



**NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
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NEWS RELEASE

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Center Urges State To Provide Data on Student Performance in Year-Round Schools

The year-round schools movement has mushroomed in North Carolina, with 111 schools now operating in 35 different districts -- the third highest total in the nation. But results are mixed as to whether this experiment with the school calendar delivers better results in the classroom, the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research says in a study released today. Continued expansion of the year-round schools movement may depend upon evaluation of student performance and keeping the calendar optional, the Center says in the latest edition of its magazine, *North Carolina Insight*.

"Our research indicates that year-round schools are very popular with both parents and teachers when they are given a choice of calendars," says *Insight* Editor Mike McLaughlin. "We found some friction, however, when local school officials decided they needed to make a school or district entirely year-round with no other options for students."

To assure that parents have the information they need to make an informed choice, the Center also recommends that the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the State Board of Education publish annual comparative data on student achievement in year-round schools versus similar traditional schools. These data would allow parents to see how well children on the year-round calendar perform on such measures as end-of-grade tests in reading, writing, and math.

"North Carolina has been accused by some of committing random acts of school reform by starting programs like the Basic Education Plan and failing to follow through on them," says McLaughlin. "In this case, a movement is spreading across North Carolina without any initiative from the governor or the legislature. It's a local effort aimed at improving public education. Now it's time for the state to take a role by making comparative data on year-round schooling available to parents and local school officials."

What Is a Year-Round School?

In a year-round school, students typically attend school the usual 180 days, but the calendar is arranged differently. Instead of a summer vacation lasting 10-12 weeks, year-round students attend school in nine-week blocks with breaks of three to five weeks between sessions.

Most year-round schools in North Carolina use either a “*single-track*” or a “*school-within-a-school*” model that offers the year-round option for reasons other than enabling more students to attend a particular school. The “school-within-a-school” model offers both a traditional calendar and a year-round calendar within the same school building. Parents simply choose which calendar they want for their child, so the year-round calendar remains optional. Under a “single-track” model, only the year-round calendar is offered, and all students attend on the same track. Another approach is the *multi-track* schedule, used to relieve overcrowding. Under this model, the student body is divided into four groups, and each attends school on a different schedule, so that a quarter of the student body is always on vacation. In this way, the capacity of a school can be expanded by about a third.

“One local school official compares year-rounders to the Energizer Bunny,” says McLaughlin. “They keep going, and going, and going.”

Additional data may, over time, help establish more definitively whether the year-round approach is a better way to educate. At present, the Center finds the picture to be mixed. To evaluate year-round schools in North Carolina, the Center: reviewed several national studies; examined studies in three North Carolina school districts -- Wake County Public Schools, Rockingham County Public School System, and Mooresville Graded School District; and visited ground-breaking year-round schools in three school districts -- Wake County Public Schools, Newton-Conover City Schools, and the Mooresville Graded School District.

Evaluations of Student Achievement in N.C. and Nationally

The Rockingham County Public School System’s self study showed some evidence of stronger achievement on the year-round calendar. The results of studies in Wake County and Mooresville were inconclusive or mixed. Using data provided by the Mooresville Graded School District, the Center compared end-of-grade test results in reading and math for four groups of students on the traditional calendar and four groups of students on the year-round calendar over a three-year period. This created eight opportunities for comparison, and the year-round students and traditional calendar students outperformed each other an equal number of times. While year-round schools in Wake County have turned in solid and even superior end-of-grade test results compared to other Wake County schools, the results conform with what educators would expect based on the socioeconomic status of students attending these schools.

National reviews of year-round school performance have been similarly mixed. A review of 32 studies completed over a 20-year period found a narrow edge in achievement for students on the year-round calendar. “Overall, there appears to be a slight but not overwhelming advantage for year-round students in learning basic content,” concluded the authors of the report by the N.C. Educational Policy Research Center in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s School of Education. Still, the study by the now-defunct research center added: “More and better research and evaluation studies will be needed before the picture becomes clear enough to describe it with absolute certainty.”

An earlier review by Phi Delta Kappa, an honorary education fraternity, concluded: “Despite claims that long summer vacations lead to lessened academic achievement, year-round schools are not associated with great leaps in academic achievement.... If a district is looking to show major increases in standardized tests, year-round schools are not the answer.”

Despite this less-than-clear research picture regarding student performance, North Carolina educators increasingly are turning to the year-round calendar. Nearly one-third of the state’s 118 school districts now offer at least one year-round school, and the numbers have grown by leaps and bounds since the state’s first year-round school opened in Wake County in 1989 with 275 students. The numbers include 88 elementary schools, 16 middle schools, five high schools, one special education school, and one hospital school -- a total of 111 schools. Most year-round schools are in the industrialized Piedmont. There are fewer year-round schools in the mountains and in Eastern North Carolina.

Arguments For Year-Round Schools

Advocates claim the year-round model benefits students because they’re never away from school long enough to forget what they’ve learned. Thus, teachers spend less time reviewing materials after the summer break. In addition, the calendar is thought to benefit students who fall behind in their classes because they don’t have to wait until the end of the year to get help. Supporters also claim that the calendar results in less student and teacher burnout due to more frequent breaks. “We’re finding we can keep kids focused for nine weeks,” says Laura Beth Taylor, principal at Cape Lookout High in Morehead City, which implemented the year-round calendar for the 1996-97 school year. “They work like their pants are on fire, knowing they’re going to get a break.”

Some advocates also claim superior academic results, although the Center found results of state and national studies of academic performance on the year-round calendar to be mixed or inconclusive. These results are partly due to difficulties inherent in designing studies that fully account for differences in socioeconomic status and student abilities.

The opportunity to use time between sessions to help students who have fallen behind in their studies is perhaps the key advantage cited by advocates of the year-round calendar. In this way, the length of North Carolina’s 180-day school year can be increased by as many as 20 days. While traditional summer school also can give students extra help, year-round students get the help sooner and without the stigma associated with summer school.

Still, the year-round calendar should not be confused with a true extended-year calendar in which *all* students attend for more than the state-mandated 180 days. One such school, Brooks Global Studies Magnet in Greensboro, requires students to attend school for 210 days -- an additional six weeks compared to the traditional calendar. The result, says Principal Tony Meachum, has been documented overall gains in reading and general knowledge, and strong gains in math for children from low- and middle socioeconomic-status households.

The Costs of Year-Round Versus Traditional Calendar Schools

Studies also have been mixed on whether year-round schools that use the calendar to serve more students save money in the long run through reduced school construction costs. Most North Carolina school systems do not use the calendar for this purpose. By using multi-track scheduling, savings can be realized through: reduced capital outlay for new schools; reduced debt service for new construction; cost savings for such items as books and furniture that can be shared by students; and savings from not having to hire additional personnel -- from principals to custodians -- who would be needed to staff new buildings. On the other hand, certain factors would tend to increase costs for year-round schools. These include: the high costs of starting the program; higher costs for utilities such as air conditioning during the summer; increased maintenance costs due to extra use of the building; and extra money for remedial teaching during intercessions.

The Wake County Public School System is the only school system in the state using a multi-track calendar to increase the number of students an existing school can serve and thus relieve school overcrowding. This is achieved by dividing the student body into four groups that attend on separate calendars or "tracks." One group of students is always on vacation, and the school building can thus accommodate up to a third more students. The Wake County year-round schools are calendar magnets, meaning parents and students who prefer the year-round calendar can choose this option. Others are not forced to attend. The nine Wake County schools operate near capacity, and one Wake County educator estimates year-round schools already have saved the county \$7 million in construction costs.

Arguments Against Year-Round Schools

Critics of the calendar claim it interferes with family traditions over the long summer break, may draw resources away from traditional calendar schools even if optional, and interferes with extracurricular activities and summer jobs for older students. Year-round schools also have drawn fire from amusement parks, summer camps, and other interests that view the revised calendar as a threat -- both in terms of their market and their labor pool of high-school age students. Moreover, critics charge, the year-round calendar is being embraced without a resulting boost in academic performance that would make the change seem worthwhile.

Where the school-within-a-school model has been implemented, friction between the two calendars has sometimes led to the curtailment of the year-round experiment when the two programs get out of balance. "It's like taking a house and dividing it down the middle," says Sabine Owen, a year-round school foe and parent who helped block a year-round school-within-a-school in Davidson County. "The traditional kids are being slighted to make the year-round program work." Year-round school-within-a-school programs at Blowing Rock Elementary School and North Asheboro Middle School are among those that have been eliminated, although principals at these schools remain supportive of the calendar.

Nationally, the controversy has centered more on systems where year-round schools have been mandated to relieve overcrowding. Parental backlash has ended or scaled back year-round

experiments in such places as Los Angeles, Calif., Albuquerque, N.M., and Orange County, Fla. The Center found criticism in North Carolina muted compared to some other states, largely because local education officials here have taken pains to maintain choice. Only one school system in the state has mandated year-round schools for all students -- the Newton-Conover City Schools in Catawba County.

Teacher and Student Morale and Parental Support

Despite some instances of controversy, the Center found student and teacher morale to be high, particularly in optional year-round schools. Surveys of parents by local school officials also indicate strong support for year-round schools, both when administrators are exploring whether to implement the calendar and after actual start-up. For example, five elementary schools offer year-round programs in Rockingham County. In a parent survey 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."

The Center's research on year-round schools will be featured in a joint production of "Solutions," a half-hour public affairs program to broadcast by WTVD-11 Television in Durham. The show, to be co-hosted by Miriam Thomas and Larry Stogner, will air at 7 p.m. on Saturday, May 31, and at 10 a.m. on Sunday, June 1.

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit corporation created to study public issues facing North Carolina and to evaluate state government programs. The Center's study of year-round schools in North Carolina was supported by grants from The Broyhill Family Foundation of Lenoir, The Hillsdale Fund and Jefferson-Pilot Foundation of Greensboro, the Philip Van Every Foundation of Charlotte, and the Weyerhaeuser Company Foundation of New Bern, N.C., and Tacoma, Washington. The Center is supported in part by grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem. Additional funding comes from 13 private foundations, 190 corporate contributors, and almost 1,000 individual and organizational members. In addition to publishing *North Carolina Insight*, the Center issues book-length research reports and publishes biennial rankings of legislators' effectiveness. Recent studies by the N.C. Center have examined the powers of governors, the changing relationship between state and local governments, state-owned railroads, and how the state's public universities evaluate and reward teaching.

Copies of *North Carolina Insight* containing the Center's research on year-round schools in North Carolina are available for \$11.50, which includes tax, postage, and handling. To order, write the Center at P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602, call (919) 832-2839, fax (919) 832-2847, or order through the Center's Website at <http://www.nando.net/insider/nccppr>.

For more information on year-round schools in North Carolina, contact Mike McLaughlin, editor of *North Carolina Insight*, at the Center at (919) 832-2839.

**Table 1. Counties with Year-Round Schools in North Carolina and
Number of Year-Round Schools in Each County, 1996-97**

County	Number of year-round schools	School districts in county with year-round schools
Alamance	1	1
Buncombe	3	2
Cabarrus	1	1
Caldwell	3	1
Carteret	2	1
Catawba	16	2
Craven	1	1
Cumberland	2	2
Chowan	3	1
Davidson	2	1
Durham	4	1
Edgecombe	1	1
Forsyth	7	1
Guilford	3	1
Henderson	3*	1
Hoke	3	1
Iredell	7	1
Lincoln	1	1
McDowell	1	1
Mecklenburg	3	1
Nash	6	1
New Hanover	5	1
Northampton	2	1
Orange	1	1
Pender	1	1
Randolph	3	1
Robeson	1	1
Rockingham	7	1
Rowan	2	1
Scotland	4	1
Union	3	1
Wake	9	1
Total=32 of 100 counties	111 schools (43,329 students)	35 school districts

* The Henderson County Board of Education has voted to return to a traditional calendar format for two of its three year-round schools for the 1997-98 school year.

Source: N.C. Department of Public Instruction

Key Arguments For and Against Year-Round Calendar for Schools

Pros of the Year-Round Calendar

1. More frequent breaks keep students refreshed and ready to learn.
2. Remediation sessions during breaks give students who fall behind the chance to catch up on their studies without waiting for summer school.
3. One week remediation programs offered during the time off between sessions provide the opportunity for lengthening the school year by as many as 20 days for the students who need it most.
4. Optional enrichment sessions give students the opportunity for additional learning experiences outside the classroom setting.
5. Proponents argue that with shorter summer breaks, students forget fewer of their lessons, allowing teachers to spend less time reviewing when school reconvenes in the fall.
6. Teachers say the shorter school sessions (typically 45 days, followed by a break of three to five weeks) allow them to incorporate more time for planning and help prevent teacher and student burnout.
7. Year-round schools may boost student attendance and reduce vandalism of school property.
8. Through multi-track scheduling in which a quarter of the student body is on break at any given time, the year-round calendar can be used to expand the capacity of an existing school, thus saving money on construction costs.
9. If offered on an optional basis, year-round schools provide a choice for parents who may find the calendar provides a better match for their work schedules.

Cons of the Year-Round Calendar

1. The jury is still out on whether students on the year-round calendar outperform their peers on the traditional calendar on standardized tests.
2. Year-round schools, if mandatory, may interfere with family traditions over the longer summer break offered under the traditional calendar.
3. Some experts dispute the claims of year-round-school advocates that students forget much of what they learn over the summer, arguing instead that more breaks mean more memory loss.
4. Principals offering both year-round and traditional calendars at the same school—a popular choice in North Carolina—must juggle resources to make both calendars work.
5. Administrative and other non-classroom personnel at year-round schools have less “down time” when students don’t attend.
6. Year-round schools may carry slightly higher operating costs and place greater stress on school facilities. Many school systems do not choose to offset this by using the calendar to expand the capacity of existing buildings.
7. At the high-school level, the year-round schedule may interfere with some extracurricular activities and with summer jobs. In addition, the high school curriculum is more varied, which may make it harder to schedule classes so that all students have the opportunity to take them.
8. *Mandated* year-round schools may arouse the ire of parents, dividing communities and creating conflict for local school officials.
9. Seasonal amusement parks, summer camps, and other institutions dependent on summer business may feel threatened by a school schedule that could erode their work force or customer base.

**Table 4. Percentage of Students Scoring at Grade Level
or Above on the End-of-Grade Test,
Wake County Public School System, 1993-1995,
Year-Round vs. Average for County Elementary Schools**

Year-Round School	1993 Reading Score (%)	1995 Reading Score (%)	Increase or Decrease in % Passing	1993 Math Score (%)	1995 Math Score (%)	Increase or Decrease in % Passing
Durant Elem.	86	86	0	81	88	7
Morrisville Elem.	91	92	1	91	90	-1
West Lake Elem.	90	89	-1	89	85	-4
County Elementary School Average	74	80	6	72	77	5

Students scoring at grade level or above (Levels III and IV) on the End-of-Grade Test are considered to have shown sufficient mastery of course material to advance to the next grade.

Source: Wake County Public Schools, "Are WCPSS Multi-Track Year-Round Schools Effective?" March 1996.

**Table 6. Percent of Students Scoring at
Grade Level or Above on End-of-Grade Tests,
Mooresville Graded School District, 1993-1995,
Year-Round vs. Traditional**

Group	Grades Tracked	Calendar	1993 Reading, % Passing	1995 Reading % Passing	Increase or Decrease in % Passing	1993 Math, % Passing	1995 Math, % Passing	Increase or Decrease in % Passing
1	3-5	Year-Round	69.7	71.4	1.7	75.6	67.7	-7.9
		Traditional	66.2	75.2	9.0	70.0	70.8	0.8
2	4-6	Year-Round	69.9	70.5	0.6	68.7	65.3	-3.4
		Traditional	66.7	76.2	9.5	65.3	73.5	8.2
3	5-7	Year-Round	69.9	73.5	3.6	65.5	76.5	11.0
		Traditional	64.0	71.3	7.3	62.0	66.4	4.4
4	6-8	Year-Round	76.1	84.1	8.0	69.0	79.7	10.7
		Traditional	62.7	76.5	13.8	65.5	77.1	11.6

 = Lighter areas represent groups that outperformed peers on the other calendar.

Number of times outperformed peers on other calendar: Year-Round = 4
Traditional = 4

Students who score at Levels III and IV on the end-of-grade test are considered to have shown consistent mastery of grade-level subject matter and skills. They are thought to be prepared to advance to the next grade level.

Data provided by Mooresville Graded School District.