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Table of Contents

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Year-Round Education: A Strategy for Overcrowded Schools. ERIC/CUE Digest Number 103.

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Confronted by overcrowded schools and tight budgets, school districts in about 30 states are keeping schools open year round. This is not the same as extending the school year; on a year-round schedule, students attend school the same number of days--180--as students on the traditional nine-month calendar. However, year-round education (YRE) students have several short vacations rather than one three-month summer break. By switching to the year-round calendar, districts can fit more students into existing school buildings, saving millions of dollars in construction costs.

School districts that respond to temporary increases in enrollment by constructing new buildings run a serious risk of costly over-building, since "[l]ong after the increase in enrollment has passed, the community probably will still be paying off the bonds for the new school construction" (Alvarez, Fraser, & Durante, 1994). Because of a growing awareness of this risk and the significant cost savings of YRE, the number of year-round schools has jumped from 287 in 1980 to more than 1,900 in 1994.

SCHOOL SCHEDULING

Most year-round schools operate on a multi-track calendar, and group students in three or four tracks with different vacation times. While one group is on vacation, another track is using the building, thereby increasing its capacity. Thus, with a four-track calendar, a school in a building built for 750 students can serve as many as 1,000 students (Bradford, 1993).
School districts can choose from a wide selection of plans or develop their own. The most popular is 45-15, where students attend school for 45 days (nine weeks) and then take fifteen days off (three weeks).

COST-EFFECTIVENESS OF YEAR-ROUND SCHOOLS

AVOIDANCE OF CONSTRUCTION COSTS. No matter which year-round plan is adopted, the chief reason for converting to YRE is to avoid the cost of building a new school. Expenses would be incurred for building design, engineering, construction, and furnishing, as well as for infrastructure reconstruction (streets, sewers, water, utilities, furniture). In 1987, a study done for the California State Board of Education indicated that it would cost nearly $4 million to build a 24-classroom elementary school (720 students), and more than $6 million to build a secondary school addition to accommodate 720 students (Quinlan et al., 1987, cited in Denton & Walenta, 1993). The Oxnard (CA) Unified School District converted to year-round education in 1976. In the 1984-85 school year, its elementary enrollment increased by 644 students. If the district had been on the traditional nine-month calendar, it would have needed an additional school, at a cost of $5 million. It is believed that by converting to year-round education the district saved $16 million in new building costs over a 13-year period

(Brekke, 1989, cited in Denton & Walenta, 1993).

TRANSITION COSTS. Costs for transition to the new schedule include those for feasibility studies, administrative planning time, and teacher in-service training. But these are modest compared to the avoided construction costs.

OPERATING COSTS. A school on a year-round calendar has students in attendance for approximately 242 days each year (Brekke, 1992). Clearly, keeping a YRE school open incurs a greater overall cost than maintaining the same school for only 180 days. Maintenance, repair, and utility expenses increase; and secretaries, custodians, cafeteria personnel, nurses, counselors, bus drivers, and other staff must be available for the full 12 months, with a proportionate increase in salary. Principals' workloads increase, sometimes requiring districts to hire vice-principals to handle the increased administrative load.

However, since YRE schools are educating more students, the key financial issue is the per-pupil cost. On this standard, YRE schools have proven to be cost-effective. For example, the Pajaro Valley (CA) School District converted five schools to YRE in 1971 because it had 15 percent more students than its schools could serve on the traditional nine-month schedule. Five years later, the year-round schedule had achieved a 4.1 percent reduction in per-pupil costs (Glass, 1992). The aforementioned Oxnard District found that the operating costs of its year-round schools averaged 5.5 percent less per student than in the traditional program (Brekke, 1992).

Year-round scheduling is not the only, or the least expensive, cost-cutting option for financially strapped school districts with growing student populations. Other measures, such as double sessions or the use of temporary structures, may prove to be cheaper. These approaches, however, have educational drawbacks, while the advantages of year-round education can, in theory at least, extend beyond economics.

EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS OF YEAR-ROUND SCHOOLING

Aside from the cost savings, the primary benefit of year-round education is that it facilitates continuous learning. Students forget much of what they learned in school while on long summer vacations (Weaver, 1992). This is particularly true of disadvantaged students and those for whom English is a second language. Because students retain more when the learning process is interrupted for only short periods of time, teachers in year-round schools need to spend less time reviewing pre-vacation material.

In addition, the shorter terms and more frequent vacations associated with year-round schooling appear to reduce dropout rates. The Jefferson County (CO) schools, for example, found that the dropout rate went from five percent to only two percent in the

same schools after a year-round program was implemented. Students can miss one term and, after their personal lives are better arranged, come back to join a new class the next term.

The San Diego (CA) Unified School District compared test scores--on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (TCBS) and the California Assessment Program (CAP)--from 1982 through 1990, and found significant differences in the percentage of year-round schools that maintained or improved student scores compared to the results for traditional schools (Mutchler, 1993). For example, in fifth grade, a much larger proportion of year-round schools maintained or improved TCBS reading scores than did the traditional schools, and the average improvement was significantly greater. In third grade, a much larger percent of year-round schools maintained or improved CAP reading scores than did the traditional schools, and, again, the average improvement was significantly greater.

Not all results are this positive, however. Merino (1983, cited in Weaver, 1992) found no significant achievement differences between nine-month schools and those on the year-round schedule. In a study done for the California State Department of Education in 1987, year-round schools consistently scored below traditional schools with similar student populations (Quinlan et al., 1987, cited in Weaver, 1992). These results are puzzling since there appears to be nothing inherent in year-round education that could harm student achievement, and since teachers, students, and parents all feel that YRE enhances learning.

RESPONSES TO YEAR-ROUND EDUCATION

PARENTS. Because year-round education differs so radically from tradition, community opposition is strong at the outset. Yet parental attitudes become progressively more positive as the programs continue. For example, Cherry Creek (CO) District 5, which instituted year-round schooling in 1974, surveyed parents after the first year and found that two-thirds preferred the year-round schedule (Glass, 1992). Nationwide, other school districts have found similarly high levels of parental acceptance after the programs began.
The year-round schedule does, however, inconvenience families with children in both traditional and year-round schools. But parental responses are mixed: In Cherry Creek, one-third of the parents felt that year-round schooling complicated vacation planning, while one-half reported that it made vacations easier to plan (Glass, 1992).

The Riverside (CA) Unified School District surveyed parents at its seven year-round schools and found that 78 percent were satisfied with the program (Barrett, Ferrett, & Beaty, 1992). Parents felt that the shorter, more frequent vacations allowed students to remain focused and enthusiastic. Their chief concern was about the availability of child care.

TEACHERS. Like parents, teachers in year-round schools have generally positive attitudes, and their acceptance of the new schedule increases over time. Teachers experience few problems with the vacation times. In fact, they feel that the more frequent breaks reduce burnout and help students retain more of what they have learned. Moreover, the frequent breaks during the school year enable teachers to visit and learn from other programs and other teachers.

One concern that teachers have about YRE is that they may not be able to continue their own education and earn pay increases by taking university classes in the summer. But teachers have solved this problem by covering for one another at work. That is, one teacher will work during a particular break to allow another to attend summer classes.

Educators who were concerned that the year-round schedule would make accelerated learning difficult have found that the flexibility of a year-round schedule makes it relatively easy to provide accelerated classes. Many YRE schools offer between-session programs for students to participate in advanced, remedial, and enriched classes.

STUDENTS. In the Riverside survey, 82 percent of the students were satisfied with year-round schooling. They felt that the shorter, more frequent vacations reduced boredom and fatigue and helped them retain more of what they learned.

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