Middle School Extended-Year Proposal: Theory and Practice

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The California State University Institute for Education Reform

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Introduction

The Middle School Extended-Year Proposal

Out of the several education initiatives put forth in Governor Gray Davis' budget proposal for 2001-02, his plan to provide longer instructional time for middle school students is emerging as the most controversial, prompting vigorous discussion by policy makers, educators, parents and students. Everyone seems to have an opinion, but facts that support one side or the other are often sketchy at best. There are no completely comparable situations to provide a credible indicator of how well extending the school year will work for this population. For example, Japan and other countries have longer school years than the United States does, but they also have different cultures and structure the use of daily school time differently. Some American schools have experimented with adding days, but none has surfaced that has increased the calendar to the extent envisioned by the governor or that is specifically targeted at middle school students.

The middle school extended-year proposal, which is meant to be phased in over three years at a potential cost of more than $1 billion, is designed to be both voluntary and flexible for districts. The key components are:

- An additional 30 days of instruction (six calendar weeks) for a total of 210 instructional days are added to seventh and eighth grade, with the option of also extending the year for sixth or ninth grade depending on how the middle school is configured.
- $770 per student is provided to the district to cover the increased costs for the extended-year program.
- A waiver may be granted to schools with facility limitations (e.g., multi-track year-round schools) to allow the use of the funding to lengthen school days or provide a combination of more days and longer days.
- A requirement that participating schools have textbooks aligned to California's standards.

While the governor's proposal is innovative in both its calendar breadth and limited target population, many reform efforts over the years have focused on the issue of time. In 1983, the benchmark *Nation at Risk* report brought higher standards and rigorous accountability to the forefront of the education debate. But the report also talked about the time that children spend in school and the potential benefits of lengthening the academic year. In California that same year, a major education reform law added five days to what was then a 175-day school calendar. In more recent years, many states have invested more resources in summer school and after-school programs.

The strong undercurrent that runs counter to efforts to lengthen the school year comes from the concern of many about the potential of student and teacher burnout and the visceral reaction of others who cherish long school-free summers. For them, school has always been nine months long and a much shorter vacation raises the specter of robbing students of their childhood. On the other side are many who believe more time on task can improve student academic performance and those who are concerned about the ability of the present system to equip children to meet the increasing educational demands of the modern job market. With interest in the issue of time highlighted by the governor's proposal, it is important to separate emotion from fact and examine the research that is available.

January 26, 2001 Seminar

On January 26, 2001, the California Education Policy Seminar and the California State University Institute for Education Reform sponsored a discussion on the middle school extended-year proposal. More than 50 educators, state policy makers and education researchers attended the session.

The seminar began with a presentation by Dr. Harris Cooper, professor of psychology at the University of Missouri and an expert on school calendar issues, including the effects of summer vacation on student achievement scores. The second presentation was conducted by William G. Studt, superintendent for the Oxnard Union High School District, and Dr. Gary Davis, assistant superintendent for educational services in the district. The district recently completed a pilot project that lengthened the high school calendar by 15 school days. The seminar included question-and-answer sessions after each presentation.

This report documents the proceedings at the seminar. The two presentations are summarized along with some of the question-and-answer exchanges.

(Comments made by individuals are summarized without quotation. All text should be regarded as paraphrasing and/or synthesizing what was actually said, and not as direct quotes attributable to the presenters or other participants.)

Presentation of Dr. Harris Cooper

Dr. Harris Cooper is the chair of the Department of Psychological Sciences at the University of Missouri and is a recognized expert on homework, alternative school calendars and summer school. The author of Synthesizing Research: A Guide for Literature Reviews *and co-editor of the* Handbook of Research Synthesis, *Cooper is an authority on all phases of research synthesis. Cooper received his Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Connecticut in 1975 and was a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard University. He has taught at the University of Missouri since 1977. Cooper's presentation is based on "The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A Narrative and Meta-Analytic Review," an article he co-authored for the Fall 1996* Review of Educational Research.

The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores

As a researcher methodologist and researcher of the social psychology of education for 25 years, and as a former school board member married to a third grade teacher, my interest has long been centered on the interface between families and schools. In an enormous number of instances, the conflicts that arise between parents and education institutions revolve around time and how school interferes with family life. The length of the school day, when it starts and stops, vacation conflicts, after-school arrangements, transportation problems – many of the issues have to do with how a historically rooted approach to school time conflicts with the lifestyle of the modern family. While communities may trust schools to do what is right in the classroom educationally, they can become very concerned about the practical matters of school scheduling.

In the mid 1990s, when my school district was concerned about the potential loss of federal funds for summer school and the possibility of covering the cost with local resources, we began to look at what happens to students over the summer. Families, of course, would be vitally interested in any change in the resources available during the summer. And as a researcher, I wanted to find out what we knew about learning loss when students have three school-free months.

The first thing to note is that the current school calendar was a compromise, crafted at a time when about 85 percent of Americans lived according to the agricultural cycle. Today, only about 3 percent of the population has farm-based lifestyles. Prior to standardization across the nation, it was up to local communities to set the school calendar. In urban areas, such as Philadelphia and Baltimore, school might be in session for 11 months. In rural areas, students might skip May and June for crop seeding time, go to school in July and August, and then skip September and October for harvest time. Today's nine-month calendar, from September to June, was a compromise between the cities and rural areas to accommodate the increasing mobility of families, who needed similar school programs as they moved from one type of community to another.

Whenever people begin to question the long summer break, they typically raise these concerns:

- The 12-week summer vacation breaks the rhythm of instruction. A certain amount of time is lost as teachers begin each new school year with a period of reviewing material from the year before.
- There may be a severe impact on the language-acquisition progress of students who do not speak English as a first language or who are in home settings where English is not spoken.
- Similarly, those with learning disabilities may suffer "learning regression" during a long break, losing the achievement levels they reach during the school year.
- Finally, there are issues of equity. Children go home to different economic and family environments. The long summer break is seen as more detrimental for children who are already struggling in school because of the limits of their home life.

There are a variety of solutions that are offered to change the long academic break. The first is to extend the school calendar by simply adding more instructional days. A second way is to modify the school calendar to change the structure of school vacation – for instance providing six two-week breaks rather than one 12-week break. And a third alternative is summer school. This can be remedial or provide enrichment; it can be mandatory or voluntary.

With this as background, we can begin to look at the research on summer learning loss. But before doing so, we need to be aware of some problems that arise when studying the available data. There are two particular areas of concern.

1. In a perfect research world, students would be tested on the last day of school and then retested on the first day when school resumes. But that never happens. When we look at existing research, there is always some instruction that takes place between the spring and fall testing that is included in the summer interval. Students may be tested a couple of weeks before school ends, and they may not be retested until a month into the new school year. Sometimes there may be as much as six to eight weeks of instruction included in the studies that look at summer learning loss. This means that studies often underestimate the effect of the summer break. As **Chart 1** shows, you can extend the trajectory of learning at the end of a school year and at the beginning and see significant learning loss even when test scores seem essentially flat, depending on the amount of instruction included in the testing interval.

2. The other problem is that tests in this type of research are often grade-level normed. A third grade class may answer 50 out of 100 questions correctly in May and be labeled 3.9 (achieving at a level equal to the ninth month of the third grade). Coming into the fourth grade, the same group may answer only 40 questions correctly and be labeled 4.0 because that is normal for fourth graders in the beginning month. Simply looking at the normed results would indicate no learning loss, but looking at the underlying raw scores tells a different story. This is another way that studies may underestimate the effect of summer learning loss.

With this background and these caveats in mind, we conducted a literature search and identified 39 research reports between 1906 and 1994. Of these, 26 studies – all conducted before 1974 – simply reported that either there was a gain or loss in learning but did not provide specific test data. As indicated in **Chart 2**, those 26 studies included 86 independent tests of the effect of the summer break on six subjects: math computation, math concepts, reading comprehension, spelling, other language and other subjects. Six of the tests found no effect. Thirty-two found some gain, particularly in reading comprehension or other language-related skills. Forty-eight found a learning loss, especially in math computation and spelling.

Chart 1: Hypothetical relationship between changes in student achievement over summer and the spring-to-fall testing intervals

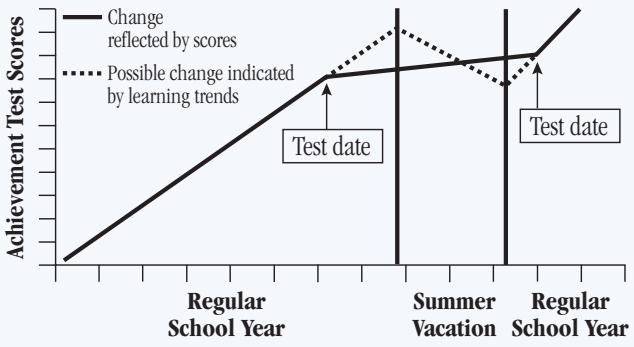

Chart 2: Summary of early studies (1906 - 1973) of summer vacation effects on academic achievement

	Gain	Loss
Math computation	0	17
Math concepts	6	6
Reading comprehension	10	7
Spelling	0	11
Other language	10	5
Other subjects	6	2
Total	32	48

Note: There were six tests of summer vacation effects that revealed no change.

From the general findings of these early studies, we can conclude that children forget their math facts and spelling, or the things that they remember through practicing, but they hold on to math concepts and maintain reading comprehension.

Of greater interest were the more recent studies that included data that could be examined more precisely. There were 13 reports, covering 66 separate groups for a total of about 48,000 students. One important element to note is that the Sustaining Effects Study, a major study on compensatory summer school that accounted for five samples and 39,000 students, included eight weeks of instruction in the testing interval. It may not be surprising that this study, reported on in a 1984 research paper, showed no learning loss during the summer.

When the Sustaining Effects Study is removed and only the remaining 12 studies and their samples are considered, the effect of summer vacation on achievement shows a drop in 43 of 57 samples, for a total difference in grade-level equivalent scores of -.13 – or just over one month of schooling. When summer learning loss in math and reading is compared, the negative effect is seen far more strongly in math.

Turning to the concern about differences of equity between children in low-income and middle-class families, **Chart 3** shows the differences in grade-level equivalent scores for reading skills. In reading comprehension, middle-income students lost 2.7 months and low-income students lost 3.4 months. (This conflicts with the trends regarding reading comprehension in the pre-1973 studies, but the conflict may simply arise from the imprecision of the earlier studies or the fact that early studies lacked data that can be more closely examined.) In reading recognition (vocabulary and spelling), middle-income students actually gained 2.3 months, while low-income students lost 1.5 months. In math, both types of students lost about the same amount of ground – about one month. To some extent, these scores reflect that reading is naturally embedded in the children's environment, where math is not. Especially in middle-class families, parents will make a specific effort to make sure that reading occurs over the summer. Such is not the case with computational math.

Finally, **Chart 4** shows that, in general, the summer learning loss is worse for older students. We see the largest losses in seventh and eighth grade.

Chart 3: Effects of summer vacation on reading comprehension and recognition for different income groups

Reading skill		Income Level *Middle*	*Low*
Comprehension	Average DGLE	-.27	-.34
	Number of samples	14	10
Recognition	Average DGLE	+.23	-.15
	Number of samples	4	4

Note: DGLE = differences in grade-level equivalent scores between spring and fall (in years).

Chart 4: Average effects of summer vacation on relative reading achievement for different grade levels

Grade	Number of samples	DGLE change
1	4	+.06
2	2	+.14
3	5	-.12
4	6	-.34
5	10	-.20
6	10	-.18
7	9	-.36
8	3	-.46

Notes: DGLE = differences in grade-level equivalent scores between spring and fall (in years). *95% confidence interval does not contain d=.00.

In sum, then, how should we interpret and explain these results? In general:

- At best, students show little or no academic growth over summer. At worst, students lose one to three months of learning.
- Summer learning loss is greater in math than in reading.
- Summer learning loss is greatest in math computation and spelling.
- Summer vacation increases disparities between the reading scores of middle-class and disadvantaged students.
- The detrimental effect of summer vacation appears to increase as grade level increases.

How we deal with these findings goes back to the variety of ways we have to address the current school calendar. We can simply live with it. We can extend the year. We can break up the 12 weeks into smaller, more frequent vacations. We can provide summer school. Or we can do a combination of these things and make different choices available to families.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q. What do we know about when the loss of learning takes place in the summer? If the loss is in a straight line throughout the weeks of summer, then simply modifying the calendar to have more, short vacations wouldn't make any difference.

A. The year-round-school advocates will tell you that with six two-week breaks, students would get back in school before they had a chance to forget anything. But those who want to preserve long summers argue that the loss occurs quickly, as soon as school is out, and doesn't continue downward throughout the summer – so students are better off with one long break. We are currently attempting to answer this question. What we are looking at now is the effect of the modified school calendar. That research should be completed soon.

Q. You've given us a good summary on the summer loss of learning, but what about summer school? What do studies show about its impact?

A. The studies on summer school show varied levels of effectiveness. Last year, we looked at 93 evaluations of summer programs and, in essence, found that summer school works. Student scores jump up about two-tenths of a standard deviation. But there are a lot of factors that influences summer program effectiveness. It works best when specific skills are taught and they match the skills that are tested. (In fact, this is an area where education evaluators often shoot themselves in the foot. No one wants to be accused of "teaching to the test" but you don't want to test things you aren't teaching.) Middle-class students learn more than disadvantaged students in summer school. Surprisingly, mandatory summer school has a slightly larger effect than voluntary summer school, perhaps because compulsory attendance affects those who

have the most need to learn basic skills that summer school is well suited for. Parent involvement, community size, class size – all these are influences that can have an effect on the outcome of a summer program.

Q. When schools consider lengthening the academic calendar, what are the areas of initial resistance?

A. A great deal of resistance is simply people's desire to avoid change. But there are also economic interests that want to keep the summer calendar free – summer camps, amusement parks, childcare providers. Affluent families tend to be against losing the summer break because they have the resources to take their children on vacations or send them to special camps. It doesn't take a majority to stop this kind of change; a small vocal minority can derail calendar reform. But when we look at the changes in families that have occurred in recent decades we find that our school calendar is out of whack with the way most families live. If we sat down today and reinvented the school day and the school calendar from scratch, with the notion that nothing existed before and we had no historical pattern to follow, we wouldn't come up with anything like what we have now. It is anachronistic, but it is firmly embedded in our economic and cultural system.

Q. Are there any studies that show learning is linear vs. studies that indicate it is an advantage for students to take a break? Or studies that show it actually is good to review and repeat material at the beginning of each school year?

A. Some skills are linear and are scaffolded on to what you've learned before, particularly math. But reading, for instance, can be approached in a variety of ways. So the answer is that it depends on the skill. Each separate school year, students may not lose a lot of time to review. If the first two weeks are taken up with orientation and review, that totals five months over 10 years of school. That's more than half a year of schooling.

Q. Do you have any research on how long the school year needs to be extended to make a difference?

A. Others have reviewed the research and the bottom line appears to be that adding a few days – say five or 10 – has little impact. Adding 20 or 30 days can have an impact if it is accompanied by changes in the curriculum. That gives you the potential for major impact.

Q. What about the argument that Japan, Korea, France and other countries have longer school years and that their children outperform ours on international tests?

A. It's true that we don't send our children to school as long each year, but if you look at the hours of instruction it isn't that far off. In Japan, they are beginning to shorten the school year because of concern about too much stress on young children. I find it difficult to make international comparisons. There are so many cultural issues involved that I am hesitant to say "they do this," "we do that" and therefore this is the solution. Further, there are different cultural definitions about what it means to be a child . And finally, there are different ways to define the outcomes of an educational system, such as its ability to produce innovation, where our children rate very highly. We wouldn't want to lose that.

Presentation of William Studt & Gary Davis

William G. Studt is superintendent for the Oxnard Union High School District in Ventura County, a position he has held since 1992. He has been with the district since 1986. Prior to that, he held positions including assistant superintendent, principal and assistant principal in the Modoc Joint Unified School District. He was a social science and economics teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District from 1969 to 1974. He holds a bachelor's degree in economics and a master's degree in educational administration, both from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. He has been named Superintendent of the Year for Region 13 of the Association of California School Administrators.

Gary Davis is assistant superintendent for educational services for the Oxnard Union High School District, where he has worked for 35 years, 15 of them as a teacher. As such, he is responsible for overseeing the curriculum, instruction and special programs serving approximately 14,500 students in the district. He holds a doctorate in curriculum and instruction from the University of Southern California, with specialties in secondary school reading development and school administration. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in English from Loyola University in Los Angeles.

The Oxnard Extended-School-Year Pilot Project

Five years ago, we met to discuss how we could improve academic performance in our district. We started by listing on the board all of the programs we had already adopted. Like many districts, we had added every possible program – if we saw a program that someone said worked, we added it. But we still weren't satisfied.

We couldn't do class-size reduction because we don't have the required additional facilities or teachers. We decided that what we really wanted to do was extend the school year by 20 instructional days, for a total of 200 instructional days – about an additional semester over a four-year high school career. We looked at summer school funding to see if it could be used to extend the school year, but the state does not allow the funds to be shifted. We decided the best avenue was using the political process to create a pilot project. We weren't too far into the process when it was made clear that we would have a much better chance if we settled for 15 additional days, for a 195-day school year. Our proposal was incorporated in Governor Pete Wilson's 1996-97 budget and subsequently approved by the Legislature.

The first year, 1996-97, the funding was approved too late in the year for us to fully adjust the calendar so only seven days were added. In the three subsequent years – 1997-98, 1998-99 and 1999-2000 – 15 days were added. As a result, students in the Class of 2000 experienced an aggregate of 52 additional days of instruction over the traditional calendar. (At the completion of the pilot project, state funding was no longer available and the district reverted to the California standard of 180 instructional days.)

As we embarked on the pilot project, we didn't stop at simply adding days to the school calendar. Our teachers had told us at the beginning that if we were serious about increasing instructional time that we should first "clean our own house" by eliminating wasted time. When we studied what was happening, we were appalled at how much time was wasted by interruptions – dances, parties, announcements, athletics and other events. We set some substantial restrictions on what kind of interruptions could occur. While we do not have quantitative data on the change, we believe we added at least two or three days of instruction time to the year by tightening our approach.

Finally, we made a conscious decision to move staff development outside of school time so as not to interfere with regularly scheduled instruction time. (Before the start of the project, the district used five of the eight days allowed annually by the state for professional development.) So in addition to the longer calendar and the elimination of wasted time, we also added five instructional days within the 180-day calendar by scheduling staff development to not conflict with classroom time. Thus, the pilot project added 15 days, but the net gain for students was closer to 22 days a year.

When the district first announced that we wanted to try this, there was a massive explosion in the community. Parents were concerned about interrupting traditional summertime family vacation, and some cited church events, scouting camps and other special programs that the pilot project would interfere with. On the other hand, parents of English learners expressed support, believing that the additional days would have a beneficial impact on the English language acquisition of their children.

Every headline that you can find today in reaction to the governor's proposal to extend the middle school year was thrown at us. Teachers would burn out and be brain dead from too much teaching. Students would be too tired to learn. Summer jobs would be impacted. There were better ways to use the money. Simply giving students more of the same curriculum wouldn't work. We have lived every one of those headlines and addressed the issues in the microcosm of our world, never realizing how timely our experience would be.

There were also comments about the top-down nature of the decision. We addressed that with a two-day community forum and a process that brought all the stakeholders together – parents, business leaders, teachers, students and classified personnel. Hundreds of issues surfaced during the forum and we had subgroups develop solutions. By the end of the second day, we had buy-in from the community and the teachers.

Oxnard Pilot Project Evaluation

Under the requirements of the state-funded pilot project, Oxnard Union High School contracted with an independent evaluator to assess the impact of the extended year. Based on interim reports, five research questions were identified and the following conclusions were reached:

1. What was the effect of the extended year on teacher instruction? Teachers indicated that they made changes including taking time to develop topics in more depth and broadening content coverage. A majority of the teachers saw the extended year as a benefit.

2. Did students perceive differences in instruction? Students most often commented that they were assigned more work, that teachers explained concepts more in depth, and that more one-on-one help was delivered.

3. What was the effect on absences? They increased: Students were absent about two days more per year and teachers about one day more.

4. What was the impact on the dropout rate? Dropout rates decreased every year. In the year prior to the pilot project, the rate was 2.9%; at the end of the program it was 1.4%.

5. Was there any impact on student achievement? There were promising indicators of improvements in student achievement, including gains in reading and math at the 11th grade level, increased SAT scores, increased numbers of Advanced Placement tests taken and increased redesignations of English learners as English proficient.

(The final evaluation report, which had not been released at the time of the seminar, is now available from the district by e-mail. Contact Dr. Gary Davis at 805-385-2521 or garyd@ouhsd.k12.ca.us.)

Once the pilot project was approved by the state, we began implementation. The key concepts for the program were:

- All students and all schools within the district were affected; the district believed that if the concept was sound, then it ought to apply to everyone, not just certain schools or students. Thus the project included five comprehensive high schools and three alternative schools. The district's 14,000 students include 1,400 special education students, 3,000 English learners and 5,000 federally identified disadvantaged students.
- Teachers were assured that there would be no added curricular expectations. They were asked to use the extra days to better teach the existing curriculum. The additional days were intended to allow teachers more time to teach and students more time to learn the new subject areas, curriculum enhancements and graduation requirements that have been added over the past few years.
- Teachers were paid their per diem salaries for the additional teaching time and the time counted toward their retirement base.

As part of the evaluation, teachers were asked before implementation what they intended to do with the extra time and during the project how the extra time was actually being used. Teachers' responses were:

- Taking time to develop a specific topic in more depth (76 percent)
- Increasing the content coverage of the course (69 percent)
- Taking time to broaden the content coverage on a specific class topic (69 percent)
- Increasing the amount of work assigned to students in the course (63 percent)
- Adding new teaching strategies to their instructional approaches (57 percent)
- Slowing the pace of instruction in the course (41 percent)
- Talking one-on-one with students about their class work (40 percent)
- Increasing the use of technology/computers as a routine part of instruction (39 percent)
- Taking time to discuss the relationships between academics and the world of work (37 percent)
- Requiring more oral presentations by students in classes (37 percent)
- Increasing the number of writing assignments (36 percent)

One unexpected finding in the evaluation was that the teachers who were most likely to be innovative with the extra time were those who had been teaching the longest. The survey broke out teachers by one to two years, three to 10 years and 11 years or more. Those with 11 years or more of teaching experience turned out to be the most ready to use the time well.

Students were also surveyed twice. At the beginning, they were fairly accepting of the idea. Many believed it would help them better prepare for college entrance tests and Advanced Placement classes. After the project was underway, they indicated on the surveys that although they felt they were given more work, teachers explained concepts in greater depth and they received more individual help. One student who had taken Advanced Placement chemistry and dropped it one year said that in the second year the course moved at a slower pace and he got more assistance. He was very successful in the class and passed the exam.

Overall, we were very pleased with the outcome of the pilot project and would be first in line to sign up for such a program again if funding becomes available.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q. Did you see any effect on teacher recruitment or retention? Did any teachers quit?

A. We didn't study that specifically and the district already has a very low turnover rate. But we would say it was easier to recruit teachers because the longer year meant a higher base salary. So for new teachers or teachers from other districts, that was very attractive. No one quit, but there was one teacher who at the end of the first year claimed to be "brain dead" after the extra days. But only one. A lot of teachers had professional doubts as to whether the longer year would make a difference. They wondered if the students could sustain learning over the longer time. But they came to be supporters of the program. One of the unanticipated side effects was that fewer district teachers were willing to teach in our summer school, either because they no longer needed the extra salary or because they needed the down time. Before the pilot project, we usually had about 50 percent of our summer school teachers from inside the district. During the project, that dropped to 30 percent. Now that we are back to a regular calendar, it has gone back up to 50 percent.

Q. What happened with your staff development since you no longer held it during the school year? Were your teachers able to attend summer programs elsewhere?

A. We developed our own summer institutes, which were very productive and very well attended. In addition, we had Friday night and Saturday institutes, but those did not work out as well. Another model that worked well were afternoon and evening presentations that went from 3:30 to about 8:30 with a hosted dinner. The feedback that we got was that teachers really missed having development days during the year since they gave the teachers a mental break from the classroom. But most of the alternatives we developed worked well.

Q. Do you have any opinion about the pros and cons if we extended the school year only for students in low-performing schools across all grades rather than extending it for all students in a limited number of grades – in this case, middle school?

A. In our district, we had a long debate about whether to limit this to certain students or include everyone or only do one grade. In the end, we decided that if we believed this was positive based on the opportunity for learning, then all students would benefit and all should be included. At the state level, of course, it is an economic issue and from what we know about disadvantaged students who are struggling, they would get the greatest benefit. But all students will benefit. If you had to look at where to do this because of limited resources, then it would be logical to target areas where students are having the greatest difficulty.

Q. Any thoughts on whether extending the school year should be done at the elementary level as a preventive measure rather than middle school or secondary school?

A. Middle school is a very timely period because of the new exit exam. These students should be better prepared as the enter high school, especially with the new algebra requirement. And the English learners will face particular challenges on the exit exam because of language skills, so the extra time will be very helpful for them as well.

Q. How did you add the days to the calendar –at the beginning or end?

A. The first year, the seven days were added to the end because it was so late by the time we had state approval that we were not comfortable with disrupting already planned family summer activities – a wise decision that helped build community support. But after that first year, we added at both the front and back end. School started in about the second week of August and ended in the third week of June. At one point, we looked at condensing winter and spring vacations but we quickly found that concept was too disruptive for families and the community.

Q. Did you have sufficient funding? And under the governor's proposal would you consider doing it for your ninth grade?

A. The governor is proposing a lot more funding than we had. With the economies of scale and the fact that many staff – custodians, secretaries, etc. – already work during the time, we were able to do our 15-day extension for about $4 per student per day. Most of the added cost was for the additional teacher salaries. So from a budget perspective and an education perspective, we'd love to participate in the current proposal. However, there are difficulties. If only one grade is involved it can be a real problem. For instance, some teachers have classes with several grade levels. But you couldn't do that if the ninth grade was on one calendar and everyone else was on a different calendar. So we'd really prefer to have a program where we could lengthen the calendar for everyone.

Q. If you had the choice, would you go back to a 195-day year?

A. If they would allow high schools to have a 195-day calendar, we would be first in line. What we are hearing from the teachers is that they really need this extra time in light of the exit exam, the Stanford 9 and all of the other requirements. They became used to having those extra days and feel they used them well, so now they are really feeling the pressure to cover the same material in fewer instructional days.

Q. What if you had the option of having a 210-day calendar, as the governor's plan envisions for middle school, rather than the current 180 days or your pilot project's 195 days?

A. The opportunities and the challenges would be different – I think we would want to do it, but I would have some questions. We initially wanted 200 days, which would provide about an additional semester over four years of high school. We would have to look at the impact of 210 days on families. At lower grades, parents might be concerned about having too little time to spend with their younger children. But by the time students are in high school, that isn't as much of an issue. It definitely would be good to have more time for instruction than the current 180 days allows, but there might be some breakpoint after which added days don't equate to additional learning. So we would have to look at it closely.

Conclusion

During the past few years, California had placed a high priority on education reform and poured both resources and energy into higher standards, greater accountability and more-focused teacher professional development. But the issue of time on task – how long students actually spend trying to master skills and learn concepts – has received little attention. That has changed with the governor's dramatic proposal to add substantial time to the school calendar for middle school students.

While many objections have been raised against the idea of lengthening the school year and many questions remain unanswered, there are two conclusions that can be drawn from the research and experiences cited in this seminar's presentations:

1. Research indicates that loss of learning does occur over extended summer breaks and that students – especially disadvantaged ones – would be better served by a different school calendar. Math skills are particularly affected, but reading skills also erode for low-income students. The research also would seem to indicate that middle school more than elementary school students would benefit from an extended-year program.
2. In at least one California district's four-year, extended-calendar experiment with high school students, the superintendent reports that the pilot was for the most part well-received by administrators, teachers, parents and students. An independent evaluation demonstrated that students showed some improvement in test scores, dropout rates decreased and the major stakeholders not only adapted to the new calendar but also supported it once it was underway.

As the superintendent of Oxnard said, most districts have tried everything they can think of to improve results. However, an extended school year to date has not received serious attention by policy makers. The Oxnard experiment provides valuable experience and data that indicates extended-year programs may make a significant contribution to improved student academic performance.

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