievement (Graves, 2009; Mitchell & Mitchell, 2005). Mitchell and Mitchell (2005) found widespread use of ability tracking in MT-YRE and warned that dividing groups of students according to ability was akin to promoting academic inequalities, limiting some students “access to high-achieving classmates, experienced and qualified teachers, and enriched curricular opportunities” (p. 550).

Economic Impact

A motivating force behind the adoption of YRE programs is to make better use of school facilities that would normally be dormant for 3-4 months a year on a traditional schedule (Glines, 1997; Orellana & Thorne, 1998). By implementing MT-YRE, districts can close older buildings without the additional cost of renovation or new construction (Glines, 1997), alleviating overcrowding while cutting expenditures (Ready et al, 2004). However, the financial savings of MT-YRE programs may come with an academic cost to students. A 2009 study noted that while cost-savings to MT-YRE schools may be “in the range of 5–15%,” there is “a trade-off in terms of academic achievement of roughly 1–2 national percentile rank points” (Graves, 2009, p. 390).

ST-YRE schools have not generated significant cost savings because they do not reduce class sizes or enroll more students (Evans, 2007; Orellana & Thorne, 1998; Ready et al, 2004). However, the cost of building operations (such as heating and cooling expenses) associated with the change to year-round schooling may lead to changes in expenditures. In fact, cost increases are more likely in year-round schools that operate at full capacity in summer months or provide instruction during intercessions (Evans, 2007).

Teacher, Parent, and Student Behaviors and Attitudes Regarding YRE

Most families and school personnel appreciated some aspects of YRE after they had time to adjust to the change. One researcher noted, “It is clear that the students, parents, and staff that participate in modified calendar programs are overwhelmingly positive about the experience” (Cooper et al, 2003, p. 43). Teacher perceptions generally appear to grow more positive over time (Palmer & Bemis, 1999). However, similar concerns regarding research design in these studies raise questions about the reliability of the findings. YRE does not appear to have a consistent impact on student or teacher absenteeism. In a review of twelve empirical studies examining student attendance, only one found significantly higher rates of attendance, while the others showed non-significant differences in both directions (Palmer & Bemis, 1999). Five of six studies showed evidence of decreased teacher absences, but only two of these tested for statistical significance (Palmer & Bemis, 1999).

Initial parent and teacher concerns were noted in several studies. Parents found it difficult to arrange childcare during intercessions and reported difficulty coordinating the schedules of their other children who attended schools with traditional calendars (Graves, 2009; Orellana & Thorne, 1998). In addition, teachers found it more difficult to schedule professional development without a large block of time in the summer (Palmer & Bemis, 1999). Businesses expressed concern over the loss of teenage labor during the summer and/or summer travel dollars. In fact, the travel and tourism industries have lobbied against YRE in some locations (Evans, 2007).

Demographics

Intersession activities are a feature of year-rounds schools that appear to benefit students (Ballinger, 1995; McMillen, 2001), but racial and cultural factors impact student participation. Hood and Freeman (2000) found that “African American, Hispanic, and Native American

students were more likely to participate in intersession offerings than White or Asian American students” (p. 359). African American and Hispanic students were more likely to participate in remediation activities (p.354), while White students were more likely to take advantage of “acceleration” and “enrichment” options (p. 355).

In California, most of the year-round schools are MT-YRE programs in urban areas where minority students and English Language Learners reside (Graves, 2009; Orellana & Thorne, 1998). The MT-YRE program studied by Orellana and Thorne divided students into three tracks using geographic location and language groupings (1998). Tracking students according to their culture of origin and geographic location contributed to a “process of racialization” (p. 456), and contributed to parent perceptions that some tracks were “more advanced” than others (p. 457). Color coding of tracks (i.e. labeling them blue, red, or green) further contributed to stakeholder perceptions that ethnicity impacted educational opportunities (Orellana & Thorne, 1998).

Studies did not consistently report on the demographics of families who opt into year-round programs where districts offer YRE as choice. It is not clear how students were selected to participate, and self-selection might influence results (McMillen, 2001).

Conclusion

The research regarding YRE is inconclusive and it is clear that redistributing the 180-day school year without making other changes cannot be expected to provide long-term gains in students’ achievement. As Silva (2007) stated, “time’s potential as a reform depends largely on whether the time is used effectively and on its use as a resource to serve students most in need of extra learning opportunities, both inside and outside of school” (p. 9). If schools are able to increase or improve engaged learning experiences through sound pedagogical practice along

with the addition of enriching intercessions, it is possible to have a positive impact on student achievement (Metzger, 2003). Further research is needed to examine the extent to which YRE reforms are associated with positive student outcomes, the reason for their impact, and professional development practices that address the challenges of the transition for students, teachers, and families.

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