



Is There a Case for Year-Round Schooling?

Prepared by Robert S. Brown

Back to the Future?

School is out for the summer – that has been the battle cry of countless students over the years as they count down the minutes on the last school day in June.

It wasn't always so. Back in the 19th century, Ontario had year-round schooling at the elementary level, with a two-week summer holiday in August. Gradually, the summer holiday was extended, for many reasons – financial restraints in keeping schools open; high summer absenteeism; excessive heat in classrooms; and the theory that keeping children in school over the summer would result in lower academic achievement.



Yet the question persists: should schools stay open year-round? Advocates on both sides can make strong cases. As this issue arises from time to time, Toronto District School Board (TDSB) research coordinator Rob Brown conducted a literature review of the topic to help frame the debate. What does the evidence really suggest?

What is Year-Round Schooling?

Year-round schooling does not mean additional instructional days. Instead, it refers to alternative ways of organizing the current 185 annual instructional days, over a full year rather than the traditional 10 months.

Estimates are that about 3,000 schools in the U.S. and 100 in Canada operate year-round. There are two types of year-round schools, single-track (the majority of these schools) and multi-track. Here are the main characteristics of each.

Single-track schools:

- All students share the same calendar.
- The school year begins earlier and ends later, and redistributes in-class and vacation times.
- Variations include attending school for 45 days followed by a 15-day break, or a school session of 60 days followed by a vacation of 20 days.
- Usually chosen for educational reasons, i.e. the learning losses that occur during a full summer vacation.

Multi-track schools:

- Students are organized into 3-4 groups, with one group on vacation at any given time.
- The school remains constantly in session, although the students attend the regular number of school days.
- Usually introduced because of rapidly increased enrolment and/or overcrowding.

Many year-round schools offer intersession programs (usually 2-3 weeks) between regular school sessions, to offer students a wide variety of academic, cultural, athletic, and remedial activities.

The Relationship of Year-round Schooling to Student Achievement

When students come back from their two-month summer vacation, they forget some of what they learned in the previous school year. This “**summer achievement gap**” is strongly related to socio-economic status, with a greater gap among the “have-nots” compared to the “haves”. Cohort studies have shown that as students get older this gap is compounded, as disadvantaged students fall further and further behind.

By reducing or eliminating long summer holidays, year-round schooling was supposed to address this gap. However, research has been at best mixed. If there is an effect, it is limited. It may be that since year-round schooling has the same number of school days as the regular school calendar, the gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students continue to grow, regardless of whether the holidays are spread out over the year, or concentrated in the summer.



A Catalyst for Change

Student achievement aside, advocates cite other reasons to consider year-round schools:

- A year-round calendar is essentially a structural, organizational change. Its true importance could be in triggering or facilitating other improvements, as educators re-think approaches to teaching and learning in light of a year-round schedule.
- The schedule may be a better fit with specific school communities, or for teachers within the school.
- Overcrowding and fiscal restraints could drive reconfiguration of the school schedule.

Challenges to Implementation

Research indicates that, despite anecdotal evidence to the contrary, students, staff and communities involved in year-round programs are supportive of their calendar, and are positive about their experiences.

The factors that may prevent year-round schooling range from the practical to the political to the economic. For instance:

- Buildings without air-conditioning could make schooling in the summer very uncomfortable in some areas.
- A lack of political will, direction, or purpose within the local school population and/or community could impede implementation.
- Some groups and recreation service providers (e.g. camps, resorts) rely on summer clientele for their livelihood.

Conclusion

Given that the number of school days has varied greatly in the past, there's no reason to believe that a school year of 185 instructional days will remain static.

Current research indicates that redistributing the same number of days within the school year will rarely result in student achievement gains. However, the decision to adopt a year-round calendar could relate to other potential benefits, i.e. improvements to pedagogic techniques, budgeting, administration, and meeting community needs.

The complete Year-round Schooling study is available in the Research Report section of the TDSB website
(http://www.tdsb.on.ca/wwwdocuments/about_us/external_research_application/docs/Year-roundSchoolingLitReview-Email.pdf)