

The 200-Day Calendar Initiative in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles: Three Schools' Decision to Break the Mold

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This research study investigated the decision-making process utilized by three elementary schools in adopting the 200-day calendar initiative in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. The schools in the study represented three distinct sets of demographics focusing primarily on high, middle, and low socioeconomic characteristics, as reported by the Archdiocese. Principals, pastors, parent representatives, and school advisory council representatives were interviewed. The current study outlines the decision-making process by the school leadership, the reactions to the decision by the stakeholders, and finally, the reasons why these three schools chose to extend their school calendar. Findings suggest that the autonomous leadership and governance structure of the elementary schools in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles allowed schools to utilize a context-specific decision-making process, where once school pastors and principals agreed to the decision, the initiative was adopted at the schools. Reasons for the extension vary by school.

The question of school day expansion and calendar extension in improving student learning is part of the educational discourse across the nation (e.g., Johnson & Spradlin, 2007; Silva, 2007). Secretary of Education Arne Duncan emphasized in his interview with Richard Stengel (2009) of *TIME* magazine, "I think the school day is too short, the school week is too short and the school year is too short." Duncan further states in the article, "You look at all the creative schools that are getting dramatically better results. The common denominator of all of them is they're spending more time, doing more after school, doing more on Saturdays, doing more over the summer. The other big issue is that ultimately if we don't do more time, our kids are at a competitive disadvantage."

Superintendent of Elementary Schools of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles Kevin Baxter (2011) joins in that discourse by affirming Duncan's belief in a longer school year when he says:

The way we educate will invariably change over the coming decades. We at the Department of Catholic Schools recognize this and have always stated that the extension of the school year was not meant to be a panacea to address all the issues and challenges we face. But we do think that moving toward an extended calendar, along with the integration of new technology and the natural shift in instruction and learning, will position elementary schools in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles to be among the key leaders in education for the twenty-first century. That benefits our students, as well as our schools. (p. 21)

On January 27, 2011, Cardinal Roger Mahony publically announced that all 210 elementary schools of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles would meet the requirements of a 200-day calendar by the 2012–2013 academic year. All of the schools were encouraged to extend their calendars to 200 days for the 2011–2012 academic year as a trial experience. Cardinal Mahony stated in his press release:

The relationship between more substantive, effective time in an academic setting and increased student performance is clear, and the elementary schools in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles are responding to this critical national issue in order that our students grow up to be successful leaders in the global workforce. (Tamberg, 2011)

Within seven days of Cardinal Mahony's announcement mandating the 200-day calendar initiative, the requirement was changed to a recommendation. Although there is no available research to support a definitive reason for the rapid alteration of the original mandate, it appears that negative reactions at some school sites from pastors, principals, and parents may have prompted a mitigating response from the Archdiocese. Therefore, the elementary schools of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles decided their own individual involvement in adopting or rejecting the 200-day calendar initiative. As reported by the Department of Catholic Schools of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, at the time of this study, approximately 60% of the elementary schools have adopted some form of an extended calendar for the 2011–2012 school year.

Given the autonomous nature of the elementary schools in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, as verified when the initiative was changed from a requirement to a recommendation, the researchers were curious as to how and why some schools accepted the initiative and others did not. Therefore, this

study represents an initial observation of three schools that immediately decided to break the mold of the traditional calendar utilized by the elementary schools of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and extend their calendar for the 2011–2012 school year from 180 to 200 instructional days.

The research was conducted qualitatively within the first five months of the calendar initiative announcement from the archdiocesan leadership. The study examined one school from high, middle, and low socioeconomic demographics, all located in one of the five pastoral regions of the archdiocese. Principals, pastors, parent representatives, and school advisory council representatives were interviewed.

The study seeks to discover, through the lens of these three distinct schools, the decision-making *process* by the school leadership, the *reactions* to the decision by the stakeholders, and finally, the *reasons* why these three schools chose to extend their school calendar. The study does not explore the debate generated by the calendar initiative in the archdiocesan elementary schools or any effect of the extended calendar related to student outcomes. These issues are reserved for later and more extensive research. Rather, the study explores how and why three distinct autonomous elementary schools adopted a recommended initiative that would radically extend their school calendars. As such, this study is important and contributes to the national conversation among Catholic school educators regarding organizational models for future sustainability. The three schools examined in this study were able to make individual decisions for their community and this existing model can be best described as autonomous, with site-based management and leadership. These schools are loosely connected in a decentralized system. Meanwhile, emerging models like those found in the Diocese of Bismarck and the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, place schools in a centralized system with solid lines of organizational authority maintained by a superintendent.

Literature Review

This line of inquiry is informed by literature organized in this manuscript in the following sections: a discussion of school autonomy as a conceptual framework for the investigation; the literature related to school calendar length and student achievement to situate the decision made by schools; a review of the current Catholic school organizational model to situate how such a decision is possible; and finally, a description of the current enrollment challenge

facing Catholic elementary schools to situate the context in which this decision was made.

School Autonomy

“The usefulness or value of autonomy does not lie in autonomy for its own sake but in the freedom it affords schools to do things that previously were not allowed or available” (Finnigan, 2007, p. 505). Research on school autonomy evolves from the reform movement in public education directed at developing charter schools. Trying to break the traditional public education model of centralization, regulation, and compliance, the charter school movement stresses parental choice, deregulation, and autonomy. Finnigan (2007) applies the theory of charter schools to her work on their perceived nature and identifies a primary assumption about charter schooling when she states, “this combination of autonomy and accountability will allow educators to implement innovative ideas and practices” (p. 504). Additional studies (Clark, 2009; Davies & Hentschke, 1994; Whitty, 1997) discuss the value in disaggregating traditional public education into individual autonomous educational centers. For charter schools, breaking the mold of centralization is an imperative in establishing site-based management and control of the decisions that will directly impact student learning.

In public education there exists a movement to create autonomy for schools. In the current autonomous setting of Catholic elementary education an emerging movement to centralize is evidenced in the examples of the Diocese of Bismarck, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the Diocese of Charlotte, and others. Accountability in a decentralized organizational model for schools is framed by the needs of the individual context and the stakeholders served (Finnigan, 2007). Finnigan (2007) highlights an essential question for public education to answer that can also be the case for Catholic schools, “under what conditions is autonomy beneficial” (p. 523)?

The School Calendar and Student Achievement

The discussion of the school calendar is rooted in the challenge of raising student achievement in the nation’s public education system and has been an ongoing point of dialogue among educational professionals. In fact, the structuring of the “exact duration of an appropriate amount of schooling” has remained an issue throughout our nation’s history (Johnson & Spradin, 2007, p.

2). Historically, the school calendar was established based on the agrarian nature of the nation's early years, which necessitated an extended summer break (Johnson & Spradin, 2007). The "traditional school calendar," which includes a 6.5-hour school day and a 180-day calendar, became more widely accepted by school districts across the nation in the second half of the 20th century. According to Silva (2007), by the 1960s, most schools in the country had established a 170–180-day calendar, five days a week, 6.5 hours a day, which has remained the standard in American public schools ever since. Today, 35 states require the school year to be 180 days or longer, and six require between 175 and 179 days. Meanwhile, 34 states require five or more instructional hours per day (or no less than 900 hours per year; Cavel, Blank, Toye, & Williams, 2004, p. 2).

Catholic schools in the United States have followed a parallel path with the nation's public schools in calendar development since the early 20th century. Walch (2003), in his book on the history of Catholic education in America, states that Catholic parish schools, "adapted many of the fundamental elements of the public school curriculum for use in parish classrooms" (p. 82). The result was a calendar that emulated the 180-day model found in both Catholic and public schools today.

Yet, the relationship between time in school and academic learning is complex. It would appear that more time in school should lead to better student achievement. A meta-analysis conducted by Silva (2007) stresses the importance of quality instructional time and student engagement as the foundation for success in learning whether the calendar or school day is extended or remains within traditional parameters. According to Silva (2007), "the correlation between time and achievement increases when students are given more instructional time, and even greater when students' academic learning time increases" (p. 3). Therefore, increasing time in the school day and/or days in the calendar may provide increased student achievement, especially when academic learning time, or the time when students are actually engaged in learning, is provided. Still, Silva's (2007) meta-analysis points to a limitation in the empirical research on extended time and its impact on student learning. Silva (2007) states, "there has never been a controlled or longitudinal experiment that specifically measures the effect of extending time on student learning" (p. 2). From Silva's (2007) meta-analysis of research on the instructional day and calendar there appears to be inadequate data to support a conclusion that an extended calendar alone will contribute to higher student achievement. There are multiple factors, such as quality instruction and engaged learning, that also influence student achievement (Johnson & Spradlin, 2007; Prendergast, Spra-

dlin, & Palozzi, 2007; Silva, 2007).

The State and Local Public Education Calendar Issue

The discourse on the school calendar is further complicated by additional challenges facing the public education system, such as the rising costs to operate schools and reduced funding from state budgets. These concerns present financial challenges to public schooling, especially in urban communities. In 2009, the State of California Legislature permitted school districts to shorten school calendars to 175 days (Education Code Section 46201.2). A report by Freeburg and Frey (2011) announced: “The prospect of many California public school students experiencing a shorter school year was heightened by the release on Wednesday of a grim report from the Legislative Analyst’s Office predicting a severe budget shortfall” (para. 1). While 18 of the state’s 30 largest districts still maintain a 180-day calendar, the California public school system is seriously considering shortening the school calendar. With this educational context occurring in the public school system, the opposite initiative was proposed for Catholic elementary schools in Los Angeles—extending the academic calendar to 200 days.

The Catholic Elementary System of Schools

Unlike public education, in Catholic elementary schooling, the efficacy for programmatic change rests primarily at the local school site level. The pastor is responsible for the well-being of the parish and therefore, the Catholic education of the members of his parish, including the viability of the school (Code of Canon Law, 1983). The pastor hires a principal to serve as the chief operating officer of the school. The effectiveness of the academic program, the financial strength of the school’s operating budget, and the presence of the school’s Catholic identity are the responsibility of the principal with delegated authority from the pastor. Supporting them is an internal collaborative of people pulled from parent and parish leadership to advise in the operations of the school.

As stated in the Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church (Code of Canon Law, 1983), the relationship of the local bishop to the parish school is described as autonomous, with the direction of each school independent from a centralized authority.

The diocesan bishop has the right to watch over and visit the Catholic schools in his territory, even those which members of religious institutes have founded or direct. He also issues prescripts, which pertain to the general regulation of Catholic schools; these prescripts are valid also for schools, which these religious direct, without prejudice, however, to their autonomy regarding the internal direction of their schools. (Can. 806 §1)

Although the pastor and principal remain the focal point for change initiatives in Catholic schooling, the parents of the school are also expected to participate in the decision-making process (Code of Canon Law, 1983). First, the Church's law points to the child's parents as the primary educator by saying "schools are the principal assistance to parents in fulfilling the function of education" (Can. 796 §1), and further states the relationship of the school to the parents and vice versa:

Parents must cooperate closely with the teachers of the schools to which they entrust their children to be educated; moreover, teachers in fulfilling their duty are to collaborate very closely with parents, who are to be heard willingly and for whom associations or meetings are to be established and highly esteemed. (Can. 796 §2)

Applying the principle of subsidiarity (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2004) to the relationship between the parish elementary school and the school administrative office situated in an archdiocese or diocese, provides a view of governance different from traditional public education: a system of schools versus a school system. According to Martin (2009), there is strength in the decentralization component of Catholic education.

One hallmark of Catholic schools has been a decentralized, non-bureaucratic organizational system where principals are CEOs of their schools, parents are highly involved and decisions are made close to the children at the school level. Catholic schools need to capitalize on these strengths as a loosely coupled system of schools and consider how to build upon them. (p. 4)

Therefore, a system of schools permits the leadership style, governance design, and decision-making process applied in each school to reflect the needs of the local context without mandate from a central figure or governing body.

Although decentralization is an identified strength of Catholic elementary education, the need to connect to a centralized administrative entity in an archdiocese or diocese is functionally important and primarily seeks three objectives. The first is to validate the Catholic mission and identity with the local bishop. The second is to share in human resource capital and capacity, which includes personnel contracts, benefits, legal representation, and regulation. The third objective is to share in academic program resources based on the economy of scale. The centralized administrative office can also provide support and encouragement for the design of innovative projects by the local parish elementary school but the school remains autonomous in program implementation. The Catholic parish elementary school in the decentralized organizational model is responsible for its own welfare and therefore, its own destiny. The organizational model operating for the benefit of the elementary schools in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles would best be described as a system of schools.

Catholic Schools and the Enrollment Challenge

While Catholic schools differ in governance structure from public schools, they are also faced with serious challenges that threaten their viability. Over the past 10 years, the number of Catholic schools in the nation has declined by 21.6% (or 1,755 schools; McDonald & Schultz, 2011). Enrollment has declined by 587,166 students (22.1%), coming largely from elementary schools. McDonald and Schultz (2011) further state that the data indicate almost a complete absence of religious faculty and administration: “The data show the shift from an almost entirely religious staff (sisters, brothers, priests, deacons) of 90.1% at mid-century (1950) to 48.4% in the 1970’s to a primarily lay staff, now at 96.3% during the current school year” (p. 3). California, specifically, has the largest population of Catholic school students (215,239) in the United States and the most number of schools (673). McDonald and Schultz (2011) indicate that the Archdiocese of Los Angeles has the largest number of elementary schools (216) in California and is second to the Archdiocese of New York (220). As such, the enrollment challenge, attached to increasing costs to educate students, continues to be present in many of the urban and inner-city Catholic schools.

Method

Design and Procedure

The current qualitative study sought to measure the experiences of three Catholic elementary schools in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles that opted to extend their school calendar to 200 days for the 2011–2012 academic year. Specifically, the researchers sought to understand the decision-making process, reactions, and reasons for the calendar extension. To that end, interviews of the school leadership team, including principals and pastors, were conducted, and when available, a parent representative and a school board representative were also interviewed to ascertain the perceptions of the broader school community related to the decision to extend the calendar year. In addition to these interviews, the principals were also asked to provide background data on the school such as enrollment, faculty, and family composition. The principals also provided a section from the latest Western Catholic Education Association/Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WCEA/WASC) accreditation document describing their school composition, which the researchers used to confirm self-reported background data about the schools.

A total of 10 interviews were individually conducted in a semi-structured format—four interviews at School A; four interviews at School B; and two interviews (principal and pastor only) at School C. Each interview ranged from 30–60 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed. At least two out of the three principal investigators conducted each interview for quality assurance. Interviews were held at the school site based on scheduling convenience for the participants and were conducted during the months of May and June 2011. This study received Institutional Review Board approval and support from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Participants

Selection criteria. Stratified random sampling was implemented to select the three schools for this study. First, a list of all elementary schools within the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, which had opted to extend their calendar to 200 days for the 2011–2012 school year ($N = 83$), was obtained from the Archdiocese. This list also included demographic information on each school such as school context, location/region, and financial level. Schools with pre-kindergarten or kindergarten through the eighth grade (pre-K/K–8) were eligible to partici-

pate in the study to standardize the school context. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles is made up of five pastoral regions: Our Lady of the Angels, San Fernando, San Gabriel, San Pedro, and Santa Barbara. The first strata imposed sorted the list of schools by geographical region so that only schools in the Our Lady of Angels (OLA) region were included ($N = 28$). This decision was made due to the proximity of the schools to the location of principal investigators but still provided an adequate number of schools for the participant pool. Next, the Archdiocese classifies elementary schools, based on median household income, on a 1 to 10 financial continua (1 representing the highest and 10 representing the lowest financial level). The list of schools from OLA was then sorted by financial level and three categories were subsequently created: high (1-3), medium (4-7), and low (8-10) financial strata. A school from within each of these financial levels was then randomly selected to participate in the study.

Contact was initially made with the principal's office of the three randomly selected schools to confirm: (1) its plan to extend their calendar to 200 days during the 2011-2012 school year and (2) its self-perceived financial level based on the category we imposed. All three schools confirmed the accuracy of the selection criteria and indicated their interest in participating in the study. The principal provided contact information for the pastor, parent, and school board representatives, and each participant was separately consented and confidentiality of all responses was assured.

School A

School A represented the highest financial category and according to the WCEA/WASC document, for the 2010-2011 academic year had an enrollment of 191 students in pre-K through grade 8. The principal indicated that enrollment at the time of the interview was 160 with capacity for enrollment closer to 225. The average class size ranges from 16-20 students. While located in a higher-income level, 20% of families live 16 to 20 miles from the school and commute to work in the area. As such, there is a range of family income represented at the school. The student ethnic distribution includes 43% Caucasian, 29% Asian, 12% Hispanic, 11% multiracial, and 5% African American. The faculty experience ranges with five teachers in their 12th year at the school and five teachers in their fifth year or less. The majority of teachers have master's degrees and credentials.

Interviewees. At the time of the interview, the principal had served in the role for eight years with 18 years experience as a principal in total. The pastor

reported having served for 43 years as a priest with two years as pastor of this school. Previously, he had served for 15 years as pastor of a different parish and was director of campus ministry. The school reports having an active parent organization focused on fund-raising, service, educational, and social events. The parent representative for this study had been affiliated with the school for two years, with children currently enrolled in the school, and was appointed to be the incoming parent club president. Finally, the school board representative was the founding chair of the advisory/consultative board and reported being affiliated with the school for four years after being approached by the pastor as a member of the parish. The board focuses on fund-raising, marketing and public relations, strategic planning, admissions, and finances, and consists of parents, parish members, and individuals with no direct affiliation with the school.

School B

School B represented the middle-income level and for the 2010–2011 academic year had an enrollment of 201 students. At the time of the interview, enrollment was 195 with capacity at the school between 285–290 students. The student ethnic distribution of the school includes Asian, African-American, African-Hispanic, and Caucasian, with the majority of families as Hispanic and Filipino (percentages were not given by the school). The teaching staff has remained stable over the past six years; eight of the nine teachers hold a credential and/or master's degree; the vice principal of lower elementary grades also has a certificate in inclusive education for special needs students.

Interviewees. The principal had served in this role at the school for 28 years. The pastor had served at the school since 2004 but reported having been a pastor for about 15 years in total. The parent representative reported having a son in the eighth grade who had attended the school since kindergarten. Her affiliation with the school began when her daughter, now a senior in high school, attended the school in second grade. She described the parent group as a core group of about 10 parents who meet monthly with a focus on marketing and providing a class liaison for teachers and parents. Finally, the school board representative reported being affiliated with the school for over 10 years with a daughter who is an alumna of the school. She has served in the current capacity on the advisory committee for five years. A school board was officially formed three years ago and consists of six to eight core board members who meet monthly and focus on fund-raising, community outreach, and marketing,

with the stated goal of wanting to build a stronger bridge between the parish and school community.

School C

School C represented the lower-income level and for the 2010–2011 academic year had an enrollment of 275 students, with a student ethnic background of 90% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 3% African American, and 2% Caucasian. At the time of the interview, enrollment was at 258 with capacity for the school between 280–300 students. The principal reported having a mixture of very new faculty, who are still working on graduate degrees, and experienced faculty, with credentials and graduate degrees. He reported that one faculty member had been at the school for 20 to 25 years.

Interviewees. The principal had served in Catholic education for 22 years and served at the school in the role of principal for 11 years. The pastor reported having served at the school for 10 years with previous appointments as a pastor in other schools also. Unfortunately, a parent and a school board representative were not provided by the school to be interviewed for the study.

Measures

Interview questions. Each participant was asked to respond to the same series of questions regarding the decision-making process, the stakeholders' reactions, and the schools' reasons for extending the calendar year to 200 days. Using a semi-structured interview format, providing opportunity to ask questions out of order depending on the stream of conversation, each participant was asked to describe themselves and their role/relationship with the school. Next, the following questions were posed to each participant to capture the decision-making process, reaction, and reasons for the decision. To understand the decision-making process, participants were asked: "How did you come to find out about the 200-day calendar change made by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles?" and "The decision has been made at your school to extend the calendar. How did that actually happen?" To understand their reaction, participants were asked: "What was your initial reaction?" and "What was the reaction of the school community?" Finally, to understand the reasons for the decision, participants were asked: "Why did your school choose to extend the calendar for this upcoming year?"

While each participant was asked the same set of questions, the principals

were asked additional questions, including factors that may have contributed to how the initiative was received, whether the decision was expected to impact enrollment, the plan for implementing the calendar extension, and the interaction with the pastor regarding the decision.

Coding Scheme

An a priori coding scheme was created to describe the decision to extend the calendar year and included: process; reaction; and reasons. This coding scheme was systematically applied to the data in order to elucidate emerging themes. The decision-making *process* was defined as an answer to the question of “how” the school decided to extend the calendar year and often included a description of the steps at the school such as meetings, decision making, internal negotiations, or bargaining. *Reaction* was defined as the experiences described by the stakeholders and included comments related to feelings, thoughts, or emotions related to the decision. Finally, *reasons* were defined as an answer to the question of “why” the school chose to extend the calendar year. This theme often included a description of alternatives that were weighed, discussion of advantages or disadvantages, or the rationale given for the decision. Using these three themes, all three researchers reviewed the transcriptions and listened to the audio recordings of the interviews. The researchers then discussed the themes and data and came to consensus about the coding, thus addressing inter-rater reliability. In the rare event that there were discrepancies in coding by researchers, they were resolved by a discussion and subsequent creation and application of a decision rule.

Results

Analytic Plan

The first step of the analysis was to determine common responses given by each participant group (e.g., reasons stated by the pastors across all schools). The most frequent and common responses given by that participant group across schools were noted, providing a snapshot of how that participant group (e.g., pastors) viewed the decision-making process, the reaction to the decision, and reasons for the decision. This step was repeated for each of the participant groups providing the most common responses expressed by pastors, principals, parents, and board members. The second step of the analysis was to identify

across schools the most common examples for the decision-making process, reaction to the decision, and reasons for the decision, yielding the most common examples across all schools and participants. To complete the analyses, conclusions were made with the context of the school in mind.

Findings

This qualitative study uncovered common responses across schools and participant groups, identified by theme: the decision-making *process*, the *reaction* of the stakeholders to the decision, and the *reasons* for the calendar extension decision. These descriptive findings are presented first, followed by an analysis of the unique context of the schools to describe differences, and concluding with a presentation of additional observations for future study that emerged from the data.

Decision-making process. When asked to describe how they initially came to know about the initiative, both the pastor and the principal at all three schools reported that when the 200-day calendar initiative was first announced by the cardinal and superintendent, the principal informed the pastor. In other words, the principal was the first person to receive the official announcement about the initiative and unanimously, all three principals indicated that their first step of the decision-making process was to discuss the initiative with their pastor to determine whether it would be appropriate for their individual school. During our interviews, the pastor and principal of each school reported having regular communication, both formally and informally, about adopting the calendar extension. At this step of the process, both pastors and principals at these three schools indicated their immediate interest in adopting the initiative (described in detail under the section on reactions).

When asked to describe the process of deciding to extend the school calendar at their individual school site, the leadership team indicated that the second step of the process was to inform and communicate the initiative to school stakeholders. While the pastor and principal at each school followed a similar path of informing and discussing the initiative as an administrative team, all three principals followed a slightly different process of introducing the change initiative to the stakeholders. For instance, at School A (high-income level), the principal followed a step-by-step process for seeking support from stakeholders. After seeking permission from the pastor, the principal of School A met with the school board and then with the faculty, at regularly scheduled

meetings, to seek their support. A regularly scheduled parent meeting, led by the parents, was used to discuss the initiative. The principal indicated, and the parent representative confirmed, that while there was at first some hesitancy expressed by parents (explained under the reactions section), by the end of the meeting, the parents expressed support for the initiative.

At School B (middle-income level), however, the principal followed a less formalized approach to change. After the pastor was consulted, the principal of School B informed the rest of the stakeholders in regularly scheduled meetings. The principal acknowledged that there were some questions related to salary and vacation time posed by the faculty but that these questions did not impede the faculty's support of the decision. She also acknowledged that there was very little discussion among the parents or school board about the initiative. Interviews with the parent and school board representative from this school confirmed that the stakeholders trusted the principal with minimal questioning about the initiative.

Finally, at School C (low-income level), the principal consulted with the pastor, made the decision, and then informed the faculty and parents about the decision to extend the calendar via a mailing. The principal stated to the researchers that a small number of parents voiced concern about the calendar extension because of the added cost in tuition but that this concern had not impacted enrollment. No parent or school board interviews were conducted at School C because the principal indicated that no formal groups existed.

Although the study did not include faculty interviews, it was reported by each pastor and principal that the faculty of their schools had reached agreement to support the extended calendar initiative. Principals indicated that they had shared the news with their faculty at faculty meetings. One principal commented that when she brought the initiative to her faculty, they responded favorably, following her lead:

People found it to be, I think, as exciting as I found it. I mean obviously the major questions came up about salaries and things like that, and I didn't really have the answers at that point. I said, "I don't know, we'll work it out and we'll get you those answers." And that's what we did.

Principals of Schools A and B also briefly speculated that faculty fatigue might occur in the spring semester but mentioned that the overarching benefit of extending the calendar for the sake of student learning provided buy-in for

teachers. The School B principal further speculated that the extra financial compensation in extending the faculty contract by 10% seemed to be an attractive component in faculty supporting the calendar extension.

Overall, the decision-making process to adopt the school calendar across the three schools followed a similar path that included consultation and communication between the principal and pastor and subsequent communication with school stakeholders. The schools were unique in their approach to communicate with the stakeholders with School A following a detailed plan to seek buy-in from the community, School B communicating the decision with well-received support by the community, and School C informing the stakeholders about the decision.

Reactions. Across the three schools, all principals and pastors reacted to the initiative positively, believing that by extending the calendar, the additional instructional time would be beneficial to the students. For example, one principal commented on her initial reaction by stating:

I personally thought it was a great idea because I have been in education a long time and I just feel that with all the advancements in technology, and everything that's happening, and how fast the world is going, that the more time we can spend on educating our kids the better it's going to be. So I personally like the idea, but I immediately thought of how I'm going to pass this on to my community here.

A pastor also expressed his reaction, saying: "Once I assessed that it really wasn't a burden, I had a favorable reaction." Meanwhile, another pastor mentioned how both he and the principal had a positive reaction to the initiative, stating:

I think pretty much from the start [the principal] and I were on the same page without having a lot of preliminary discussions. We harmonized pretty quickly in deciding that if it would work with our school community, and if our school community would be supportive, that we wanted to try it sooner than later. And there was a certain eagerness and excitement to do that.

The favorable reactions held by the leadership team were echoed across principals and pastors at all three schools who answered this question with comments like: "the extra time is ideal" and "I think it is going to be a good

thing.” A principal mentioned: “Catholic education is all about being a student-centered environment. We all felt that the best thing for our students is not to lie around all summer.” While another principal reflected, “I think the parents wanted this for a long time.” Thus, the leadership team at all three schools were in agreement that the 200-day calendar initiative was a good idea.

While these experiences were common across principals and pastors at the schools, there were some unique reactions to the initiative by parent and school board stakeholders. For instance, the parents of School A were interested in extending the calendar if it meant bringing added value to the academic program due to an enhanced curriculum. The parent representative commented that she was at first “on the fence” about the initiative because she “didn’t want more of the same.” She continued to say that the parents of the school who worked were “probably more grateful” due to summer child care assistance and concluded her thoughts with “I think it was really either people were for it, or people really had difficult questions about it” indicating the divided reaction among the parents. In a parent-led meeting to discuss the initiative, both the principal and the parent representative confirmed that the parents began to generate ideas for enhancing the curriculum and seemed to convince themselves of the benefit of the initiative by the end of the meeting. The school board representative also commented that the board was “enthusiastic” about the initiative but that “unless the school...offers additional enrichment...parents [would] be more reluctant.” She continued to describe how the school was fortunate to be in a position to begin a science, technology, engineering, and Math (STEM) program at the school and that “the idea of additional programs, the STEM program...was very interesting to [parents].” She concluded her perspective of the school community’s reaction to the initiative by saying, “there is always a percentage of people who don’t like change, no matter what it is...it’s just how you overcome that and make sure that their concerns are addressed.”

The parent representative of School B indicated a positive reaction to the initiative, stating, “I like the idea and that we’re participating in [the initiative] because I think that makes us look good as a school to say that we are truly invested in the education of our children here.” She also commented about the initiative being beneficial to reduce summer academic loss, stating, “I think the kids get too much time off. I’m very structured, I run a tight ship at home so anything that can help continue that; I am a firm believer that the kids do need a break but I think that too much idle time is not good time.” She also reflected that among the rest of the parents in the school community there

did “not seem to be any issue at all.” Parents and the school board of School B also felt that the extra days in the school calendar would provide a competitive edge over the local public schools that were discussing reducing the days in their calendar. The school board representative reflected, “I see it as a benefit that the public schools don’t have.” She responded that her initial reaction was that she was “excited to hear about it” and she “thought it was a great idea.” The board member commented that her perspective of the school community, including faculty, parents, and board members, was that the initiative “wasn’t disruptive” but “a positive thing; seen in a positive light.”

Unfortunately, the parent and school board reactions at School C were not captured directly because the principal indicated that these groups were unavailable at the school. However, the principal indicated very little resistance among the parents of the school when the decision to extend the calendar was announced.

Overall, the reaction of the leadership team expressed by the principal and pastor at each school were favorable, while the reactions of stakeholders varied across schools. School A parents demanded enrichment and proposed new programs for the extra time; School B stakeholders saw the initiative as favorable to reduce summer academic loss and provide a competitive edge; School C stakeholders were seemingly accepting of the change.

Reasons. There was one central reason for extending the calendar shared across all schools: improvement of teaching and student learning. For example, a principal noted her reason for adopting the extended calendar: “it would be good for our kids and what we could do with our curriculum and the different things we could do to enhance our curriculum.” A parent also mentioned, “this [initiative] is like one step forward in helping to really instill some good academic foundation for our children.” A board member stated, “this [calendar extension] was, overall, in the best interest of the children for them to have this extended school year and extended opportunity.” A pastor put it simply, stating “it’s good for kids.” Another pastor said “it’s a good thing for our kids to get extra days in school” and yet another pastor reflected:

One (parent) brought up the point which I think was very well taken by all of us—we are already as parents spending a lot of money on enrichment, extracurricular types of programs for our children during the off season [summer], suppose that some these [programs] could be incorporated into the school curriculum—wouldn’t that really be advantageous?

The main reason for extending the calendar—improvement of teaching and learning—was shared by all stakeholders and the leadership teams at each school. Interestingly, this sentiment was expressed across the three schools without suggesting that the schools were underachieving and looking to this initiative to improve school performance.

Comparative Analysis across Three Schools

In addition to the descriptive trends that emerged from the three schools in terms of their decision-making process, reactions, and reasons for the calendar change, analysis of how these vary by financial level may shed insight on why schools differed at times due to their unique educational context. However, any comparative lens applied to the data is somewhat limited by the variability in the data corpus across sites, such that there were four qualitative interviews at two schools (Schools A & B) versus only two interviews at School C. Yet, the study intentionally stratified by financial levels to examine differences across the three schools. Specifically, five other categories emerged as reasons for extending the school's calendar, but varied in emphasis based on the financial level of the school: (a) enrollment issues; (b) achieving a competitive edge; (c) reduction of summer academic loss; (d) more instructional time to enrich and enhance the current curriculum to provide for a stronger experience in teaching and learning; and (e) summer child care.

Enrollment. In regard to enrollment as a reason for extending the calendar, the pastors and principals at Schools A and B agreed that the benefits of extending their school's calendar had the potential to not only stabilize the school's enrollment but also the strong possibility for growth. Similarly, the board members of School A and B considered the financial impact of the extended calendar as positive because of the potential for increased enrollment. Stated by a pastor regarding enrollment:

I think our director of admissions is really working to get the word out to the various employers here, just getting the word out [to the community] about our availability and what we are doing here and how this [extended calendar] might be an advantage to them.

Similarly, a principal reflected that the adoption of the initiative may have a positive impact on enrollment, sharing:

People are inquiring about our school. We're getting a lot of inquiries; I think already our enrollment is going to be up for next year just from the number of people that have already signed on for next year. So I think that's a nice side effect of the 200 days. I really do think that people are going to start hearing about us and that's what I want. I want them to hear the positive things that are happening at our school.

Interestingly, the principal at School C (low-income level), mentioned that due to the added cost of tuition, there was an expectation that some families might not return for the 2011–2012 school year as a result of the announcement. At the time of the interview, the principal stated that all of the concerned parents had re-enrolled their child(ren) for the coming school year and the principal also indicated that, in fact, enrollment figures were up from the previous school year (however, it was unclear if the calendar initiative had any impact on the increased enrollment).

Enhancing curriculum. The opportunity to enhance the curriculum was also expressed as a reason for adopting the calendar extension across schools. For instance, schools discussed the common feeling of not having enough time to cover all the desired content and how the extra days would allow faculty to expose students to more content. However, only School A (highest financial level) specifically mentioned enhancement of the curriculum as a major reason for not only adopting the extended calendar, but for obtaining buy-in from the parents. The parents of this school were more interested in the opportunity to enhance the curriculum through supplemental subject strategies that could bring added value to the academic program. They were not interested in an extended calendar if it meant that there would be more curricular repetition, or “more of the same.” School A was the only school to mention implementing a specific new program, a STEM program, into the curriculum.

Summer academic loss. The issue of reducing summer academic loss by extending the calendar was not voiced as a concern of the parents from School A (highest income level). Parent and school board representatives from School B (middle financial level), however, felt that the extra days gained in the summer from an extended calendar would reduce the need to “get the gears going again,” as one board member stated. Parents also reflected how they tried to keep their children connected to some type of school program over the summers, through bridge books or summer school, and how the extended

calendar would provide that opportunity for their children. A school board member also reflected that the extended calendar would help prepare children for the working world where “summers off” are not typical. And the principal reflected that there is so much content to cover and yet the beginning portion of the year is spent in review, “so you really start with the new material after the testing period,” which she indicated occurs “at the beginning of October. So you’ve got part of October, then you’ve got November, and the holidays... so when does the new learning get solidified...not until January or February; then you’re going into Easter and you’re out the door. So the extra time is ideal.” Across the participants at School B, this notion of reducing the summer academic loss was expressed as a reason for wanting to adopt the calendar extension.

Competitive edge. The advisory boards from Schools A and B (representing the high and middle financial levels) placed emphasis on the potential financial impact of an extended day calendar. The potential to attract families to the school who would prefer that their children be involved in an extended year school environment versus placing them in summer child care was appealing to the boards. In addition, the two boards felt that the schools would enhance their image in the marketplace by seeking an initiative focused on academic achievement. They reported that raising academic standards was an expectation of Catholic schools and implementing an extended calendar during a period of criticism of the nation’s public education system would bring attention to the quality programs in their schools. For example a parent/board member said:

[The extended calendar is] a great idea to keep kids in school longer because not only does it work for them academically and help them get to a higher [achievement] level, which is one of the reasons my daughter went to Catholic school in the first place was to have a more quality education. You know public school will get you the basics but not necessarily prepare you for a better education; be better for college where you are going to go.

Parents and school board members from School B (middle financial level) also specifically felt that the extra days would provide a competitive edge over the local public schools. For example, a School B parent said:

I see it as a benefit that the public schools don't have. They are confined by the school district and are [held] within those confines. [We have to] let parents know that they have an option to keep their kids in school longer. That's the precedent and the whole kind of trend seems to be let's get back and focus on education. Catholic schools are, if they are known for one thing they are known for focusing on education so that's a tremendous selling point.

The notion that their children would be attending a school with an extended calendar instead of a shortened calendar witnessed in the local public schools elevated the credibility of the school's academic program.

Summer child care. Finally, participants from Schools B and C (representing the middle and lower financial levels) commented on summer child care as a main reason for wanting to adopt the extended calendar. One parent reflected, "I don't get the summer off. I need to have some place for [my child] to go." A board member reflected that as a parent, "I always have to scramble to figure out what to do during the summer; always trying to keep [my child] engaged." Another parent mentioned, "I go to work so you know [my child's] got to have something to do with those hours and I'd much prefer to have it be constructive." Even pastors and principals at the schools indicated that summer child care was a consideration when adopting the extended calendar at their school site. The principal at School C (low-income level), specifically mentioned: "We are not in a community that goes to France for the summer; we're in a community that struggles to find care for their children during the summer because both parents are working." As such, summer child care assistance was a factor considered at these schools when adopting the extended calendar.

Implications and Areas for Further Study

In addition to these findings regarding the decision-making process, reactions, and reasons for adopting this initiative, some general observations emerged from the interviews and provide the basis for further study.

Leadership. Interestingly, each school had an experienced principal as indicated by their current length of time in the position: eight, 11, and 28 years. But at each of the schools, a previous pastor hired the principal. Still, the pastor from each school indicated that although his role in the school was to provide ultimate oversight, he deferred to the principal all matters related to instructional program, personnel, students, parents, and budget. As such,

future investigation of the stakeholders' views of the principal's leadership may shed light on the successful adoption of an initiative such as the calendar extension.

Each of the three schools approached the process of the calendar change initiative in their respective schools through the leadership of the principal. The principal of School A (the highest financially ranked school) provided the researchers with an organized step-by-step process for seeking the support from the pastor, faculty, and parents. The principal described a discussion with the entire faculty the same day as the initiative was announced by the superintendent to the principals of the Archdiocese. After consensus was attained to support extending the school's calendar from the faculty based on the discussion at the meeting, the principal then met with the parents at a regularly scheduled morning meeting to explain the initiative. The parents in the discussion at the meeting initially voiced concern about extending the calendar because they did not recognize any advantage in doing so. The principal reported that the parents led the discussion during the meeting. The principal then reported that creative ideas began to surface that demonstrated support for the extended calendar through curriculum enhancement, which could potentially provide a competitive edge for their children when applying to to-tier Catholic high schools. The principal indicated that the parents convinced themselves of the potential benefits of the initiative.

The principals from Schools B and C (representing the middle- and low-income levels), however, provided a less formalized process for change. In both cases, after the pastor had been consulted, the principal met with their respective faculty to announce the extended calendar. Parents of School B were informed of the extended calendar change by the principal who explained the advantages of the change initiative at a regularly scheduled meeting. The parents indicated to the researchers that there was some hesitancy but no examples of this hesitancy were given other than the cost of tuition, and there appeared to be no argument against extending the calendar. At the time of the interview, the parents of this school were completely supportive of the initiative and articulated their reasons for support with similar language as the principal. In fact, the parent representative expressed that the parent group felt a deep sense of trust in the principal.

The principal of School C (lowest-income level) announced the calendar extension to the parents in a mailing and expected some argument from parents who were not in support of adding days to the calendar. The principal stated to the researchers that a small number of parents voiced concern about

the calendar extension because of the added cost in tuition but that enrollment had not appeared to be affected.

Taken together, the decision to extend the calendar at these three schools appears to have occurred in large part due to the leadership of the school where once the decision was made by the principal and the pastor, it was announced to the school community and adopted. The decision-making process did not appear to include strategic or feasibility planning but the sense given by these school leaders was that the needs of these schools were already known by the leadership team and they were therefore able to make the decision without the need for strategic planning.

Instructional plan. At the time of the interviews with the principals, the extended school year had not yet begun. Rather, the decision to extend the following school year had just been made. At that time, none of the schools had developed a clear plan to implement the instructional strategies for an additional 20 days of the school year. Only School A mentioned a new STEM program but the details of the program were not articulated. According to the principals, the faculty accepted the concept of a longer calendar but the plan for using the extra 20 days was only in the preliminary stages of formation. Still, stakeholders from all three school communities indicated being comfortable with not having a clearly defined and/or designed plan for using the extra days in the school calendar. Further study will investigate how schools actually used the extra instructional time by speaking with teachers directly. This investigation will identify challenges as well as strengths associated with an extended calendar.

Enrollment. Each principal was initially concerned about the possibility of losing families who did not agree with the decision to extend the calendar, yet none of the schools, as reported by the school's principal, lost enrollment as a result of the decision to extend the calendar. All three schools reported that they were hopeful that enrollment would increase for the 2012-2013 school year after the successful implementation of the calendar extension, and future investigation will examine whether enrollment was impacted by the calendar extension initiative.

Overall, the elementary schools of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles operate as autonomous education centers in the functions related to governance, educational program, management, and finance, thus creating a system of schools rather than a school system. Applying the principle of subsidiarity to the operations of these schools permits a non-standardized approach to governance and decision making. Developing a plan for curriculum and instruction that

is implemented to impact student learning is the responsibility of the school site leadership team. The pastor and principal serve as the core of the leadership team and are only responsible to archdiocesan governance in matters of Catholic educational mission and identity. Therefore, decisions made by the school's leadership team that impact the instructional program are based on the needs of the local context and culture of the school. The findings affirm the presence of autonomy in the governance of the elementary schools of the Archdiocese, leading to the non-standardized decision-making process and reasons found among these three schools that chose to extend their calendars.

Limitations

While this study begins to shed light on the decision-making process, reactions, and reasons why three Catholic elementary schools adopted a 200-day school calendar, some limitations exist. Primarily, only three schools were enrolled in this qualitative study, limiting the scope of the findings. Still, a major strength of this study was the use of random selection techniques to enroll the three schools. Additionally, the timing of the study provided an immediate view of the decision-making process used by the school's leadership team in adopting this major calendar change initiative. However, future studies should examine more schools that have made the decision to extend their calendar to verify if the findings from these schools are similar. Likewise, future studies should compare the various extended calendar options such as the 185-day or 190-day calendar to determine if the decision-making process, reasons, and reactions are similar despite the length of extended time.

The purpose of this study was to document the process of adopting a new initiative and as such, only the voices of the schools that said yes to this initiative are captured. Certainly, the decision-making process, reactions, and reasons for not adopting this initiative are equally informative and worthy of future investigation. Of particular interest would be a comparison of the reasons for and against the decision to extend the school calendar.

Moreover, there were four qualitative interviews at two schools (Schools A & B) versus only two interviews at School C. This dynamic was beyond the researchers' control in that parent and school board groups did not exist at School C. As such, any comparative lens applied to the data is somewhat limited by the variability in the data corpus. Finally, while the current study sought to capture the voice of both the leadership team and key stakeholders, the faculty voice was not obtained directly; rather, principals described in their

interviews how their faculty reacted to the initiative. Furthermore, principals selected the parent and school board representative to be interviewed for the study and it may be that members who already had a favorable relationship with the principal and likely shared similar views to the initiative were selected, limiting the perspectives shared in this study. Still, with qualitative research, it is often common practice to seek participant assistance in the enrollment of other participants who are knowledgeable about the topic. Interestingly, at School A, the principal indicated that she specifically referred us to a parent representative who originally expressed reservations about the initiative but then later changed her mind, and this was confirmed by the parent in her interview, allowing us to feel confident in our choice to have principals select representatives to be interviewed. Still, randomly selecting a parent or school board member for future interviews may provide a different view of the extended calendar as a local need than the one captured here.

Conclusions

In studying the decision-making process that led three demographically and financially distinct schools to break the mold of the traditional school calendar, the researchers discovered a common reason for the change—the students' best interest. Each school pursued a different process for change but the study consistently reflected the common position taken by the leadership team (pastor and principal) as the positive force in moving the school to accept the calendar initiative. Each school's leadership team continually emphasized the importance of extending the school calendar for improvement of teaching and student learning. Although the three schools had not developed a plan for implementation of the additional days, they were comfortable with the formation of strategies under consideration at the time of the interviews. The researchers did not find any evidence from the interviews that the pastor, principal, or parents were anxious about how the instructional program would be finalized for the coming year given the additional days.

In a research study conducted in 2010 by Higareda, Martin, Chavez, and Holyk-Casey (2011), students, parents, guardians, principals, and teachers of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles were asked to identify why Catholic schools were succeeding in the communities they served. From a list of several reasons stated by the participants, one specifically is affirmed by the three schools of this current study:

Catholic schools tend to operate smaller school sites that allow teachers and principals to identify issues, find solutions, and implement changes that best serve students. These smaller schools create a personalized environment where Catholic educators know how to help their students succeed on an individual basis. (p. 20)

The flexibility and freedom afforded in situations of site-based management, as found in the participating autonomous Catholic elementary schools of the current study, appears to have been a factor as to why each school took a different approach in their decision-making process in adopting an extended calendar. The needs of each individual school context were different. This is confirmed by the supplemental reasons shared for adopting the extended calendar, which beyond the improvement of student learning, varied at each school. Likewise, in discussing the data from the interviews, the researchers were reminded of the statement by Martin (2009), when he described Catholic schools and their leaders as innovators of change.

They [Catholic schools] must keep a nimble and cost effective organization with visionary leaders who have the ability to innovate and change quickly. They must reinforce their successful model of education—including the strong core curriculum, high levels of parental involvement, spiritual development, and local decision-making—to accommodate an ever-evolving population. (Martin, 2009)

Understanding the decision-making process at these schools, the reactions of the stakeholders, and the reasons for adopting this major school calendar change may provide helpful information to other comparable autonomous school communities considering a similar decision. Since not all of the elementary schools of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles adopted the recommended calendar initiative because of the freedom that exists in a decentralized system of schools, it would be interesting to study their decision-making process as well. Nevertheless, where decisions are localized to the needs of the individual school, the autonomous nature of these schools allows for decisions based on what is perceived to be in the best interest of their students.

The discussion in pursuit of determining the best organizational model for Catholic schools remains focused on decentralization versus centralization, autonomy versus compliance. This study provides a snapshot of how and why three autonomous schools in a decentralized system adopted a major change

initiative that they perceived to be in the best interest of their students.

In exploring student learning and achievement, the findings of this study lay the foundation for an ongoing longitudinal study that examines Catholic school leadership, curriculum, and assessment in schools that adopted the extended calendar. The study will be mindful of the challenges found in each local context as they find ways to promote their distinctive qualities in the competitive marketplace in which they exist.

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