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 continuously, 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 pacing.

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 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
### 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 |
| Intersession | December 18-January 25 |
| Teachers | Recording first semester grades, preparing for new semester |
| Students | Holiday period |
| Second Semester | January 27-June 20 |
| Summer Break | Five/six weeks |

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### Table: Curriculum Considerations of Sample Calendars of Year-Round Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Y-R Calendar</th>
<th>Format: Sequence</th>
<th>Accumulated Days of Instruction per Instructional Year</th>
<th>Weeks Used</th>
<th>Curriculum Format</th>
<th>Number of Grading Periods</th>
<th>Teaching Format</th>
<th>Intercession (vacation) Instructional Possibilities</th>
<th>Number of Tracks Usually Used in Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45-15</td>
<td>45 days in school (9 weeks)</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>36 weeks in school 12 weeks out 4 holiday weeks</td>
<td>4 periods (quarters) of work</td>
<td>4 (1 each quarter)</td>
<td>1 9-week study unit</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>From one to four (a traditional track can also be offered)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-20</td>
<td>60 days in school (12 weeks)</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>36 weeks in school 12 weeks out 4 holiday weeks</td>
<td>3 periods (quarters) of work</td>
<td>3 (1 each quarter)</td>
<td>1 12-week study unit</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>From one to four (a traditional track can also be offered)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-15</td>
<td>60 days in school (12 weeks)</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>36 weeks in school 9 weeks out 4 weeks common summer vacation 3 holiday weeks</td>
<td>3 periods (quarters) of work</td>
<td>3 (1 each quarter)</td>
<td>1 3-week study units</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>One or five</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-30</td>
<td>90 days in school (18 weeks)</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>36 weeks in school 12 weeks out 4 holiday weeks</td>
<td>2 periods (semesters) of work</td>
<td>2 (1 each semester)</td>
<td>1 4-week study units</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>From one to four</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept 6</td>
<td>82 days in school (41 days vacation)</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>32 weeks in school 16 weeks out 4 holiday weeks</td>
<td>2 quarters 14 days back-to-back</td>
<td>4 (1 each period)</td>
<td>1 6-week study units</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>One or three</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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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