

**JIM DOLSON,  
INNA MOLITORIS  
(Jackson, USA)**

## **DEMANDS AND CHALLENGES OF TRADITIONAL SCHOOL CALENDAR TRANSFORMATION**

*Demands and Challenges of Traditional School Calendar Transformation* The purpose of this paper is to share with our Russian colleagues the current discourse among practitioners and researchers about school calendar in the United State of America.

*This case study paper will communicate how Jackson Christian School (JCS) and local public schools, the Intermediate School District (ISD), located in Jackson, Michigan, make decisions regarding a common balanced calendar.*

*Scholarly research on school time as adjustable resource is also presented in this study.*

*Key words: school, year-round calendar, balanced calendar*

In 1994, the United States National Education Commission on Time and Learning in its report stated that learning in America is “a prisoner of time” (Prisoners of Time, n.d.). That report raised the issue of necessity to adjust traditional school calendar to the modern economic and social reality. It is obvious that the school calendar governs how families organize their lives, how administrators oversee their schools, and how students are taught through the curriculum. Contradictions and mismatch of the organization of school year and current life style of most people in the knowledge-based economy prevents schools in the USA to prepare a competitive generation of future workforce.

Traditional school calendar was built during the agricultural era, when most Americans worked on farms. Public education at that time required people to possess basic learning abilities and skills in order to be employed. In today’s world, the global economy demands more advanced education and the ability to constantly learn without any “breaks” (White, 1999). The new time offers the opportunity to create an education system geared to the demands of current situation in the world education and job market. In the school of the future, organization of learning must be reconsidered. It is not a secret from our international counterparts that achievements of American school children fall behind many other countries. According to research, students in Japan, France, and Germany allocate twice as much time in core academics as students in the United States. For example, over a four-year period, American students spent 1,406 hours in academic time compared to 3,170, 3,260, and 3,628 required hours for students in Japan, France, and Germany, respectively (Prisoners of Time, n.d.).

There are some of the typical school features related to traditional school calendar listed below:

- Most schools in the United States open and close their doors at fixed times in the morning and early afternoon. Typical time what a school has its door opened for students is from 7:30 a.m. through 3:00 p.m.;
- With few exceptions, the school year lasts nine months, beginning in late summer (mid-August) and ending in late spring (May).
- Schools typically offer a six-period day, with 5-6 hours of classroom time a day.
- Regardless of complexity/simplicity of the school subject and no matter how well or poorly students comprehend the material, the national average is 51 minutes per class period.
- According to the Council of Chief State School Officers, school attendance is required for 180 days a year. Several states permit school terms of 175 days or less.
- Staff salary increases are typically tied the number of hours and years at school.

Public educators in the United States continue to seek innovative methods to improve education. Many American researchers believe that time spending for formal and informal learning must become an adjustable resource. There are two strategies are used by schools that see time as an adjustable resource: (1) a balanced calendar and (2) a “year-round school” (YRS) (Silva, 2007). The first strategy extends the instructional time in schools by minutes, hours, or even days (Evans & Bechtel, 1997, p.3; Silva, 2007, p.4). This strategy encourages lengthening the school day, or adding days to the calendar beyond the traditional 180-day calendar. The other strategy, “year-round-school”, generates calendars referred to as “modified calendars or balanced

calendars” (Silva, 2007, p. 7). Worthen and Zsiray (1994) define year-round education as “reorganization of the school calendar into several instructional blocks, interspersed with shorter and more frequent vacation breaks than is true of the traditional calendar” (p.6). In other words, a balanced calendar redistributes the 180 days of required instructional days across a 12-month calendar instead of the traditional 9-month calendar.

The year-round school calendar definitions developed by these researchers are very similar to the balanced calendar definition offered by local educational leaders in Michigan. Scholarly literature discusses both advantages and disadvantages associated with year-round education. However, this research will not provide exhaustive evidence on the topic; rather, the intent is to bring a more complete discussion of the balanced calendar to the forefront.

Some of the perceived advantages are: improved achievement, improved teacher and student attendance, reduction in discipline problems, reduction in teacher stress, increased motivation among teachers and students after returning refreshed from more frequent breaks, and increased availability of enrichment opportunities during intersessions (Brekke, 1992). Studies suggest high parental approval for year-round calendars because of a positive change in their children’s attitudes. The research indicated that teachers become more accustomed to the year-round teaching concept as they gain experience in a year-round calendar school. The literature asserts that the student dropout rate decreases and student attendance increases. Research found that 82 percent of students supported a year-round calendar because of reduction in boredom, and the year-round calendar helped students retain more information. Year-round education may help economically disadvantaged students, low-level readers, and students who are English deficient (White, 1993).

Anticipated disadvantages include: increased administrator burn-out, scheduling conflicts between family vacations and school or community activities, difficulty in arranging daycare, having siblings on different attendance schedules, difficulty in scheduling teacher in-service days, and increased costs of operation (Herman, 1991). According to several researchers, quantitative studies attempting to correlate year-round schooling to increase attendance (Palmer & Bemis, 1999; Sexton, 2003) and decrease suspensions (Sexton, 2003; Crow and Johnson, 2010) fall short of statistical significance. Sexton (2003) stated that “The data... yielded no statistically significant difference in the year round education and traditional education students’ first time placement in... [suspensions]” (p. 79). Implementing year-round schools did not reduce the first-time suspensions within the student body. The greatest resistance comes from teachers. Many teachers assume they must work 365 days in a year-round school and fear they will never have any free time. Studies show that changing to a balanced calendar can create negative effects on professional development for teachers (Silva, 2007; Kneese, 2000b).

Jackson Christian School is one of many schools located throughout Jackson County, Michigan. There are twelve public school districts, three public charter schools, and four private schools in Jackson County. Jackson Christian School teaches students from a Biblical worldview perspective without encroachment from the state of Michigan or the federal government.

JCS enrolls students from all twelve school districts and even a few from outside of Jackson County. Demographically, the school population mimics county demographics. Economically, the majority of school families are middle class, but 9% of the families enrolled at the school live at, or below, the national poverty line. Denominationally, the school enrolls families from 45 different local churches representing various Christian theologies.

From an academic perspective, most families in the school community point their children toward a four-year university or some variation of a post-secondary education. Each year, about 90% of graduating seniors enroll in college. The balance of the student population usually begins working careers, or attends a trade school.

JCS students participate in extra-curricular activities such as choir, music, art, drama, and many play multiple sports throughout the school year. Many students also compete in recreational youth leagues and other forms of non-school competitions. As important, these same students stay involved in a local church, participate in church youth events, and attend family events.

The local public school leadership, the Intermediate School District, is gathering community input for building consensus on the creation of a common balanced calendar. Local school boards will vote later in 2015 regarding adoption of a common calendar. If approved, then all public schools in Jackson County would adopt the same balanced calendar.

The current calendaring strategy already employed by JCS does not create a calendar perfectly aligned with the ISD calendar. For example, JCS students usually complete school year sometime the first week of June, while public school students are typically not done until the second week of June. Moreover, the school does not take the same professional development days (i.e., in-service) and does not follow the same report card distribution dates. Other than major holidays, there are few overlaps between JCS's and the ISD's calendars.

Based on existing research, it is suggested to local educational leaders to be realistic in their expectations about the improvements expected with a calendar change given the weak statistical correlation between a balanced calendar and academic improvement. A second caution is for parents with lower socio-economic status. These parents should be wary of promises for scholastic improvements in their children unless the district is intentional in designing and delivering services that take advantage of the re-distributed schedule.

One of the time slots available to deliver additional academic services in the balanced calendar model is during the intersession. Silva (2007) defines the term intersession as "programs during the breaks [vacations] for students who want to catch up or get ahead" (p. 7). According to the academic research, intersessions allow an opportunity for low performing students to close the achievement gap throughout the school year (Kneese, 2000a). By spreading out the 180-day schedule, vacation breaks throughout the school year allow time for interventions and academic programs to close achievement gaps.

However, closing the achievement gap by using the designed-in breaks as time to deliver interventions, or remedial instruction, is not a panacea. The Mid-Continental Regional Educational Lab (Lauer et al., 2004) found that delivering academic content to close the achievement gap was as effective whether it was delivered in school, in the summer, or during other breaks. In other words, the most important aspect of improvement *is not when* an intervention happens, but that the intervention is *intentionally targeting* needy students. Therefore, similar to reducing the losses of knowledge experienced over the summer, academic improvements do not happen simply because the instructional time is year-round. Educational leaders must be intentional in the design and delivery of programs to specific students during the intersession.

Parents in Jackson County should be cautious in believing there will be vast improvement in attendance and behavior patterns related to the implementation of a balanced calendar. The research on the year round calendar also highlights challenges related to scheduling and delivering teacher professional development. In a traditional calendar, teachers have the typical summer break open for a number of personal and professional activities. Silva (2007) points out that, "Teachers...rely on this time to take professional development courses" (p. 9). Supporting evidence from Kneese (2000b) indicates that teachers often use their extended summer breaks to take professional development courses needed to renew or expand certifications. Unless planning and coordinating professional development is a priority, teachers in Jackson County may not have equal opportunity during the traditional summer break to attend courses with their peers around the state.

In summary, implementing the balanced calendar may not provide the purported benefits when the entire knowledge base of existing academic research is considered. JCS's administration will continue to employ a strategy to create a calendar that may not always perfectly align with the ISD. If the local public schools and the ISD approve and publish a balanced calendar, JCS will compare that calendar to its own calendar.

### References

1. Brekke, N. (1992), Year-round schools: An efficient and effective use of resources. *School Business Affairs*, pp. 27-37.
2. Crow, K., & Johnson, D. (2013). A comparison of achievement and attendance in schools. *Journal of Border Educational Research*, 8(1).
3. Evans, W., & Bechtel, D. (1997). Extended school day/year programs: A research synthesis. *Spotlight on student success*. s retrieved from the ERIC database on February 9, 2015 at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED461695.pdf>

4. Herman, J. 1991. «Novel approaches to relieve overcrowding: The effects of concept 6 year-round schools.» *Urban Education*, 26:2, 195-213.
5. Kneese, C. (2000a). *Year-round learning: A research synthesis relating to student achievement*. San Diego, CA: National Association for Year-Round Education.
6. Kneese, C. (2000b). *Teaching in year-round schools*. As retrieved from the ERIC database on February 9, 2015 at <http://ericae.net/edo/ed449123.htm>
7. Lauer, P.A., Akiba, M., Wilkerson, S.B., Apthorp, H.S., Snow D., & Martin Glenn, M. (2004). *The effectiveness of out-of-school-time strategies in assisting low-achieving students in reading and mathematics: A research synthesis*. As retrieved from Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning on February 27, 2015 at [http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/SchoolImprovementReform/5032RR\\_RSOSTeffectiveness.pdf](http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/SchoolImprovementReform/5032RR_RSOSTeffectiveness.pdf)
8. McMillen, B.J. (2001). *A statewide evaluation of academic achievement in year-round schools*. *The Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 95, No. 2 (Nov. - Dec., 2001), pp. 67-74.
9. Palmer, E.A., & Bemis, A.E. (1999). *Year-round education*. *Gedownloadop*, 28, 05-10.
10. *Prisoners of Time* (n.d.). The National Education Commission on Time and Learning report retrieved July 30, 2015 from <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/PrisonersOfTime/Prisoners.html>.
11. Sexton, M.B. (2003). *A case study of the effect of year round education on attendance, academic performance, and behavior patterns*. As retrieved from the VTech Works Database on February 27, 2015 from <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/27118>
12. Silva, E. (2007). *On the clock: Rethinking the way schools use time*. As retrieved from the Broad Education website on February 27, 2015 at <http://m.broadeducation.org/asset/1128-ontheclock.pdf>
13. White, W. (1993). *Educational benefits in year-round high schools*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for Year-Round Education. Las Vegas, NV, February 1993. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 359 660.
14. Worthen, B.R., & Zsiray Jr, S.W. (1994). *What twenty years of educational studies reveal about year-round education*. As retrieved from the ERIC database on February 27, 2015 at <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED373413>
15. Wu, A.D., & Stone, J.E. (2010). *Does year round schooling affect the outcome and growth of California's API scores*. *Journal of Educational Research & Policy Studies*, 10(1), 79-97. As retrieved on February 27, 2015 from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ930166.pdf>



### ***Требования и проблемы изменения традиционного календаря учебного года***

*Рассматривается опыт школы Джексон Кристиан и государственных школ, расположенных в Джексоне, штат Мичиган, касаемый принятия решений единого рационально составленного календаря; а также характеризуются научные исследования школьного времени как источника информации.*

**Ключевые слова:** *школа, календарь на учебный год, рационально составленный календарь.*