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Year Round Schools Offer Year Round Benefits

By

B. Thomas Kostiw

&

Dr. James Davis

Coastal Carolina University

What Exactly is Year-Round Education?

A major goal that schools throughout the country have in common today is closing the achievement gap. Many people in the educational field often complain that there is not enough time in the day to successfully close the achievement gap. There is not enough time to teach everything students need to know, there is not enough time to assess and reflect, and there is not enough time to plan effective and highly-engaging instruction. However, there are many strong educational leaders who have stopped saying that there is not enough time and have started thinking outside the box to create additional time for staff and students while attempting to reduce various stressors. A popular strategy being utilized and researched today is year-round education. Year-round education, also known as modified-calendar schooling, explores schooling throughout the school-year with breaks throughout, as opposed to a traditional school calendar with a 10-week break during the summer. The year-round schooling model focused on here, in this research, utilizes 45-day quarters broken up by 15-day intersessions with a 30-day summer vacation. In addition, students and staff have off for national holidays. There are many advantages to this type of model. Year-round education provides multiple benefits to students, teachers, and parents.

Lasting Benefits for Students

The main focus of any school program or initiative must be to do what is best for kids. Closing the achievement gap is what is best for all students. When we think about possible solutions to closing the achievement gap between higher and lower socioeconomic students, year-round education is an approach that can effectively do that. Students from families with higher incomes are provided many more opportunities to learn and grow at home, in extracurricular activities, and during summer programs. Studies show that low socioeconomic students regress academically over the summer while higher socioeconomic students see continued academic gains (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007). If this is a major cause of an increasing achievement gap, then the only way to fix it is to provide additional learning opportunities for our lower socioeconomic students and to reduce the amount of summer learning loss.

After school tutoring is currently a popular way to provide additional learning opportunities. There is nothing wrong with after-school tutoring; however, as any teacher or student may tell you, they are tired at the end of a long school day. Extending the school day leads to more burnout for all stakeholders. With a traditional school schedule, after-school tutoring is the only option. All struggling students have to look forward to is extra school before they come back the next day and do it all over again.

With a year-round education model, struggling students are provided additional opportunities to learn in between quarters as an attempt to close that gap. With three-week breaks, students will typically go to school for two weeks before taking a break the third week (National Association for Year-Round Education: Specialists in Time and Learning, 2017). This allows them to properly rest and recharge without too much time off for learning loss to have a significant impact. Those two-week intersessions are filled with remediation and enrichment classes to help students catch up to their peers. Because they are not part of the standard 180-day school year, there are more opportunities to increase creativity and make the material more interesting through different activities and untraditional instruction that does not follow a strict curriculum. In addition to those classes, there are more recreational classes that are more likely to make students increasingly interested and motivated in attending intersessions. These sessions can include math or ELA classes, recreational sports classes, or even community service classes (Gismondi Haser & Nasser, 2005).

Mid-year remediation courses in between quarters have several advantages for students. From a school standpoint, if students are getting additional support throughout the school year instead of over the summer, the additional learning will have a greater effect on end-of-the-year test scores. From a student standpoint, if they are able to have opportunities every nine weeks to slow down and catch up on things they did not understand or fully master, the chances that they become more engaged and interested once regular schooling is back in session increases because they will have a better understanding of the content. In addition, summer learning loss is minimized. Students of lower-income families have fewer opportunities to learn each summer than students of higher-income families. This causes these students to make fewer academic gains and see larger learning loss by the start of the following school year. Studies show that this summer learning loss equates to one month of instruction (Cooper, Valentine, Charlton, & Melson, 2003). By shortening the summer break from ten weeks to four weeks, students retain more information and take fewer steps back every year.

Another group that greatly benefits from year-round education is the students who learn English as a second language. One advantage of year-round schooling for this population is that there is no longer a ten-week window when they are not being exposed to English over the summer. Many students speak their native language at home. When summer vacation arrives, many of those students will not hear English until they come back to school. Again, by reducing summer vacation from ten to four weeks, we reduce the amount of learning loss and allow them to retain more English. An additional advantage for this population is the opportunity to travel during the winter months. The holiday break compounded with the winter intersession allows many immigrant families to travel back to their home countries without students missing any days of schools (Gismondi Haser & Nasser, 2005). Many times we see families take weeks off during the winter months to visit families back home leading to students missing critical days of school. By offering a break during that time, students miss less instruction.

Ongoing Benefits for Teachers

Statistics show that teachers have the single greatest influence on student success. Researchers estimate that based on all school factors, “teachers account for more than a third of the variation in a school’s achievement” (Krasnoff, 2015). Knowing this, it is logical to reason that by making teachers’ jobs less stressful, we are benefiting students. If doing what is best for students is our number one priority, then creating less stress and a better environment for teachers is in our best interests. Much teacher stress comes from increasing demands and not having enough time to meet them all. Unfortunately, there is no way to create more time each day. However, year-round education provides more time each quarter for teachers to do what they need, which allows them to be less stressed and more successful, as they positively impact the daily quality of education.

One of the keys to being a successful educator is meaningful reflection. Talking to many teachers in the field, a common sentiment is that there is not enough time to purposefully reflect as they are constantly “on the go.” There is always another lesson to plan and another assessment to grade. There is rarely time to sit and think about the way things are going and how they can improve. The only breaks throughout the year are on the weekends when many teachers work, during holidays when teachers are busy with family functions, or over the summer when most teachers shut down after another long and hard school year. Even with the ten-week summer vacation, it is nearly impossible to remember the beginning of the school year and meaningfully reflect upon it. The opportunities for meaningful reflection are limited during the course of a traditional calendar school year. With a year-round school schedule, teachers have the opportunity to get away from the classroom a few weeks each quarter without the burden of holiday plans. They have time to reflect

on the way things are going, think about how they can improve, and then plan for the following quarter (Gismondi Haser & Nasser, 2005). This reduces stress, increases preparation, and in a way, creates time so that teachers stand a fighting chance of meeting all the demands. In the big picture, this leads to better instruction which influences our main goal of doing what is best for all students.

Knowing that teachers have the greatest impact on students' success and closing the achievement gap, fostering them and helping them become the best teachers they can be is definitely in our best interests. Effective leaders provide opportunities to grow professionally. Year-round education allows for these professional development opportunities throughout the school year. This professional development can come in several forms. First, there is more time to attend formal staff developments where educators can learn or hone skills in the classroom. Year-round education ensures that it is not crammed in between school days when teachers need to be planning instruction. Secondly, there is an opportunity to observe or co-teach classes during the intersessions. "In thriving schools you have a professional learning community" where teachers are sharing ideas to become more effective (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Teachers have opportunities to learn from each other without sacrificing instruction during the typical school year. Finally, teachers have time to do their own professional development through catching up on scholarly articles or researching teaching strategies independently. Your best teachers want to be better, and they will look for ways to do just that. Given the opportunity, they will take the additional time off to recoup, reflect, and grow.

Many teachers found that the year-round education model provided a plethora of positives such as less stress, opportunities for professional development, and chances to earn more money by teaching intersession classes. These positive effects also led to further advantages for the school. For starters, administrators of year-round education schools noticed a decrease in teacher absenteeism. Due to the frequent breaks, teachers did not need to take as many mental health days, and they were able to schedule doctor appointments during the intersessions. This benefits students because teachers are in the classroom more. There are also fewer substitutes which saves money for the school and the district holistically. Teachers reported feeling less stressed and burned out thanks to the frequency of the breaks (Gismondi Haser & Nasser, 2005). This then led to an increase in teacher retention. Teachers had higher morale at schools that had changed to the year-round model. This promoted a better, stronger learning environment which prompted a decrease in the turnover rate of teachers in these schools (Lyttle, 2011).

Increases in teacher morale were reported at many year-round schools. In fact, many of the Title I schools that switched to the year-round model even saw an increase in applicants to their school. An additional benefit was teacher fulfillment. Teachers authentically enjoyed the opportunity to try their hand at new subjects, grade levels, or teaching a hobby during intersessions. Another perk was the chance to earn extra money during these intersessions for teaching various classes. Having the option and not feeling completely obligated also eased any stress over these classes. Finally, teachers that chose not to work enjoyed discounted vacations and got to experience things they would not have been able to during the summer months due to higher prices. Overall, based on exit interviews, teachers overwhelmingly embraced this year-round model. Based on the fact that they are the most important influence on student achievement, lightening their load without decreasing expectations is a benefit to all stakeholders.

Positive Benefits for Parents

The final group that had positive experiences with the year-round education schedule is our parents. At the end of the day, student achievement is what is most important to parents. They want their

child to be successful. The year-round model is not fully supported in all districts by all parents. In fact, many parents were resistant to this calendar because they do not like to change their routine and they moved their student to a school with a traditional September to June schedule. However, parents that tried it out discovered many benefits themselves. Like teachers, they too got to experience vacations at non-peak times of the year which made them easier to afford. This was especially true for a large part of the immigrant population at schools who typically took time during the winter months to travel back home to visit family. Many parents also had an easier time working a full-time job because they did not have to worry about finding someone to watch their kids all summer. Instead, they enrolled their student in intersessions throughout the school year and had a much shorter summer break to account for. This provided an affordable and safe outlet for kids that also reduced learning loss.

Bottom Line

There are many advantages for students, teachers, and parents using a year-round education model. Students have been reported to be more authentically engaged, far less stressed, and have achieved higher levels of success on end-of-the-year assessments. Teachers have discussed in exit interviews that they also felt less stressed as well as feeling more fulfilled and prepared. Data shows that teachers were reported absent less often and there was less teacher turnover in schools utilizing year-round schooling. Parents enjoyed the benefits of student success, the ability to work a full-time job more easily, and flexibility in terms of going on vacation as a family. In order to close the achievement gap, we need to support our struggling learners. They need more time in the classroom, they need to be more interested and engaged, and they need to have some weight and stress lifted off their shoulders. Year-round education data has shown that it is an outside-the-box idea that can successfully do all those things.

***Mr. Thomas Kostiw** is a 5th-grade teacher at Myrtle Beach Intermediate School in the Horry County School District (South Carolina). He received his bachelor's degree in both Early Childhood, and Elementary Education from Hofstra University in Uniondale, New York. He is currently completing his Master's Degree in Educational Leadership at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina.*

Mr. Thomas Kostiw (tkostiw@horrycountyschools.net) is an outside the box thinker that is interested in researching anything that will benefit children. This includes professional growth, building relationships, best teaching practices, and creating environments that breed success. He has received recognition and awards for authentic leadership, creativity, and positively impacting both student achievement and the daily quality of education. His main mission is to "do right by children" each and every day.

***Dr. James Davis** (jdavis9@coastal.edu) is a professor and program coordinator in educational leadership at Coastal Carolina University. Coastal Carolina has an M.Ed., Ed.S., and Ph.D. program (www.coastal.edu). Prior to his positions at the university level, Dr. Davis served as a school turnaround principal with various school systems. Dr. Davis spent the last 20 years in education as a professor and serving at the school and district-level.*

Dr. Davis received his Doctorate from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus on Urban Education. He is certified as a teacher, administrator, Curriculum Specialist, Exceptional Children's Director, and Superintendent.

Dr. James Davis has research interests that include school transformation, teacher effectiveness, teacher leadership, principal support, and serving at-risk populations. He strives to implement his personal mission statement on a daily basis: "Love Kids, Support Teachers, Involve Parents, and Pass it On."

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