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Officials in some school districts facing growing student populations and little or no money for building new facilities are looking at year-round education (YRE) as a

possible solution. By revising the traditional nine-month calendar, districts can fit more students into a smaller building, thus saving millions of dollars in new construction costs. Each year the number of schools adopting YRE grows, and some go so far to say that YRE is the wave of the future.

Notwithstanding the recent interest, YRE remains a novel concept to most educators, and objective information regarding year-round calendars is scarce. Schools usually adopt YRE for its cost-saving features, but a year-round calendar affects all aspects of a school, from what classes are taught to how the administration is run. This Digest looks not at the budgetary considerations of YRE, but at its implications for the educational program.

WHAT DOES A YEAR-ROUND SCHOOL LOOK LIKE?

In most instances, year-round schools operate on calendars that are reworkings of a traditional, nine-month calendar. Year-round students attend the same number of days as their counterparts (180), except that these days are arranged differently. The most popular YRE calendar is the 45-15 plan, where students attend school for 45 days and then go on vacation for 15. There are numerous other types of schedules as well, but the common factor in all YRE calendars is that students have several short vacations all through the year, rather than one three-month summer break (Ballinger and others 1987).

A few year-round schools have all their students on the same instructional and vacation schedule (a singletrack calendar). Most, however, operate on a multitrack calendar, which groups students onto tracks that have different instructional and vacation schedules. These tracks are stepped so that there is always at least one track on vacation (Ballinger and others).

The multitrack calendar allows a school to enroll more students than the school building was designed to hold. A school in a building built for 750 students can enroll as many as 1,000 students on a four-track calendar (Quinlan and others 1987). Because of this, the multitrack option is attractive to schools where population increases are straining existing resources, especially in urban areas in the western states where the overwhelming majority of year-round schools are located (Carriedo and Goren 1989).

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS OF YRE?

The primary educational benefit of YRE is that it facilitates continuous student learning. According to a study done for the New York Board of Regents (1978), students forget

much of what they learned in school while on a long summer break. This is particularly true of disadvantaged students and students for whom English is a second language. With YRE, less is forgotten over the shorter vacations, and teachers spend less time reviewing (Ballinger and others).

The flexibility of a year-round calendar also offers several benefits. For example, schools can offer intersession programs where students participate in advanced, remedial, and enrichment classes (White 1985).

This flexibility can also help migrant students, who are at a serious disadvantage because they are in and out of school several times each year (NYBR). Allowing migrant families to choose their children's vacation schedules may help to keep them in school (Ballinger and others).

Teachers can benefit from YRE's flexibility when schools allow them to work during the intersessions and earn more money (Ballinger and others). There also are reports that teachers and students are less likely to burn out and be absent on a YRE calendar (Quinlan and others).

WHAT IS THE EFFECT ON CURRICULUM?

It goes without saying that YRE calendars require that educators revamp curriculums. The degree of change depends on what system a school had before (that is, semesters or quarters), what kind of calendar is adopted, and whether a school is an elementary or a high school (White).

At the elementary level, where students are usually with the same teacher all year, YRE tends to be less disruptive than at the secondary level (White). However, in multitrack schools, there are always students and teachers who have to change rooms, as often as four times a year (Carriedo and Goren). Some schools have to combine students from several grades into one class, which some teachers consider to be "a dilution to the quality of instruction" (Quinlan and others).

When YRE is instituted at the secondary level, where teachers are divided into departments and courses are offered individually, curriculum changes become more complicated. Secondary schools usually have to revise their graduation requirements and break up sequenced courses (White).

Multitrack secondary schools experience major curriculum changes. While more than one track may be in the same term, all the tracks are never in school at the same time or at the same point in the school year (White). This creates a problem with advanced, elective, and specialized courses; multitrack schools are often forced to offer the course several times to small groups or have students cross-track for special courses (Quinlan and others).

DOES YRE IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT?

Despite the current interest in YRE, there has been no definitive study done that shows how YRE affects student achievement. In the words of Carriedo and Goren, while studies rarely show that YRE lessens achievement, "research findings are mixed and inconclusive."

Merino found that out of nine studies done on achievement in year-round schools, only three favored YRE, and two of those three studied schools that had increased the number of instructional days for disadvantaged students. Two studies indicated that YRE lowered achievement, but overall, research revealed "no significant differences between the two types of schedules" (Merino 1983).

A study done for the California State Department of Education by Quinlan and associates sheds further light on the enigmatic relation between YRE and achievement. Research revealed that California year-round schools have improved but consistently score below traditional schools, even traditional schools with similar student populations. Additionally, when singletrack and multitrack schools were considered separately, the data showed that singletrack schools perform better than their traditional counterparts, while multitrack schools perform worse.

Mazzarella (1984), in trying to explain these types of results, points out that changing calendars and schedules will not improve achievement until educators learn to use existing schedules more effectively.

WHAT SHOULD SCHOOLS CONSIDER BEFORE ADOPTING YRE?

Although YRE has the potential to solve budgetary, population, and even academic problems, YRE affects every part of a school. There are myriad things for administrators to consider, and some issues, such as how YRE affects families, are not discussed until there is already a problem. Here is a brief list of some considerations that might affect a district's decision to implement or not to implement YRE:

*Not all schools are the same. While a year-round school may work in an urban or migrant environment, that does not mean it will work everywhere. Consider a school's needs carefully before choosing YRE (White).

*Offseason vacations often cause problems. Student summer activities may be disrupted. Some year-round schools have worked with the community to ensure that students will not be left without intersession activities. Offering intersession classes and activities is also a partial solution to this problem (Oxnard 1990).

*Without the long summer break, teachers may not be able to continue their own education by taking university classes. Schools may need to offer inservice training (Merino).

*Families and family traditions can be disrupted by YRE, especially if siblings are attending schools with different calendars. Additionally, many parents experience difficulty finding offseason childcare (Carriedo and Goren).

*Those who have implemented YRE programs report that community opposition to year-round programs is usually very strong at the outset. A school or district should be prepared for opposition (Ballinger and others).

*Although it is poorly documented, year-round administrators are especially susceptible to burnout. Vacations are harder to schedule, and communication with teachers and staff can be difficult on a year-round calendar (Goldman 1990).

YRE is a relatively inexpensive method of reform that allows educators to deal with population increases and budget constraints, reform curriculums, and renegotiate teacher contracts. However, there are many other aspects of YRE that lack definitive research, such as its effects on families, students, teachers, and administrators. It remains to be seen exactly how the recent increase in the number of year-round schools will affect education as a whole.

RESOURCES

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