

**Extended Year or Extended Headaches:
Does an Extended Year Calendar Work to Target Student Deficits or Foster
Academic Fatigue?**

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Rationale

In an educational system where the measure of a student's preparedness for the future, as well as their countries global competitiveness is increasingly viewed solely through the lens of standardized test scores, districts are scrambling to come up with ways to address achievement gaps that tend to leave socio-economically disadvantaged students at, well...a disadvantage. In DCPS' effort to close this gap, ten elementary and middle schools were selected to transition to a model, piloted initially, by Raymond Education Campus in 2015, which would extend the school year by 20 days and shortening the summer break.

School Year 2016-2017, began with 11 DC public schools following an Extended School Year Model. These schools were Garfield ES (Ward 8), H.D. Cooke ES (Ward 1), Hart MS (Ward 8), Hendley ES (Ward 8), Johnson MS (Ward 8), Kelly Miller MS (Ward 7), King ES (Ward 8), Randle Highlands ES (Ward 7), Raymond Education Campus (Ward 4), Thomas ES (Ward 7), and Turner ES (Ward 8). This Extended Year Model sought to extend the traditional 180-day school year by adding 20 additional instructional days for students via a mandatory intersession which would be attached to the winter or spring breaks and summer enrichment taking place between June and July. The purpose for adapting this model was to provide schools with populations that were underperforming on achievement tests, more instructional time to work on the skills needed to reach proficiency; while also helping to reduce the effects of the "summer slide" by shortening the amount of time these students spent out of school for summer break.

According to the DCPS website, Extended Year schools were selected, "based on interest from the community (including from among both students and parents), and strong leadership in each school;" no mention is made, however, of DCPS ever consulting with teachers. Based on my experience and those of colleagues in other extended year schools, teachers were never consulted prior to their schools' decision to transition to the extended year model, instead they were told this was the direction their school would be going in and asked if they would be willing to stay on for the transition. Many agreed to stay because they thought voicing concerns or seeking to transfer to traditional year schools might adversely affect their careers within DCPS; not because they believed this model would best address the needs of students.

Nationally, the extended-year model has been adapted by several school districts. For some this model has been successful, others not so much. My research explores the effectiveness of the extended year model in general, as well as DCPS teachers opinions of how well this model is working in their schools.

Literature Review

“Public schools across the nation...struggle with closing achievement gaps and the challenge becomes even greater for schools with economically disadvantaged and high minority populations. Educators continue to seek solutions to increase student academic achievement while they ensure the achievement gap between students of high and low socioeconomic status does not continue to widen,” (Dwight, 2010).

Traditionally, “most states in the U.S. require that schools maintain 180 days of instruction over an academic year,” (Baxter, 2012). When schools are not meeting their growth goals or benchmarks districts must begin dissecting the problem as well determining potential solutions. For many school districts the answer has been to adapt an extended school year model, which extends the year by 20 days or more. This is done by spreading out the school year and staggering breaks so students are in school almost every month of the year, with short breaks every 9-11 weeks. The purpose behind this is to reduce summer learning loss/summer slide. “Summer learning loss is the loss of academic skills and knowledge over the course of the summer vacation,” (Cooper et al, 2003).

As can be imagined, not everyone supports an extended year model or believes it effectively speaks to the real issues surrounding achievement gap concerns. Acknowledging that a learning slide can take place; not just during the summer but as quickly as one week if a student hasn't mastered a skill or feels disengaged, Tina Bruno, executive director of the Coalition for a Traditional School Calendar, believes that is where parents come in. Bruno says, “it is imperative to have parental involvement and parental responsibility.” Parents are a key factor in helping students to master skills and ensure they are engaged and/or receiving any additional supports needed; simply just relying on schools takes onus away from the important role parents play.

According to the Center for Public Education's director, Patte Barth; “It makes sense that more time is going to equate to more learning, but then you have to equate that to more professional development for teachers-will that get more bang for the buck? Teachers and instruction are still the most important factor more so than time.” To support Barth's claim, she referenced a study the center conducted which found that some nations who outperform the U.S. academically such as Finland and India require less school time than our traditional year model does (Associated Press, 2013).

Finally, a 2007 study by Ohio State University sociologist Paul von Hippel found virtually no difference in the academic gains between students who followed a traditional calendar or those with an extended year.

Data Methodology

The question of whether or not the extended year model was the best option for DCPS students and teachers, with respect to closing the achievement gap, is what drove my research. Teachers are at the crux of whatever the solution may be, however, they were not consulted in a meaningful way as to whether they thought an extended day would truly be beneficial to students or how it would impact them as educators.

The survey data I collected came from 38 DCPS extended year teachers working at Hart MS, Johnson MS, Kelly Miller MS and Raymond Education campus. The survey

was sent via google forms and was anonymous in efforts to allow teachers to feel comfortable in sharing their views.

The extended year survey asked teachers questions gauging the models effectiveness, execution and how it has impacted their professional growth as well as mental well-being. There was also space for teachers to leave any recommendations they had for improving the model.

Data Analysis

- Only 29% of teachers felt prepared for the beginning of SY 17-18
- 58% of teachers said they did not have access to the curriculum and other resources they needed to be effective at the beginning of SY 17-18
- Over 60% of teachers felt the two-week professional development which occurred at the beginning of SY 17-18 was not purposeful or helpful in preparing them for the year.
- 79% of teachers said they did *NOT* spend *LESS* time re-teaching skills at the beginning of SY 17-18 than they would have in a traditional year school
- 52% of teachers disagreed that the additional month of school (June-July 2016) increased student proficiency in their subject
- 63% of teachers felt the intersessions effectively targeted skills students needed to work on
- 65% of teachers acknowledged attendance was low at the beginning of SY 17-18
- The majority of teachers said the intersessions were well attended but that the summer session (June-July 2016) was not

- 42% of teachers felt the culture of their school had shifted in a negative direction due to the extended year and only 8% felt parental involvement had increased
- 62% of teachers said they felt their students intrinsic motivation remained the same as opposed to increasing or decreasing as the extended school year progressed
- 59% of teachers felt their students exhibited more mental fatigue then they would during a traditional school year
- 55% of teachers stated their level of stress increased with an extended year calendar and because of that 53% said they have needed to take more mental health days
- 74% of teachers typically used their summer breaks to enroll in professional development courses, that were specific to their areas of interest and aligned with their educational career goals but due to the extended year they are relying on the district led PD's that don't necessarily help to enrich their craft.
- Overall, 69% of teachers polled did not think the extended year model was successful

Recommendations

DCPS, in determining the calendar for what the extended year would look like did not follow a "traditional" model. For many in extended year schools, students go for 9-11 weeks then have a 2-3 week break which typically coincides with the end of the semester. DCPS provides very few breaks in their calendar, thus very little time for teachers to recalibrate. The opportunity for teachers to recharge is just as important as the drive to push students towards proficiency. The fact that over half of the teachers polled acknowledged they felt more stressed and needed to take more days off to avoid burnout is a testament to the need for a more balanced calendar should the extended year model continue.

When teachers were asked for alternatives to the extended year model in its current iteration these were some suggestions:

- 6-8 weeks on with 2 weeks off for everyone
- Follow a traditional model of 9 weeks on and 3 weeks off
- Get rid of it and incorporate an extended day instead
- Regular school year with students who are not progressing receiving interventions during a longer day and/or Saturday school
- Provide summer bridge programs that teachers can apply to work for extra pay
- Have outside programs come into schools to provide intersession and summer enrichment opportunities

Based on the survey conducted, all teachers are committed to addressing the needs of the students. They understand the deficits many of their students have and know that additional time on task can be helpful. However, with the calendar DCPS has chosen to institute, the teachers do not feel their students are truly benefiting because both parties are burned out. As one teacher said, "I know we are about educating kids, but if teachers are burned out quality education will not be had."

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