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Popularity Grows Anew for Year-Round Schooling

By **Madeline Will**

When Stiles Simmons, the superintendent of a two-school district outside Lansing, Mich., looked at the data, he realized summer break was hurting his mostly-low-income students, who were losing significant amounts of knowledge in math and falling further and further behind.

"What we found was appalling, and for us to not do anything about it—not to do anything drastically different—would have been negligence on our part," said Mr. Simmons of the Baldwin district.

His solution: Shift the 578-student district to a year-round schedule, with shorter breaks over the course of the year, rather than the traditional longer period each summer.

Schools have implemented such calendars for years—mainly as an attempt to solve overcrowding. Although interest in the practice has ebbed and flowed, year-round schooling appears to be making another surge in public education. The number of public year-round schools increased by 26 percent, to 3,700 from 2006-07 to 2011-12, according to the latest data available from the National Center for Education Statistics.

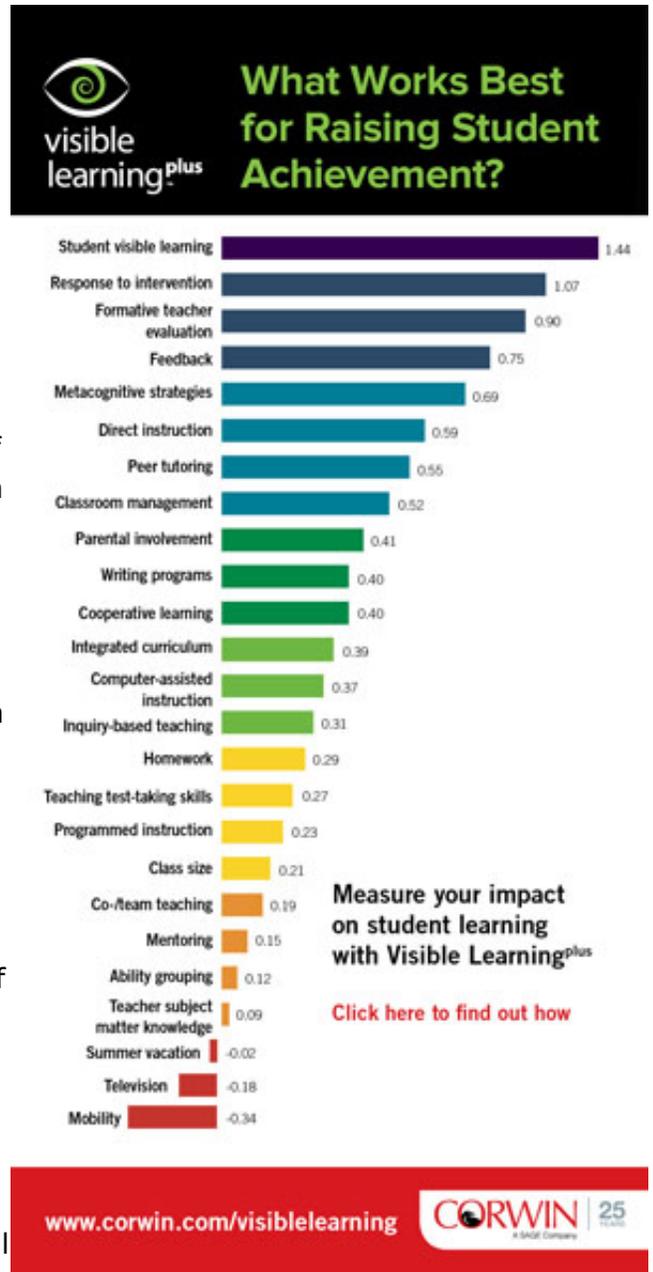
It's getting helped along by recent grant programs in Michigan and Virginia that aim to reduce the amount of time students, particularly those from low-income families, spend out of school during the summer.

Both states recently set aside money in their budgets (to the tune of \$1 million and \$2 million, for Virginia and Michigan respectively) for grants to districts that want to implement a year-round calendar for one or all of their schools. Other states, like West Virginia and California, offer information to their districts regarding year-round calendars.

Meanwhile, U.S. Sen. Mark Kirk, R-Ill., introduced legislation this year that aims to promote a year-round pilot program, particularly for low-performing schools and those serving mostly low-income families.

"I think we're ripe in America to consider doing something a little bit different. We've been working on a model that was established 100 years ago," said David Hornak, the principal of Horizon Elementary School in Michigan and an advocate of year-round schooling. "It's time for all

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of us in the United States to look at how and why we're educating kids, and look at alternatives."

Smaller Breaks

Horizon Elementary has had a year-round calendar for about 20 years. "I'm confident in saying the calendar contributes to a positive school environment and success for all students," Mr. Hornak said.

In a balanced, or year-round, calendar, students have a much shorter summer vacation than in traditional schools. Instead, they have two- to three-week minibreaks interspersed throughout the year. Typically, students still attend school for the same number of days as in a traditional calendar.

Year-round calendars account for 4.1 percent of all public schools in the country, according to the NCES data. In 2012, almost 11 percent of year-round schools were charters.

Almost half of all year-round schools have three-quarters or more of their students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, according to a Congressional Research Service report released in June.

Meeting Needs

Gordon Grant, the principal of Hall Fletcher Elementary School in Asheville, N.C., which started a year-round calendar this year, said the initial testing data after the students—80 percent of whom get free or reduced-price lunch—returned to school in July was encouraging. For example, students' reading foundational skills showed less of a drop after a four-week summer than a 10-week one.

Michigan state Rep. Andy Schor, a Democrat, introduced the initial bill that led to the grant program after hearing from superintendents who said students in at-risk schools were suffering from summer learning loss. But converting a school to have the capacity for a year-round calendar can be expensive.

Grant winners had to commit to three years on the year-round calendar. Five districts received grants from the state that added up to \$2 million, and two more received \$750,000 each from the Michigan Economic Development Corp. In the 2013-14 state budget, the program was open only to districts with high percentages of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

But funding for a second year of grants was scrapped in the 2014-15 budget. Rep. Schor introduced a bill last month that would keep the program open for another year by allocating \$2 million from the state's strategic fund.

Baldwin was one of the districts that received a grant. Superintendent Simmons said he hopes the year-round calendar will strengthen student achievement.

But for his high-poverty district, a year-round calendar has other benefits, he said, such as uninterrupted access to free meals and an on-site health clinic.

"While our kids are out during the summer for 2½ months, we don't know what kind of medical



Fifth grader Amaria Burdine gets a pencil from Phyllis Robertson of Western Carolina University on the first day of school at Hall Fletcher Elementary in Asheville, N.C. Both schools use a year-round calendar.

—Erin Brethauer/The Citizen-Times

treatment they're getting, if any," he said.

In 2012, the Virginia Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission released a report on the **efficacy of year-round schools**. It didn't find evidence that a year-round calendar improved test scores for all students, but did find strong and consistent gains in scores for black students. Hispanic, low-income, and limited-English-proficient students also generally scored better at year-round schools, but not to the same extent.

The report's outcomes led to the state's allocation of money for both planning grants and startup grants to help schools implement a year-round calendar.

'Nothing New'

Halls Fletcher Elementary had used a year-round calendar in the 1990s, but the change didn't last long since it didn't mesh with the traditional calendar, Mr. Grant said.

His advice to administrators planning to switch to a year-round calendar now: Take a full year to plan and prepare, coordinate the calendar with the rest of the district as much as possible, and make sure the staff is fully committed to the idea.

But some parents and educators are strongly against a year-round calendar. Many point to the fact that some schools have tried and dropped a year-round calendar as proof that it is just another educational fad.

"Year-round school is nothing new," said Tina Bruno, the executive director of the **Coalition for a Traditional School Year**, a nonprofit group of parents and educators based in San Antonio that lobbies against early school start dates. "If year-round school was the miracle that we were waiting for, we would have known it 20 years ago."

Research on year-round schooling has had mixed results: Some studies found positive, albeit modest, gains in student achievement, while others saw no difference.

A 2011 study by Barbara Kay Ramos of Simpson College in Iowa found that a year-round calendar made a statistically significant difference in improving math scores.

Parent Complaints

Year-round schools can be a cost-saver if used to ease overcrowding, particularly when schools implement a multitrack system, meaning children are placed on separate tracks, which have staggered vacations so they are never all in the school at the same time.

But many schools aren't equipped with air conditioning to cool them during the hot summer months, and renovations—as well as the additional cooling costs—would be expensive. Ms. Bruno said it's more cost-efficient to direct that money to other academic initiatives, like small-group tutoring.

Also, a year-round calendar is not conducive to high school students who want to take college classes or get a summer job, Ms. Bruno said. It also can make it difficult for teachers to further their education, she said.

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One of the common hesitations from parents about switching to a year-round school is scheduling and child care: What will working parents do when children are home for a few weeks in say, October? And what happens when parents have children at both year-round and traditional schools and their breaks don't align?

Mr. Hornak, the Horizon principal, said he's found parents can better budget for periodic child care than care for three consecutive months: "It's a little easier on the pocketbook when it's spread out over time."

And Charles Ballinger, the executive director emeritus of the **National Association for Year-Round Education**, said camps and child-care agencies will adjust to a year-round school schedule as more change.

Many year-round schools also offer optional intersession classes during breaks, such as remedial classes for struggling students or enrichment activities. And they're ideal for parents needing child care, particularly during breaks not shared by schools' with traditional calendars, Mr. Hornak said.

The Coalition for a Traditional School Year takes its lead from parents who, frustrated with their school's switch to a year-round calendar, find the coalition online and ask for help, Ms. Bruno said.

She said she has talked with parents in Virginia and Michigan who are upset about the grant programs to fund implementation of year-round schools. She added that they have planned education activities for their state legislators in the hope that they will look at alternative ways the money could be spent.

But on the other end of the spectrum, the recent surge of interest in year-round calendars has motivated Mr. Ballinger and Mr. Hornak to revitalize the National Association for Year-Round Education, which is no longer as active as it once was, so it becomes a resource available for administrators considering the switch.

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