
Do Parents Support Year-Round Schools?

Among the claims of year-round education advocates are that parents enthusiastically support the program. But do they? Given that enrollment in most year-round schools in North Carolina is voluntary, the intuitive answer is yes. After all, if parents didn't support the calendar they could shift their child to the traditional calendar. But is there other evidence of parental support for the year-round calendar?

Administrators contemplating a year-round start-up typically find some support for the idea. Bill Upton, principal of Meadowbrook Elementary School in the western North Carolina town of Canton, surveyed parents in the spring of 1996 as part of a study of whether to convert the school to a year-round calendar. All but about a dozen of the 340 parents surveyed responded. Upton found 60 percent of parents favored the idea and 40 percent opposed it. The response gave Upton, part of the information he needed to plan the shift to a year-round calendar. "With 60 percent of parents for it and 40 percent against, we want to do an optional year-round-school," says Upton.

Upton's research convinced the Haywood County Board of Education to approve a single-track magnet school for the 1997-98 school year, with current Meadowbrook students getting first preference. Students preferring the traditional calendar will be placed at nearby elementary schools.

Other surveys exploring parental interest in the year-round concept have found support similar to that Upton found among Meadowbrook parents. A survey of parents in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro school system in January 1996 found about 80 percent of parents would like the option of sending their children to year-round schools.¹ The survey of 900 parents drew 377 responses (41.9 percent).

A similar survey for the Orange County Public Schools in October 1994 found 64.7 percent of the 480 parents who responded would send their children to a newly renovated year-round school in Hillsborough.² The school opened in July 1996.

So school officials *can* find support for the

year-round concept when their schools are in the planning stages. But how do parents feel once the calendar is implemented?

In 1991, researchers at North Carolina State University surveyed 350 parents of year-round students at Wake County's Morrisville Elementary School. The study found overwhelming support.³ Of the 290 parents who responded to the survey (82 percent):

- 99 percent agreed that year-round education is suitable to their lifestyles;
- 95 percent agreed that children's needs were better met by the year-round program than by traditional programs;
- 94 percent agreed that the year-round program was one reason that their children were more eager and enthusiastic about learning;
- 83 percent agreed year-round education better promotes the development of the whole child, and;
- 76 percent agreed that year-round education allows parents greater opportunity to be involved in their children's education.

Parents were less inclined to agree that child care and supervision can be provided more adequately in a year-round setting (60 percent agreed), and that extracurricular activities and events were better accommodated at year-round school. Only a minority (39 percent) agreed that changing classes after each three-week break was an advantage for their children.⁴

Additional evidence of parental support for year-round schools may be taken from the Wake County Public Schools parent survey, which goes to the parents of all children in the school system. In the 1994-95 school year, Wake County had three year-round magnet elementary schools. At those three schools, parents were far more likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement, "My child's school provides a high-quality educational program," than were parents of elementary students system wide. The system-wide average was 82.8 percent, while 93.4 percent of parents at year-round Durant Road Elementary School agreed or

"The World is full of mostly invisible things,
And there is no way but putting the mind's eye,
Or its nose, in a book, to find them out . . .

—HOWARD NEMEROV, "TO DAVID, ABOUT HIS EDUCATION"

strongly agreed with the statement, 89.4 percent of parents at Morrisville Elementary School agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, and 91 percent of parents at West Lake Elementary School agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.⁵

Similar strong support has been found for the year-round calendar in the Rockingham County Public Schools. Five elementary schools offer year-round programs in Rockingham County. In a parent survey conducted at all five schools in May 1995, overwhelming majorities of parents said they strongly agreed or tended to agree that "my child learns more in the year-round program."⁶

But if there is some evidence of parental support for optional year-round schools, what about taxpayers at large—parents and non-parents alike? After all, multi-track year-round schools are sometimes billed as a way to realize short-term savings on school construction. And it's the taxpayers who ultimately must foot the bill for school construction.

In Wake County, at least, there seems to be creeping support for year-round schools as a space-saving device. In a poll of Wake County citizens conducted prior to a June 1996 vote on whether to authorize \$250 million in bonds for school construction, 53 percent of respondents said they would support mandatory year-round schools to help relieve school overcrowding.⁷ That compares to 47 percent who gave a similar response in 1993. In the end, the question was moot because the voters overwhelmingly approved the bond referendum. But supporters of optional year-round schools realize the issue could arise again.

—Mike McLaughlin

FOOTNOTES

¹Deidra Jackson, "Year-round schools backed," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Feb. 10, 1996, p. 6B.

²Deidra Jackson, "Parents interested in year-round school," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Nov. 30, 1995, p. 6B.

³Robert Serow *et al.*, "Year-Round Education Program: Evaluation Report," Wake County Public School System, Raleigh, N.C., March 1992, pp. 2-4.

⁴Students are forced to change classes at Morrisville Elementary School because the school offers a multi-track program with students on four different calendars, thus accommodating more students than a traditional calendar school or a single track year-round school.

⁵*School Profiles: 1995-96*, Wake County Public School System, Department of Evaluation and Research, November 1995, elementary school section (schools are arranged alphabetically with a four-page profile for each). Another year-round elementary school, Vena Wilburn, also operated on a year-round calendar in 1995-96 but is not a magnet school. Parents who wish to transfer their children out of the school district may do so, but those living outside the attendance zone generally do not have the option of transferring in. At Vena Wilburn, only 75.9 percent of parents agreed or strongly agreed that the school provides a high-quality educational program—less than the system-wide average. It should be noted, however, that the question is an indirect measure. Vena Wilburn has a higher percentage of students on free and reduced lunch than the system average, while the other three year-round schools have a far lower percentage. This indicates students at the school are, on the whole, from less affluent families, and the school is located in a less affluent section of Wake County. Thus, other factors may play into the lower level of satisfaction with school programs among Vena Wilburn parents.

⁶Parents of students in five schools in Rockingham County were asked to respond to 12 different questions about year-round schools. For each question, parents at all four schools were overwhelmingly supportive of year-round schools. Responses to the statement, "I feel that my child learns more in the year-round program" are illustrative. Here are the percentages of parents who strongly agreed or tended to agree with the statement at each of the five schools: Central Elementary School, 96.7 percent; Dillard Primary School, 97 percent; Moss Street Elementary School, 89.5 percent; New Vision Intermediate School, 97.2 percent; and Stoneville Elementary School, 90.2 percent. Response rate of parents ranged from 89 percent at Central Elementary School to 76 percent at Dillard Primary School. The survey was conducted in May 1995 and the results were presented to the Rockingham County Board of Education in November 1995.

⁷Todd Silberman, "Wake notes growth in support for 12-month schools," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Jan. 19, 1996, p. 1B.

says Barnes. The decision to drop the year-round calendar was the direct result of this declining interest, which caused resources to be stretched between the two calendars.

A similar result occurred in Hendersonville, where the Henderson County Board of Education elected to drop school-within-a-school year-round calendars at one middle school and one elementary school but retain a single track year-round calendar at another elementary school. Hendersonville Middle School Principal Bobby Wilkins professes some dismay at the decision, which takes effect in the 1997-98 school year. "We had more kids in year-round this year than traditional," says Wilkins.

Hendersonville Elementary Principal Catherine Childress says her school retained its single-track calendar, but she is worried that the loss of the middle school option will hurt parents with children of both elementary and middle-school age. "It could have a ripple effect on us because that's where kids go from here."

One North Carolina school system has taken a different tack by placing all of its programs and students on the same, single-track, year-round calendar. Newton-Conover City Schools took that step after finding that parallel schools-within-schools created a degree of conflict for parents and teachers.

"We felt there was division among teachers and in the community," says Elaine Hall, principal of

"Education and religion are two subjects on which everybody considers himself an expert."

—ROBERTSON DAVIES,
THE REBEL ANGELS

Newton-Conover Middle School. "There was an issue for teachers who had children on a different schedule."

The school system has about 2,700 students in three elementary, one middle, and one high school. "We still have some folks who aren't happy with the calendar," Hall says. "But the majority is in favor. We were trying to give everyone a choice, but we began hearing that whatever we're going to do, let's do the same thing."

For teachers, Hall says, the two different calendars posed problems with staff development efforts, because it was difficult to schedule meetings and programs that worked for both schedules. "We were losing cohesiveness," she says.

Nevertheless, some strong opposition to dropping "choice" from the calendar came from high school students and their parents. They were concerned about summer jobs, special summer programs, and athletic seasons that wouldn't match up with the 45/15 (nine weeks on/three weeks off) year-round calendar. In fact, most systems with year-round schools—even those with ambitious programs—have steered clear of high schools for such reasons.

But Hall says the sports issue hasn't been the problem in Newton-Conover that some had feared. The football team finished 10 and 0 in its first season on the year-round schedule, she says. "We found that students had to be around in the summer anyway if they made a commitment to a sport or to the band." Thus, in a year-round school, students might have to return to school during their breaks to play in a game or participate in practice. School superintendent Everette Simmons also says that summer jobs have not been a problem in Newton-Conover. Students tend to take jobs during the school year anyway, so most student jobs are not affected.

A multi-track program is especially difficult for a comprehensive high school because of class scheduling conflicts. For example, a low-enrollment advanced placement course might not be feasible for each of the four tracks. Those kinds of

Organizations to Contact

for More Information

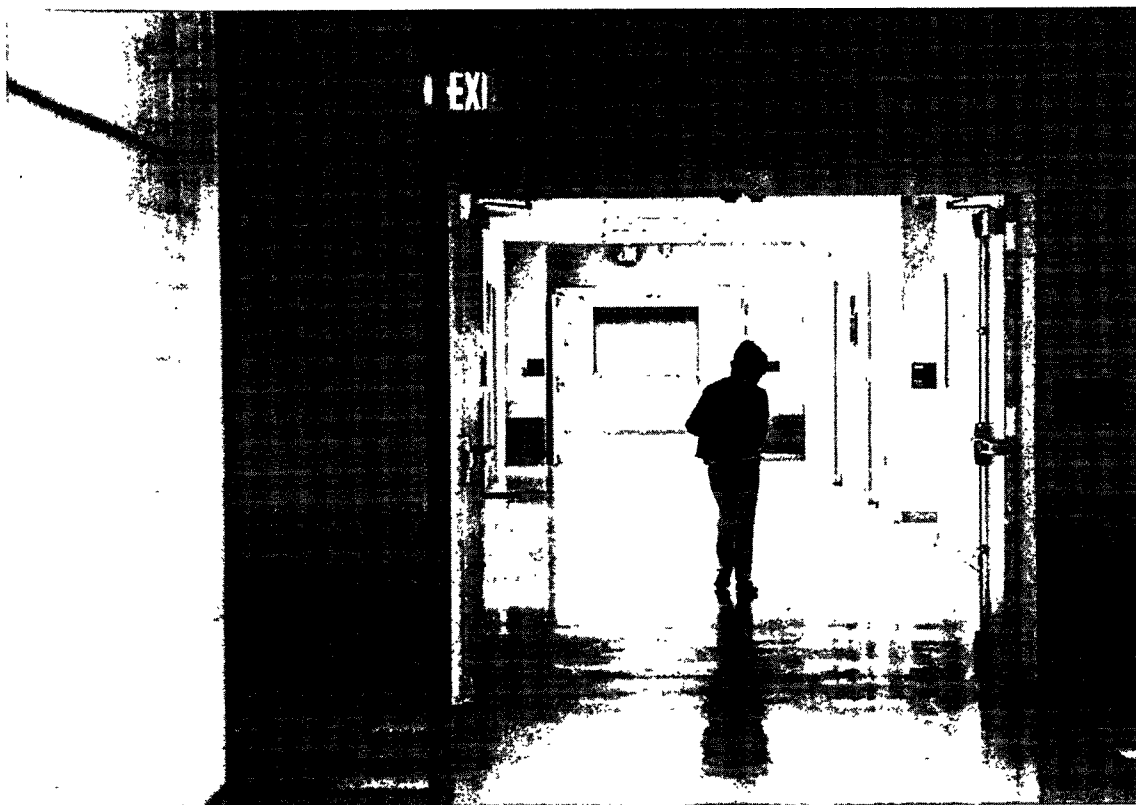
About Year-Round Schools:

Supports Year-Round Schools

The National Association for
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Opposes Year-Round Schools

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Karen Tam

concerns led the Wake County school board to shelve a proposal for a year-round high school in the early 1990s.

Incrementally, however, more high schools are sampling the year-round schedule. One alternative high school, for example, has found the calendar to be a natural fit for students who fail to flourish within the traditional school setting. Cape Lookout High in Morehead City implemented the year-round calendar for the 1996-97 school year, and Principal Laura Beth Taylor already is impressed with the results. "We saw year-round as a really natural step to take because we can do nine weeks of work and then remediate," says Taylor. "We're finding we can keep kids focused for nine weeks. They work like their pants are on fire, knowing they're going to get a break."

About 40 percent of the school's 60 students are enrolled in algebra II, says Taylor. "And they're all at-risk kids," she says. "They're not just taking it. They're passing it."

Yet another high school that has converted to the year-round calendar is Northampton County High School West. The school operates on a 90-days-in-school, 30-days-out calendar with 15-day breaks in the fall and spring. Northampton County Schools Superintendent Gregory Todd says the

schedule allows the school to use a semester system and get exams in before the Christmas and summer breaks. Remediation programs are incorporated for students who are failing. "The other high school and two middle schools are going year-round next year," Todd says.

Conclusion

The debate over the year-round school calendar typically has turned on a simple question: Is it the solution to the myriad problems that public education faces today? This, however, may be requiring an experiment with the school calendar to carry too much baggage. One strong argument made by proponents of year-round schools is that they allow school facilities to accommodate more students—thus relieving overcrowding and reducing construction costs for new schools. A second major argument is that the restructured calendar actually can improve academic achievement.

But as much as proponents want to believe that year-round schools increase academic achievement, studies have produced inconclusive or mixed results. This is in part due to difficulties inherent in matching year-round students with their counterparts on the traditional calendar in order to design

studies that fully account for differences in abilities among students. In this sense, the studies in North Carolina are as inconclusive as those in other states. While there are some hints of increased achievement on the year-round calendar, there are other examples where students on the traditional calendar have outperformed their year-round peers. No dramatic leaps in learning should be anticipated unless year-round schools are willing to use time when their students are on break to lengthen the school year. Even then, the differences may be subtle and may take years to materialize.

A more dramatic result of the year-round calendar seems to be the increase in positive attitudes among teachers and students who enroll in the program on an optional basis. Teachers enjoy more frequent vacations and may therefore experience less "burnout." This is increasingly an issue as North Carolina attempts to retain its best classroom teachers. Many students also may benefit from more frequent remediation on a case by case basis, even though there is little evidence that it helps all or even most students. And teachers say the more frequent breaks keep students fresh and more eager to learn. Parents with lifestyles that are more conducive to frequent breaks rather than one long break also benefit. Supporters say that these factors—happy teachers, happy students, and happy parents—combine to create a better atmosphere for learning than the traditional calendar.

But if the atmosphere for learning has improved, why is there so little evidence of increased achievement? While it makes sense intuitively that shorter breaks and more frequent remediation might enhance learning, compelling empirical evidence indicating stronger academic performance does not exist. The best proponents can claim is that year-round education does no worse than the traditional calendar.

Because the findings on year-round schools are still debatable, the public schools should move cautiously on this issue. It must be remembered that many school systems across the country (Los Angeles, California; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Orange County, Florida) and in North Carolina (Blowing Rock, Catawba County, Asheboro, and Hendersonville among others) have ended or scaled back year-round programs for reasons such as cost, community dissatisfaction, and lack of academic results.

Satisfaction among parents, teachers, students, and the community is vital to success of any year-round program. To make sure this support exists, North Carolina should continue its permissive approach of allowing individual school districts to ex-

periment with different year-round approaches. Where possible, year-round programs should remain optional. Forcing people to participate in a program they strongly oppose makes success less likely. By allowing localities to experiment, costs and benefits will be clearer, and successes in one district can be adopted in another. ▢

FOOTNOTES

¹ N.C. Department of Public Instruction, "North Carolina 1996-97 School Year Year-Round Education," Fact Sheet.

² Linda K. Wertheimer, "Parents: Turn Back Calendars; Year-Round Education Loses Favor Amid Furor," *The Orlando Sentinel*, Orlando, Fla., June 4, 1995, p. B1.

³ Todd Silberman, "School bond details put off," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Sept. 18, 1992, p. B1; Silberman, "Crowds putting schools in bind," *The News & Observer*, Sept. 8, 1992, p. A1; Silberman, "Group readies school protest," *The News & Observer*, Aug. 11, 1992, p. B1; Tim Simmons, "Year-round schools on hold," *The News & Observer*, July 17, 1992, p. B1.

⁴ For a comprehensive discussion of the school choice issue, see Tom Mather, "School Choice: A Simple Term Covers a Range of Options," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (September 1995), pp. 2-50.

⁵ Walter L. Winters, "A Review of Recent Studies Relating to the Achievement of Students Enrolled in Year-Round Education Programs," National Association for Year-Round Education, Nov. 1994, p. v.

⁶ Carolyn Calvin Kneese and Stephanie L. Knight, Texas A&M University, a report presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, Calif., April 18-22, 1995, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Blaine R. Worthen and Stephen W. Zsiray, Jr., "What Twenty Years of Educational Studies Reveal About Year-Round Education," report commissioned by N.C. Educational Policy Research Center, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, March 1994, pp. 10-11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹¹ Jane L. Zykowski *et al.*, "A Review of Year-Round Education Research," California Educational Research Cooperative, School of Education, University of California, Riverside, Feb. 1991, p. 49.

¹² *Year-Round Schools: Do They Make a Difference?* Center for Evaluation, Development, and Research, Phi Delta Kappa, Bloomington, Ind., May 1990, p. 243.

¹³ D. Kirk Grotjohn and Karen Banks, "An Evaluation Synthesis: Year-Round Schools and Achievement," Wake County Public School System, 1993, p. 3, presented at the 1993 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, Ga.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁵ A "multi-track" school operates with different groups of students on separate calendars, or tracks, that rotate when the groups are in session. The groups attend on staggered schedules with one group always on vacation. This way, the school can serve a greater number of students. The Wake County schools use a 45-15 calendar, where each track attends school for nine weeks (45 days) then takes a three-week (15 day) break. "Magnet" refers to a school that is optional for students to choose to attend, as opposed to going to the school to which the student is assigned by zoning. In Wake County, the entire student body of

a year-round magnet school is on the year-round calendar.

¹⁶ Robert Serow *et al.*, "Year-Round Education Program: Evaluation Report," Wake County Public School System, Raleigh, N.C., March 1992, p. 6.

¹⁷ Bethany Prohm and Nancy Banen, "Are WCPSS Multi-Track Year-Round Schools Effective?" Wake County Public School System, Raleigh, N.C., March 1996, p. 3.

¹⁸ The exception was at Durant Elementary, where students increased from 81 percent scoring at Levels III or IV in math to 88 percent.

¹⁹ Bethany Prohm and Nancy Banen, note 17 above, p. 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2. See Table 3 for specific school information.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Robert Serow *et al.*, note 16 above, p. 15.

²³ Bethany Prohm and Nancy Banen, note 17 above, p. 5.

²⁴ Cammie Hall *et al.*, "Results of Year-Round Education Research," Rockingham County Public School System, November 6, 1995, pp. 1-18.

²⁵ *Ibid.* at pp. 1-8.

²⁶ *Ibid.* at p. 11.

²⁷ Faye H. Frye *et al.*, "YRE—What Is the Real Truth!," report presented to the Rockingham County Board of Education and to a national conference on year-round schools. Data analysis by Ann Brady, September 1996, pp. 6-7.

²⁸ A "school-within-a-school" refers to a school that has students on both a year-round calendar and the traditional calendar.

²⁹ The gains in math were small. However, they were more than 8 percent greater than the percent of the year-round students scoring at Levels III and IV.

³⁰ Quinn Raspberry, "Year-Round Schools May Not Be the Answer," position paper, Time To Learn, Charlotte, N.C., June

1994 (revised May 1996), p. 13.

³¹ McGladrey & Pullen, LLP, *Wake County Public Schools Cost Comparison of Year-Round Schools Versus Traditional Schools*, Wilmington, N.C., June 6, 1996, pp. 2-3.

³² Seminole County Schools, Fla., Division of Business and Finance, "Cost Effectiveness of a Modified School Calendar vs. The Traditional 180 Day Calendar," 1989, pp. 6-20; and report to the Wake County Board of Education by Farrell Hanzaker, former associate superintendent for administrative services, Nov. 1992, pp. 11-12.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁴ McGladrey & Pullen, LLP, note 31 above, p. 2.

³⁵ Neil MacFarquhar, "Trenton Schools Begin an Experiment with Year-Round Classes," *New York Times*, July 22, 1995, p. 1B.

³⁶ Jacquelyn Heard, "Year-Round School Could Face Some Heat," *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 1995, p. 1.

³⁷ N.C. State Board of Education policy on year-round education, adopted Dec. 4, 1991.

³⁸ Worthen and Zsiray, note 9 above, pp. 18-19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴¹ Telephone interview with Don Patterson, Oct. 6, 1995.

⁴² Lois Timnick, "Year-Round School Plan Rescinded," *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 1993, home edition, p. J1.

⁴³ Henry Chu, "School Year Vote Forces Officials to Scramble," *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1993, p. B4.

⁴⁴ Seminole County School System's report on year-round costs, Sanford, Fla., May 10, 1995, p. 12.

⁴⁵ Center for Evaluation, Development, and Research, note 12 above, p. 243.

Recommendations on Year-Round Schools Policy

While the year-round calendar shows much promise in improving teacher morale and creating a better classroom atmosphere for children, that promise is yet to be translated into dramatic improvements in classroom performance. In some studies, year-round students have outperformed their peers on the traditional calendar. In others, it's traditional calendar students who have attained higher marks.

A Texas study, for example, found year-round students performed slightly better in reading and math than their peers on the traditional calendar. And at-risk students in schools serving poorer populations were found to reap even more benefits.¹ Researchers at the now-defunct North Carolina Educational Policy Research Center within the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reviewed

20 years of studies on year-round schools conducted across the nation. Their conclusion? "Overall, there appears to be a slight but not overwhelming advantage for year-round students in learning basic content."²

Still, results of studies across the nation have been mixed, and the results are clouded by difficulty in matching students on innate ability and demographic factors such as income and education level of parents. A Wake County study that used an "effectiveness index" to compare similar students across the school district concluded, "[Y]ear-round elementary students are performing about the same as similar students in other schools." The North Carolina Educational Policy Research Center concluded that "[m]ore and better research and evaluation

—continues