

## **The History of School and Summer Vacation**

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### **Background**

For more than 100 years the public school system has been the foundation of our society. Millions of our nation's citizens have moved through the primary, middle and secondary schools which, although they vary slightly from region to region, provided a shared experience and are a part of Americana. History tells us the reasons that school systems used only a 10-month calendar were due to agrarian needs, but in recent years this rationale does not seem as applicable. In light of global competition and America's consistently poor international rankings, it would seem a logical conclusion to extend the school year to increase instructional time. But the move to year-round schooling isn't so easy, nor do parents, community members, businesses or politicians unanimously embrace it.

The issue of providing American students with additional instructional time students spend in American schools is not a recent educational concern. Even as early as 1983, a national report, *A Nation at Risk*, urged educators to add more time to address some of the achievement gaps that, at the time, were increasingly widening in the American public school systems at the time. This particular report awakened an interest in examining how instructional time was spent with students in the United States. Educational researchers began to look at how much instructional time American schools utilized in comparison to other schools in other countries. *A Nation at Risk* (National Council for Excellence in Education, 1983), *Prisoners of Time* (Kane,

1994), and more recently, *Tough Choices, Tough Times* (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007), recommended districts look into ways of modifying their existing traditional school day to address ways of improving student achievement.

Many schools around the country responded to these increasing educational demands by experimenting with the reorganization of instructional time spent in classrooms (Anderson, 1994). With varying degrees of success, as well as a variety of models, a number of these initiatives to increase instructional time were implemented in schools across the United States. For example, The Center for American Progress found that in the years between 1991 and 2007 alone, almost 300 initiatives to extend learning time were implemented in American schools (Gewertz, 2009).

A number of these initiatives involved lengthening the school day, increasing the number of school days or moving to some form of a year-round school calendar. At the heart of most of these initiatives was the goal to increase student achievement through the addition of instructional time (Neal, 2008). The basis for many of these initiatives for lengthening the school year or extending the school year were premised on a belief that additional instructional time would allow teachers more opportunities to teach their children (Stoops, 2007). As educators noticed their global counterparts implementing year-round schools with impressive results, schools in America experimented with phasing in different school calendars models as well.

## **School Calendars**

Currently in America most school calendars average approximately 180 days with some small breaks during the year and a summer vacation that lasts anywhere from 4-8 weeks. In comparison, several studies have reported that nations with more than 180 instructional days and/or that have calendars that are year-round have outperformed American schools (Farbman & Kaplan, 2005). Some public, private and charter schools in the United States have responded to this educational dilemma by taking steps to extend their school days and/or school year in order to take measures to boost student achievement (Neal, 2008).

In 2005, close to 2,300 public schools in the United States followed some form of a modified schedule (St. Gerard, 2007). Many of these schools were “designated” year-round and still operated in the same districts with other schools that followed traditional calendars. Other programs to increase instructional time, such as classes offered after-school or on Saturdays,

have had varying degrees of success, but many school districts embraced year-round education as a concrete means to increase academic achievement (Aronson, 1995).

## **Summer Vacations Today**

Since very few American students today have the same farming obligations as their predecessors from over a century ago and most buildings constructed in the past 20 years are equipped with the necessary climate control, the original obstacles for year-round education, for the most part, seem to have been removed as a scheduling barrier for public schools. Yet, a majority of American schools continue to operate for only 10 months out of the calendar year.

The deficits that occur from “summer fade,” the time between the ending of school and its beginning when many students do not receive any formal education, most often severely impact students from low socio-economic areas and at-risk students. Some studies even claim that as much as 3 months of academic setback can occur per grade level (Cooper, 1996). Other research has found that children from various socio-economic backgrounds may make similar gains during the school year as their peers, but those from low socio-economic groups create academic deficits during their summer months (Cooper, 1996, Edmonds, 2008, Zuckerbrod, 2007). Lastly, additional studies have shown that in the last few decades our high achieving students in America have been steadily losing their educational ranking in the world and spend considerably less instructional time than students in other countries (Bracey, 2002a). High-achieving students are known to benefit from schools with year-round calendars that can provide accelerated programs and advanced classes (Coalition, 2009).

## **Historical Perspective**

Summer vacation wasn't widely instituted until the late nineteenth century when one of the measurements of a good school at that time was the number of days it was open (Weiss & Brown, 2005). Oftentimes, the financial state of the district determined how long the school was open during the year. Schools with longer calendars were often perceived by the general public as more effective. Until educational reforms in the last century sought to unify schools, many districts operated on a calendar that varied from region to region based on the unique needs of the community (Weiss & Brown, 2003). The 9-month calendar that is used in the majority of

American schools today was never initially intended to be the standard calendar for schools (Ballinger & Kneese, 2006).

The idea of the traditional summer vacation seems to have become part of the fabric of American culture over the course of the last 200 years. Currently, the summer holiday is viewed by many Americans as the backbone of our country's school system (Weiss & Brown, 2003). In addition, the revenues of many seasonal industries have become dependent on the openings and closings of the traditional school. As well, the summer-themed attractions for children seem to give credence to the metaphor given by one writer that the school schedule is one of the "great clocks of our society" (Weiss & Brown, 2003).

For the past 100 years, though, researchers have begun to document what has been referred to as summer fade or summer slide as the decline in student achievement immediately following the summer break (Borman, 2006). Unfortunately, there have always been two great barriers that made it difficult for schools to be in session for the entire year – the vestiges of the agrarian calendar and the limitations of the building facilities.

As early as 1684, a grammar school founded in Massachusetts required 12 months of education. In 1841, Boston schools operated for 244 days while Philadelphia implemented a 251-day calendar (Association of California School Administrators, 1988). According to Silva, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, large cities commonly had long school years, ranging from 251 to 260 days (2007). During this time, many of these rural schools were only open about 6 months out of the year. Glines first wrote that the origin for the traditional school calendar based purely on agrarian needs was not entirely accurate (1995). In the 19th century districts organized their calendars around the needs of the community.

For example, some special provisions were made for vacations during September and October for communities with large fall harvests. Prior to 1890, students in major urban areas were in school for 11 months a year. But by 1900, the more popular 180 day, 9-month calendar had been firmly established. Year-round programs were implemented in such places as Bluffton, Indiana (1904), Newark, New Jersey (1912), Aliquippa and Ambridge, Pennsylvania (1928, 1931), Nashville, Tennessee (1925), Omaha, Nebraska (1924) and Minot, North Dakota (Glines, 1997).

Many 12-month schools called for a 2-week vacation during the summer, which was then extended to 4 weeks. The reasons for the increase were attributed to high absenteeism due to hot

and unhealthy summer months; epidemics, vacations, and general truancy of students were other contributing factors. Some urban centers in America such as Buffalo, Detroit and Philadelphia changed from year-round in the middle part of the century to a 2-month holiday by the late 19th century. In rural areas the dates would change depending on funding problems, fuel, harvest and the weather conditions (Weiss & Brown, 2003). Year-round schooling was also used in some areas across the country to address rapid population growth. It wasn't until 1968 to 1970 that year-round education was established in Missouri, Illinois, California and Minnesota to have students attend school the entire calendar year to accommodate the increasing student population (Glines, 1997).

A majority of districts that adopted year-round schools during 1970-1990 did so to maximize space (Hazleton, 1992). In 1972, California seemed to lead the way in the resurgence of year-round calendars creating the first multi-track school in La Mesa, Spring Valley and Chula Vista to address large increases in student enrollment (Ballinger & Kneese, 2006). Also in that same year, educators from existing year-round schools formed the National Association for Year-Round Education (NAYRE, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

The traditional school calendar has governed how families organize their lives for well over a century in this country (Rasmussen, 2000). Yet, in spite of this tradition there is growing evidence to suggest that year-round schools are increasing in number among the states (Weiss, 2003). The National Association for Year Round Education reports that approximately 3,000 schools within 400 school systems in 46 states currently utilize some form of year-round education (2010).

A considerable amount of literature suggests that year-round schools are effective at the earlier grades. Research studies conducted by Alcorn (1992), Downey, Von Hippel and Broh (2004), Edmonds (2008), and McMillen, (2001), have all shown that year-round calendars appear to academically benefit elementary and middle school students. Additionally, the meta-analyses of Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsey and Greenhouse (1996), Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, and Muhlenbruck (2000) and Worten and Zsiray (1994) have all supported these findings with over 100 years of studies that have focused primarily on the pre-secondary students (Burkham, 2004).

Other researchers have found that lengthening the school year has no immediate impact on student achievement (Ubben, 2001). Penta concluded that gains in year-round schools were nullified when racial and socio-economic variables were taken into consideration and also found that the gains were eventually erased over time (2001). Even Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsey and Greenhouse, whose meta-analysis found gains in student performance, indicated that further research was needed for any serious decisions to be made regarding this topic (1996). Lastly, some school districts have conducted their own investigation into the success of their year-round programs and have discontinued them for a variety of reasons (Cuban, 2008).

For example, the San Diego Unified School District conducted its own study in 1991, where modified calendar schools were implemented in 1972 and found no significant difference in student achievement (Wildman, 1999). The Alabama school district also returned to a traditional school calendar after several years with year-round school calendars Zckerbrod, 2007).

Currently there are over 2,000 year-round schools in the United States with modified calendars (NAYRE, 2010). These schools are comprised of public, private and charter schools at the elementary, middle and secondary levels and represent most of the geographical regions in the United States. As more and more schools implement modified school calendars for all students, it is vital that researchers look at the performance results of all grade levels to determine if year-round education is effective as well as if it is necessary to be implemented for all grade levels in the future.

The year-round calendar affords younger students the ability to continue their education uninterrupted and address key learning areas. At the middle school level, year-round education has been used to address the learning needs of the students as they prepare to enter high school. Indeed, most of the research that has been conducted regarding year-round education has targeted these two student populations. Some studies, though, do not provide evidence that gains are made at the high school level (Pedersen, 2011). In fact, some of the unplanned and supplementary analyses show that year-round high school students actually had lower passing rates than their traditional peers on standardized tests.

Lastly, it must also be noted that there are competing priorities regarding the proponents of year-round schools who claim that this model has academic benefits and those who oppose this type of reform because it negatively impacts summer economies. Many critics of year-round

schools argue that summer industries, such as tourism that tends to utilize student workers, would be greatly affected. Others feel that non-academic influences such as athletics and family vacations are obstacles that prevent calendar reform in many districts. These societal influences tend to have greater influence in determining if a school will move to a year-round schedule than does the potential academic benefits.

American public schools face many challenges today as they try to compete in the global arena. Consistently, studies American schools continuously fall far behind many other developed countries such as China, Japan and the Netherlands when it comes to student achievement. Reformers have been scrambling to try new initiatives to address this great educational chasm by developing ways to improve academic achievement (OECD, 2009). In order to adequately prepare for global competition many districts have begun to re-think how they spend their summer vacations. Educators have also begun to question the value of having students take a 10 to 12 week break during the summer months. With newer climate-controlled school buildings and the lack of child labor needed for farming, the agrarian school calendar has been re-examined with many professionals questioning the usefulness of the extended summer vacation that was based on the needs of a pre-Industrial American society. But as we continue to make progress with year-round schools at the elementary and middle school levels, careful attention should be paid to whether programs should be implemented at the high school level as an effective means of educational reform to improve student achievement.

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