

COMMENTARY

The Limitations of Year-Round School Calendars as Cost-Saving Reform

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In any given year, California alone has typically accounted for roughly half of total enrollment in year-round school calendars nationally. It is likely that this school policy option was so widely embraced in California due to the fact that the state experienced school crowding issues and that year-round school calendars often appear to be a promising solution. Year-round calendars redistribute the same number of school days more evenly across the year. A particular type of year-round calendar, multi-track, does this in a way that supports a larger student body in the same school facility. The multi-track year-round calendar has therefore gained the reputation of being a cost-saving remedy to school crowding.

As an additional motivation, many researchers and policymakers have argued that by redistributing the summer break, year-round school calendars could alleviate summer learning loss, the well-documented loss of knowledge that students experience in the summer months spent out of school on a traditional calendar. This summer learning loss has also been shown to be larger for students from traditionally disadvantaged groups. In the face of school crowding and fears about inequality-inducing summer learning loss, many schools nationwide have started to adopt multi-track year-round calendars.

In [this study](#), [Jennifer Graves](#), [Steven McMullen](#), and [Katy Rouse](#) (2013) discuss their research on year-round school calendars and explain why policymakers both in California and across the nation need to proceed with caution when considering this policy tool. While cost savings have been established, the predicted academic benefits have not materialized. Except as a remedy in cases of very over-crowded schools, year-round schooling has been found to either have little impact on achievement, or has been shown to actually decrease achievement, especially among the most high-risk student populations. On a year-round calendar, vacation days are not eliminated, but are simply redistributed. It is therefore flawed reasoning to motivate use of year-round calendars based on the existence of summer learning loss alone. In theory, year-round school calendars could just as easily harm students, by disrupting the flow of learning, as help them by breaking up the long summer vacation.

The main studies reviewed by Graves, McMullen and Rouse find large negative effects of year-round calendars in California and largely neutral effects in Wake County, North Carolina, two cases where the multi-track year-round school calendar was widely implemented. While the most recent evidence discussed in their study does not settle the debate, there are some key recommendations that can be drawn from the evidence thus far. First, small cost savings may not justify risking student achievement. Second, policymakers should exhibit particular caution in schools in which the low-income and/or minority populations are large.

The challenges faced by schools with very high minority, low socioeconomic status and potentially English-learner populations (as found in California) are likely to differ from schools where this demographic does not make up as large of a proportion of the

students (as found in Wake County, North Carolina). Third, keep in mind that there is almost no evidence supporting academic achievement gains except as a remedy for particularly severe crowding. Despite the negative effects found for the state of California, the authors remain cautiously optimistic about the use of year-round schools as policy reform, not because of the academic impacts, but because of the cost savings, which become increasingly more important to school districts in the face of tightening financial situations.

The full study (gated) is in Graves, J., McMullen, S. and Rouse, K. "Multi-Track Year-Round Schooling as Cost Saving Reform: Not Just a Matter of Time," Education Finance and Policy, Summer 2013, Vol. 8, No. 3, Pages 300-315.

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