The School Calendar

While Memorial Day heralds the unofficial start of summer, for most families with school-age children it is the last day of school, typically in mid-June, which indicates that summer has truly arrived. Similarly, it is the first day of school in the “fall” and not Labor Day that signals the conclusion of the summer season.

This particular rhythm of the seasons has changed relatively little over the past 150 years. The school calendar is based on the agrarian demands of the 1800s, when children were needed to help work the family farm during growing season. But is this schedule still appropriate for the 21st Century?

Ten years ago, the National Education Commission on Time and Learning concluded that “decades of school improvement efforts have foundered on a fundamental design flaw, the assumption that learning can be doled out by the clock and defined by the calendar.” The Commission’s prescient recommendations foretold of the challenges created by the standards-based reform movement:

Time, the missing element in the school reform debate, is also the overlooked solution to the standards problem. Holding all students to the same high standards means that some students will need more time, just as some may require less. Standards are then not a barrier to success but a mark of accomplishment. Used wisely and well, time can be the academic equalizer.

It speaks to the ubiquity and ingrained nature of the school experience that the school calendar has remained so constant and attempts to alter it so controversial. Still, there have been a number of subtle policy changes in states over the past decade that, for various purposes, are affecting the time, and timing, students spend in school.

Most states (34) require 180 days of school per year with another eight requiring at least 175 days. Less well known are the existence of state requirements on the length of the school day. Thirty states require at least five hours of school per day. An additional six states (36) require five hours per day for grades 7-8. While 34 states mandate five hours of school for high school grades, all but two states require at least four hours for high school. (These statistics are the most recent available from comprehensive state surveys from the 2002 school year.)

A related issue to the state-mandated number of school days is the start date of the school year. In a 2002 survey, 15 states reported that the majority of their schools began the year sometime in August exclusively and nearly all others reporting mid-August dates through September 3.

Yet a narrow focus on the minimum number of school days obscures the growth of year-round school policies, growth that has occurred at the local level with little prompting from states. While the number of states with a year-round policy only increased from 15 to 16 states between 1995 and 2000, the number of states with districts providing year-round schools went from 29 to 34 during that period. Currently, there are more than 2.3 million students attending one of the more than 3,100 year-round schools nationally.

It is important to note that, as commonly understood, year-round schools reconfigure the traditional nine-month calendar into a 12-month model with instructional time and vacation blocks evenly distributed throughout the year so that they are still meet for 180 days just like those using the traditional nine-month calendar.

Issues to Consider

Notwithstanding the perennial news stories that contrast the number of days American students attend school compared to such foreign counterparts like Germans or Japanese that are well over 200 days annually, there appears to be little interest among the public or state policymakers for increasing the minimum number of school days.

In addition to discussions on the benefits and drawbacks of year-round education, most recently states have become embroiled in heated debates about proposals to establish, or to push back, a statewide school start date. Whether it is year-round education or a post-Labor Day start date, there are a number of issues state policymakers must contend with when considering changes that will allow or require students to attend school on a routine basis during the summer.
**Costs**: Direct costs of operating schools in the summertime include increased utility bills for air-conditioning. Such costs can be substantial. The Tulsa, Oklahoma school district saved a reported $500,000 by moving its start date from mid-August to after Labor Day. Indirect costs have also been a factor in deliberations over setting a statewide start date close to Labor Day. The economic impact on tourist areas—both the loss of businesses of teenage workers returning to school and family loss of vacation time—was a major point in the loss to businesses of teenage workers returning to school to Labor Day. The economic impact on tourist areas—both direct and indirect—has been substantial. The Tulsa, Oklahoma school district saved a reported $500,000 by moving its start date from mid-August to after Labor Day. Indirect costs have also been a factor in deliberations over setting a statewide start date close to Labor Day. The economic impact on tourist areas—both the loss of businesses of teenage workers returning to school and family loss of vacation time—was a major point in the debate held in states considering start date policies. Additionally, attention should be given to the impact the school year’s starting time will have on migrant families.

**Increasing capacity of school buildings**: A year-round school calendar can increase the use of school buildings by up to 33 percent by using a “multi-track” system that allows one or more “tracks” of students and teachers to be on vacation while other groups of students are in attendance. This efficient-use strategy can sometimes alleviate overcrowded schools without constructing new buildings.

**Academic achievement**: Research on the impact of year-round schools and/or school start dates is mixed. A nect year, at least, year-round proponents argue that eliminating the three-month summer vacation helps stem the loss of learning colloquially known as the “summer slide.” Traditional calendar advocates counter, however, that the multiple multi-week vacations throughout the year merely diffuse the learning loss over more days every time the students return to school. Regardless of the lack of evidence, it is clear that satisfaction levels of students, teachers, and parents who participate in a year-round school are usually high.

**Summer school**: The fate of summer school is of mixed opinion. Policies to inhibit social promotion have led to a surge of at-risk students in summer school’s remedial services. Advocates of year-round schools suggest that this summer school trend is the vanguard of eventual widespread adoption of a year-round calendar. Critics of 12-month schedules counter that a comprehensive year-round school eliminates the downtime summer months and actually reduces the amount of time dedicated solely to helping the lowest-performing students.

**No Child Left Behind**: Under NCLB, states are required to report test scores back to parents and the public before the beginning of the next school year. These test scores are also used to make AYP determinations for individual schools. Schools in need of improvement are required to offer students the opportunity to transfer to another public school before the beginning of the school year. Obviously, these federal requirements put pressure on states and test contractors to report scores back more quickly when the school start date is earlier in the summer.

**Uniformity**: Establishing a statewide start date for all schools may be desirable to give students a level academic and athletic playing field (schools that start earlier can begin holding pre-season fall practices earlier than others). But if there is a standard start date it is probably wise to have a waiver process available to schools and/or districts.

**State Actions**

**California** is the national leader in year-round education. The state accounts for half of the 3,000 year-round schools currently operating nationally. California’s first experience with year-round education was as a means to cost-effectively address the state’s growing student population and its class size reduction initiative.

Last summer, the **North Carolina** legislature—despite strong opposition from the state board of education—approved a law setting August 25th as the earliest possible start date for all schools in the state. Wisconsin, Minnesota, Virginia, and Texas also have school start date laws, and other states continue to consider such a policy.

The **Hawaii** State Board of Education recently adopted a uniform school calendar for all public schools beginning in the 2006-07 school year. The “1-3-2” schedule gives students one week off in the fall, three weeks in the winter, two weeks in spring, and a seven-week summer vacation. This schedule was the favorite among five options in a survey of staff, parents, and students. The most unpopular choice was the “traditional” calendar, with its two-week Christmas break and a summer vacation as long as 10 weeks.

**Resources**

The **National Association for Year-Round Education**, PO Box 711386 San Diego, CA 92171-1386, Phone: (619) 276-5296; www.nayre.org.


Telling Tales Over Time: Constructing and Deconstructing the School Calendar, Teachers College Record Volume 105 Number 9, 2003, p. 1720-1757.