RESEARCH & EVALUATION

RESEARCH BRIEF

School calendar configurations and student outcomes

by Laura Fogarty and Matthew Linick

Options for school schedules go beyond the traditional, five-day, nine-month configuration which is utilized by the majority of US schools. When considering shifting the calendar structure for district schools, administrators want to know the benefits that different schedules offer; particularly, how they affect student outcomes.

According to some studies, schools that have adopted an alternative calendar configuration have been found to differ in terms of student outcomes. However, these findings do not paint a clear picture on what the best calendar approach may be. The mixed findings show that some schools with non-traditional schedules report better student achievement than do those with a more traditional calendar; others show less student achievement than traditional-calendar schools; and still others show no significant differences between the two types.

Introduction

While the traditional view of a school year typically involves students attending from August through May and taking the summer off, there has been rising interest in recent years in modifying the school calendar and taking a new approach. There are a variety of reasons that schools may consider making the switch. One reason can be the fear that students forget information that they learned from the previous year over the summer break. Other reasons might include addressing overcrowding concerns by staggering school year start times and to save the schools money by having time off; increasing capacity without incurring additional building costs. There are a variety of different school calendar configurations that differ from the traditional structure. While these different academic calendar options have been adopted by many schools nationwide, the majority of schools have not implemented an alternative structure to that of the traditional school year. Administrators want to know what the existing data says about the benefits versus drawbacks of shifting to a new schedule – primarily, what does the research say about the effects of different school calendar configurations on student outcomes?

Findings:

- Extending the learning time in a calendar is linked with some positive student outcomes.
- Restructuring the calendar is not consistently linked with positive or negative outcomes.

There are multiple configurations of the school calendar that schools around the country have implemented; differing in terms of length of school day, week, and year. Regarding student outcomes, the most commonly measured factor in the reviewed literature was student achievement.

Schools on a multi-track, year-round calendar were found by several studies to actually decrease achievement, especially among

high-risk students.[i] Other studies found that students attending school year-round increased proficiency scores [ii], particularly in mathematics.[iii] Another study found no relationship between year-round schooling and academic achievement for the average student, and further was unable to identify that any racial subgroup benefits from this configuration.[iv]

Another option of a modified school calendar is implementing a four-day week in schools, as opposed to the traditional 5-day week. No significant differences were found between four- and five-day week schooling in student achievement outcomes.[v vi] Often, the decision to switch to a four-day week may be driven by a motivation to cut costs associated with operating schools five days a week.

> "The extended learning time was found to be positively correlated with academics, behavior, as well as parental engagement and involvement... [however] a meta-analysis found that increased learning time is not always correlated with positive results."

An additional method for modifying the school calendar is extending the hours of the school day. Researchers conducted a data analysis on the National Center on Time & Learning (NCTL) database, and found a positive relationship between student achievement and school time; however, they caution that findings are not conclusive; the movement towards expanded-time (ET) schools is relatively new and decentralized.[ii] A more recent study found that extended school day programs for high school students were correlated with better attendance, but not with standardized test scores.[vii] Another study explored the effects of an extended school day on various outcomes for African-American male students.[viii] The extended learning time was found to be positively correlated with academics, behavior, as well as parental engagement and involvement, though. Finally, a meta-analysis found that increased learning time is not always correlated with positive results.[ix]

Policy Recommendations

When considering the results of the reviewed literature, it may be gathered that extending the amount of learning time (whether by extending hours or days in school) appears to be linked with some positive outcomes. However, implementing a revised calendar structure that differs from the traditional model appears to be linked with mixed results. These mixed findings from the review of school calendar configuration literature suggest that administrators carefully review the different options, and conduct their own research prior to implementing a change in calendar structure. Some themes emerge from the literature that may guide leaders in the decision-making process.

- Extending the amount of learning time for students appears to be linked with some positive outcomes. Administrators wishing to modify the amount of school time spent by students may consider increasing the length of the school day, extending the school year, or offering additional after-school programming.
- The reviewed literature shows no significant differences in student proficiency for those who are enrolled in four- and five-day week schooling; thus, the decision to switch to a shorter school week may be made on the basis of other motives (conserving energy, cutting costs).
- Schools that operate on a year-round calendar tend to show mixed student outcomes. Since the evidence does not indicate all positive associations between a year-round calendar and student outcomes, administrators may consider further research as it becomes available prior to making significant calendar changes in their school.

While the option for adopting non-traditional configurations of the academic calendar has been around for decades, relatively few schools have adopted schedules that differ from the 5-day school week, with 180 days of instruction

that runs consistently through nine months, with a summer break. Thus, literature on student outcomes in such schools as compared with schools with traditional schedules still remains limited. School administrators should stay up-to-date as additional research becomes available.

i Dixon, A. (2011). "Focus" on the alternative school calendar: Year-round school programs and update on the four-day school week. Challenge to lead. Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board.

ii Farbman, D. (2009). Tracking an emerging movement: A report on expanded-time schools in America. Boston, MA: National Center on Time & Learning. Retrieved from: http://www.schoodoodle.com/shop/images/12.7.09FinalDatabaseReport.pdf

iii Ramos, B.K. (2011). Breaking the tradition of summer vacation to raise academic achievement. *ERS Spectrum, 29 (4)*, 1-20.

iv McMullen, S.C. & Rouse, K.E. (2012). The impact of year-round schooling on academic achievement: Evidence from mandatory school calendar conversions. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy, 4 (4)*, 230-252.

v Anderson, D.M. & Walker, M.B. (2015). Does shortening the school week impact student `performance? Evidence from the four-day school week. *Education Finance and Policy, 10 (3)*, 314-349.

vi Hewitt, P.M. & Denny, G.S. (2011). The four-day school week: Impact on student academic performance. *Rural Educator, 32 (2)*, 23-31.

vii Furrer, C.J., Magnuson, L. & Suggs, J.W. (2012). Getting them there, keeping them there: Benefits of an extended school day program for high school students. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 17 (3)*, 149-164.

viii Fashola, O.S. (2013). Evaluation of an extended school day program for African American males in the context of single gender schooling and schoolwide reform: A case for REL midwest school calendar approaches – extending the school day for African American males. *Peabody Journal of Education, 88 (4)*, 488-517.

ix Kidron, Y., & Lindsay, J. (2014). The effects of increased learning time on student academic and nonacademic outcomes: Findings from a meta-analytic review (REL 2014-015). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia.