

Rethinking the School Calendar

The September-June calendar served our economy when it was primarily agricultural, but it's time for a change.

The September-June school calendar has outlived its usefulness. Originally it had a strong purpose: to enhance the prevailing agricultural economy of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was not designed to enhance instruction then, and it does not do so now. Today, when we announce that formal instruction is over in June and that "real" learning will not be available again until September, what subliminal messages are we sending to students?

A New Design Makes Sense

Children learn continually; that thesis underlies a school's formal curriculum, which is usually sequential in nature or tied to the learner's earlier experiences. The customary long summer vacation disrupts the continuity of instruction that curriculum planners desire. Further, the extensive reviews most teachers conduct in September and October limit the number of days available for introduction of new material and subsequent mastery of that material.

Accumulated over a period of 12 years, review time takes its toll on the subsequent achievement of most students. A less interrupted flow of instruction throughout the year will certainly enhance the education of the most able students, who learn continu-

ously, whether in or out of school. Likewise, average students are also ill-served by the traditional calendar because the long review early in the school year is largely wasted time for

them. Interestingly, the least able students are not well served by the traditional school calendar either. A summer away from school disrupts the learning pattern required by slower

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Restructuring schools can begin with something as simple as an innovative summer school, just to demonstrate the benefits of uninterrupted instruction (see also p. 78).

"For most students, the language of the summer is going to be the language of the community, whether it is English or not. Three months away from formal instruction is not helpful to students learning a new language, whether they are English-speaking students learning Spanish or Spanish-speaking students learning English. . . ."

students, who learn best from a continuous cycle of teaching, practice, re-teaching, and practice.

By now, traditionalists have likely formed a series of "Yes, but . . ." statements to counter these ideas. Some may contend that summer school is an important part of the learning process and helps to bridge the period between instructional years. The hard truth is that the vast majority of students do not attend summer school, and those who do are not always placed in classes with the same academic rigor as classes held between September and June.

Other opponents of calendar change may claim that summer provides an excellent time for students to "grow," travel, commune with nature, or have unscheduled free time. While most educators would agree that these are desirable outcomes, there are other options for achieving them. For example, why can't students "grow" with personalized experiences in October or February, as well as in July or August? Why can't students travel to

Europe in September or May? Student visits to Paris in November or March would be infinitely more valuable learning experiences than visits in August, when Paris is largely closed and the students would bump mostly into other Americans. Also, why can't a student learn about nature when the maple sap starts running in early spring or animals begin growing heavier fur coats in late autumn? And why wouldn't a three-week class at the local art museum be as valuable in January as in August?

Besides instructional considerations, contemporary social factors demand a rethinking of the traditional school calendar. An increasing number of students come from homes where English is not the primary language. Formal language instruction, which is best offered on a continuous basis, is disrupted by a long break. For most students, the language of the summer is going to be the language of the community, whether it is English or not. Three months away from formal instruction is not helpful to stu-

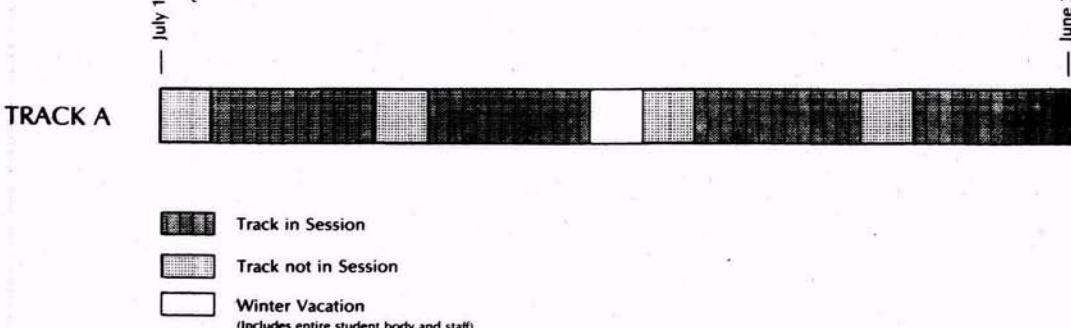


Fig. 1. Basic Year-Round Calendar

dents learning a new language, whether they are English-speaking students learning Spanish or Spanish-speaking students learning English, or any student learning any new language.

Another troubling social factor is the number of students with little to do during the summer months. Of what value to society is a situation in which urban and suburban teenagers are free to roam neighborhood streets, unsupervised, unemployed, and unoccupied, for up to three months? Contrary to the belief of many teachers, few students under the age of 16 have steady jobs, and the jobs held are usually independent of the school calendar. Few students between 16 and 18 hold substantial jobs, and most of these jobs can be independent of the school's schedule. By following an outdated calendar, the schools have created an unfortunate situation that gives rise to untold problems for youth delinquency agencies, social community agencies, and police departments.

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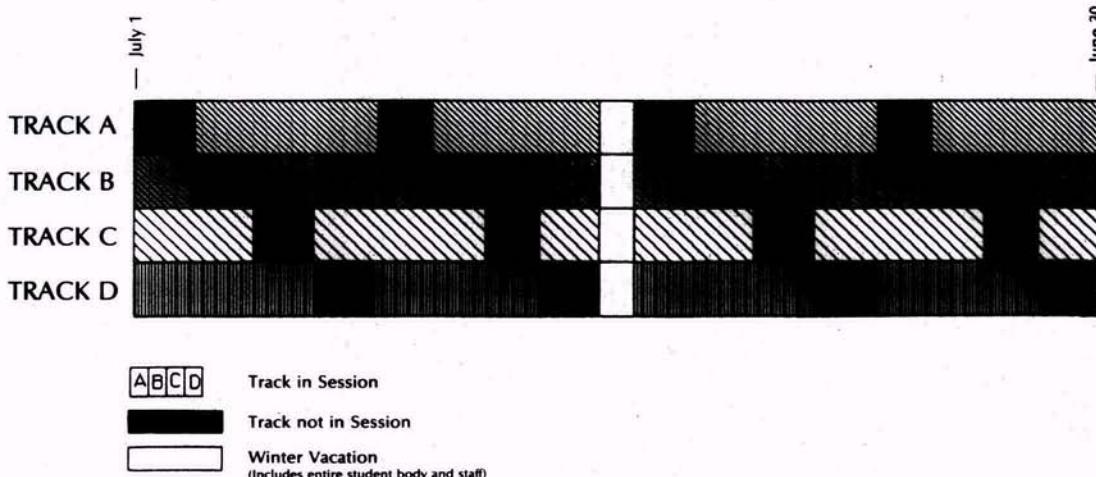


Fig. 2. Multi-Track Year-Round Calendar

Name of Y-R Calendar	Format: Sequence	Accumulated Days of Instruction per Instructional Year	Weeks Used	Curriculum Format	Number of Grading Periods	Teaching Format	Intersession (vacation) Instructional Possibilities	Number of Tracks Usually Used in Plan
45-15	45 days in school (9 weeks) 15 days vacation (3 weeks)	180	36 weeks in school 12 weeks out 4 holiday weeks	4 periods (quarters) of work	4 (1 each quarter)	1 9-week study unit 3 3-week units 1 quarter study unit	Yes	From one to four (a traditional track can also be offered)
60-20	60 days in school (12 weeks) 20 days vacation (4 weeks)	180	36 weeks in school 12 weeks out 4 holiday weeks	3 periods (mesters) of work	3 (1 each mester) or 6 (2 each mester)	1 mester study unit 1 12-week study unit 4 3-week study units per semester 3 4-week study units 2 6-week study units per mester	Yes	From one to four (a traditional track can also be offered)
60-15	60 days in school (12 weeks) 15 days vacation (3 weeks)	180	36 weeks in school 9 weeks out 4 weeks common summer vacation 3 holiday weeks	3 periods (mesters) of work	3 (1 each mester) or 6 (2 each mester)	(Same as 60-20 above)	Yes	One or five
90-30	90 days in school (18 weeks) 30 days vacation (6 weeks)	180	36 weeks in school 12 weeks out 4 holiday weeks	2 periods (semesters) of work	2 (1 each semester) or 4 (2 each semester) or 6 (3 each semester)	1-semester units of varying lengths	Yes	From one to four
Concept 6	82 days in school 41 days vacation (days are lengthened to equal minutes of instruction in a 180-day year)	164	32 weeks in school 16 weeks out 4 holiday weeks	2 quarters 41 days back-to-back	4 (1 each period) or 8 (2 each period)	Quarter units of work	Yes	One or three

Fig. 3. Curriculum Considerations of Sample Calendars of Year-Round Education

Options for Redesigning the School Year

Year-round education takes many forms. In its broadest definition, it is redesign of the school year to make instruction more continual and the traditional summer period substantially less. Implementations throughout the U.S. range from a simple reconfiguration of the two-semester school year to a very sophisticated 60-15, five-track calendar plan. Some forms of year-round schooling are:

Strands

- Single-track
- Multi-track
- Extended Year

Kinds	
25-5	trimester
45-15	quarter
60-15	quinmester
60-20	Concept 6
90-30	Concept 6 (modified)
	Continuous All-Year Plan
	Five-track, Five-term Plan
	Modified Traditional/Year Round

The school year should be consistent with a curriculum designed by teachers and other instructional personnel in the local community. Some communities may decide at first to move gently into a reorganized year by merely modifying the traditional calendar. Curriculum planners may decide that the tradition of having the

first semester end three weeks after a major holiday break makes little sense instructionally. They may also realize that the folly is compounded by scheduling a second semester to start three days after the end of the first semester. For them the school year could be restructured this way:

- **First Semester:** August 5-December 17 (90 days of instruction)
- **Intersession:** December 18-January 25
 - **Teachers:** Recording first semester grades
 - **Students:** Preparing for new semester Holiday period
- **Second Semester:** January 27-June 20 (90 days of instruction)
- **Summer Break:** Five/six weeks

"Remediation can occur throughout the year by using more frequent vacation periods, rather than limiting it to summer school after nine months of failure and frustration."

Known as a modified traditional/modified year-round calendar, this simple rearrangement allows teachers a work break between semesters, allows students an intensive on-site or off-site learning experience, and enables families to have a winter vacation. If the example above were organized into a firm rhythm of instructional time, the concept would be called 90-30 and organized this way:

90 days of instruction (first semester)
30 days of vacation (winter vacation)
90 days of instruction (second semester)
30 days of vacation (summer vacation)

180 days of instruction, 60 days of vacation

When many educators think of year-round education, they have in mind the multi-track version of the concept, which was originally designed to handle over-enrollment of students in limited facilities. It accomplished the task, and proved to be cost-effective and efficient as well.

The multi-track calendar is built upon a basic year-round calendar. When a school is faced with overcrowding, educators take the basic plan illustrated in Figure 1, which becomes one of several tracks, and develop what is called a multi-track year-round plan (shown in fig. 2). Any continuous learning calendar adopted by a community has curriculum implications, which are illustrated in Figure 3.

Benefits of Year-Round Education

Over 400 schools in the United States organize the instructional year on a year-round basis. They do so for these instructional reasons:

- Learning is more continual.
- Memory loss is reduced by shortening summer vacation.
- Remediation can occur throughout the year by using more frequent vacation periods, rather than limiting it to summer school after nine months of failure and frustration.

- The instructional periods lend themselves to concepts of units, segments, or blocks of learning.

Districts also implement year-round education for financial reasons. The multi-track version of the concept allows considerable savings in both operational and capital outlay costs. All new buildings cost money to build, of course, but they also cost money to operate and maintain each year they are in use. A secondary school costing \$20 million to build will require at least another \$20 million to service the bond debt, to repair and maintain, and to operate over a period of 30 years. That total of \$40 million or more—for one building—is forever lost to the more important instructional considerations of materials and supplies, field trips, instructional aides, and adequate salaries for the professionals involved in the education of the nation's young.

The September-June calendar, based on economic rather than instructional considerations, has outlived its usefulness. Year-round education clearly offers a better way to educate today's students.

If year-round education were the traditional school calendar and had been so for 100 years or more, and if someone came along to suggest a "new" calendar wherein school students were to be educated for only nine months each year, with another three months free from organized instruction, would the American public allow, or even consider, such a calendar? □

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