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BCTF Research Report

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Year-Round Education: Is it Worth the Hassle? A BCTF Perspective

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When the B.C. Minister of Education announced the Year-Round School (YRS) pilot program, the BCTF had an existing policy opposing the introduction of year-round schools "on the evidence to date." Our research at that point had found no significant advantages for students or parents in changing from current calendars to year-round systems.

With the introduction of the B.C. pilots, the union decided to participate in further investigation of the YRS concept, in terms of research, discussion with teachers, parents, and District/Ministry staff. Details of our involvement are shown in Appendix 1. The nature of our participation illustrates the serious and constructive approach of teachers to this issue. Teachers did not block inquiry but participated with parents, students and other staff to consider the possibilities and potential problems associated with year-round schools.

After two years of participation in the pilots and detailed analysis of the literature, we say with some confidence that **year-round education is not worth the hassle -- the problems associated with it are greater than any benefits**. In this issue the BCTF has arrived at a conclusion opposite to that reached by Dr. Shields. Here is why we believe that year-round schools are inappropriate for our educational system:

1. The motivation for year-round education, or efficiency scheduling, is economic, not educational. Neither year-round education nor other 'efficiency schedules' significantly improve student learning. While teachers support cost-effective education, the BCTF does not support the concept of year-round schools when benefits to students are dubious and where even the cost analyses are highly disputed. Nevertheless, teachers have supported efforts to reduce capital costs in districts such as Coquitlam with 'extended day' efficiencies being introduced at senior secondary levels. Several other districts have agreed to contract language with teachers to effectively implement efficiencies should they be required.
2. The incidence of year-round schools in the USA has been greatly exaggerated by its proponents. In the USA, 37 of the 50 states have fewer than 10 year-round schools, and only three (Florida, Texas, and California) have more than 100. Fewer than 3% of American public schools are year-round, and 84% of year-round sites are in elementary schools. Such low numbers of year-round sites, most of which are in states with benign climates, indicate that year-round schools are far less popular than proponents indicate.

0.0015% of private schools are year-round in the USA, and most of these are Catholic schools in poor inner city areas. If year-round schooling is so good, why are no private schools interested?
3. Academic achievement is rarely improved by year-round schools. Dr. Shields reports that "many studies report that year round schooling has a very positive impact on student grades."

Many such studies have been conducted by the National Association for Year Round Education (NAYRE), a highly partisan organization whose consultants earn significant amounts by promoting year-round education. Robert Rosenfeld, a systems analyst from Potomac, Maryland, was so concerned at what he considered to be misrepresented data by the NAYRE that he analyzed a substantial number of YRE evaluations in a 1994 paper. He concluded:

Each study presented in the NAYRE review has either been incompletely characterized, or otherwise contradicted by other studies within the same state or district. Nothing in the NAYRE review demonstrates any academic achievement gain by changing to a year-round calendar. Moreover, review of reports from Houston, Texas, Oakland and Ohio reveal that year-round education does not help and (as found with statistically significant results in Oakland) may even hurt disadvantaged students.

While Dr. Shields recognizes the existence of 'advocacy research' she fails to identify its prevalence, and downplays negative findings. She states: "In fact, only one study reported some negative effects on student achievement" (in a year-round system, compared to traditional calendar). This 'fact' ignores a number of instances where year-round schools appeared unimpressive in terms of academic achievement, including the much-touted Oxnard, where, after 17 years of year-round schooling, the district has yet to achieve the state average in test scores.

The (1993) Resnik study of Oakland Unified School District, California, concluded:

Students at year-round schools show on average a lower academic achievement level than those at other schools, and their achievement has decreased for the period, while it increased for the schools in the regular calendar. (Both differences are statistically significant at level .05 or less.)

Jo-Ann Taylor's "21st century School Calendar Task Force Report" (1993) from Corvallis, Oregon, reviews the comments of key assessment/evaluation staff in ten school districts with year-round schools. Not one of the specialists contacted stated that there were any academic gains from year-round schools. (See Appendix 2.)

Overall, a more accurate representation of the research is that there is little difference in student achievement between year-round and traditional calendars, as stated in two comments. The first of these is by Dr. Kathryn Weil, the Testing/Assessment Co-ordinator of Albuquerque Public Schools, who said in a letter dated July 19, 1993:

The year-round calendar had no positive OR negative effects on students' test scores.

The second comment, quoted by Rosenfeld, was from Dr. Leo Wisebender, the Assistant Director of Evaluation of Los Angeles School District, who said:

There is no evidence for higher academic gains under the year-round program as compared to traditional schools in the Los Angeles school system. Don't you think we'd have all our schools on year-round if there were academic advantages? In fact, most schools get off year-round when given a chance.

4. Attitudes towards year-round schools are not universally positive.

Dr. Shields suggests that year-round schooling "is associated with positive student attitudes." But in California, the San Diego Union Tribune newspaper of January 26, 1993 reported that:

San Diego schools lose nearly \$2m a year because of poor attendance in year-round schools that start the academic year in July instead of September. The district's 38 year-round schools have an attendance rate 15% lower than those of schools with traditional calendars, and 82% have test scores below the district average in reading, language and mathematics."

In terms of parent support, a Seminole County (Florida) study conducted by the district's Division of Business and Finance concluded:

Case after case has documented the fact that the public, while willing initially to support a year-round program to avoid tax increases or double sessions, is unwilling to support the continuation of the program on a long-term basis once they experience the inconvenience and disruption which automatically comes with having children out of school at times other than the traditional holidays and summer vacations.

A report of the Year Round School Committee to the Frederick County Board of Supervisors (Virginia) in 1994 stated:

Following a thorough review of all materials, information provided by experts in the field, and survey results of the current status of multi-track year-round programs at the high school level, the year-round school committee concluded at their February 15, 1994, meeting that the adoption of the multi-track year-round school system would not result in any short-term gains or long-term benefits for the students and citizens of Frederick County.

The year-round school committee feels that the many problems associated with a multi-track year-round calendar far outweigh any gains that may be realized from adopting such an approach. Therefore we recommend against the adoption of the multi-track year-round concept.

Don Patterson, writing in *The Albuquerque Journal* (1994), said: "Year Round Education is a failure here, just like it has been everywhere else it has been tried." Such a comment, after parents sued a school board attempting to implement year-round schools, may not be scientific research, but identifies deep community concerns with the issue of year-round schools.

The *Los Angeles Times* of May 28, 1993, reported the results of a vote by parents, teachers and administrators on single-track year-round schools. The vote was allowed by the district when it was found that single-track schools were costing an additional \$4.2m annually. 544 school communities were invited to vote. 543 voted to scrap single-track year-round schools:

An initial tally showed that a sizable majority of parents, teachers and administrators voted to reject the year-round calendar the Board of Education instituted two years ago over the vociferous objections of many parents.

In Florida, the *Orlando Sentinel* (October 25, 1995) reported:

The Seminole County School Board voted Thursday to virtually eliminate year-round education next year, following a crescendo of complaints from teachers and parents....The Seminole Board joined a growing number of school districts in central Florida that have backed off from year-round education.

The *Education Week* of November 15, 1995, reported:

The new school (year-round) calendars in Orange and Seminole Counties became increasingly unpopular with parents over time. And in August angry parents from school districts across the state packed a legislative hearing on the issue and more recently bent the ears of school boards in the neighboring central Florida counties.

Such views are not the 'pre-implementation concerns' identified by Dr. Shields, but the lived experience of parents in hundreds of communities who have tried and rejected year-round schools after the promises of improved test scores were unrealized, and family disruptions became too much to bear.

5. There is no consensus regarding cost effectiveness of single-track or multi-track schools.

Dr. Shields claims that such a consensus (in terms of single-track) exists, but this appears debatable. If Los Angeles spent an extra \$4.2m annually on single-track schools, it appears difficult to present a case that "single track schools may (but do not have to) cost more than traditional schools." In the B.C. context, with the possibility of a small number of schools initiating single-track calendars within a district on a predominantly traditional calendar, costs are almost certain to increase, or services will decline. Reduced services exist in the single-track Williams Lake school, in which no special needs itinerant staff are available to students in July, when such staff are on holiday.

Within the general debate on cost effectiveness, the Seminole County Study (see above) found that:

There are no estimated cost savings -- either short-term or long-term -- which can result from implementation of modified school calendars providing for year-round operation of schools.

The same report included a quote attributed to Gordon McCloskey of Washington State University, who said:

Make it plain that while new construction costs can be saved temporarily, year-round use of buildings will increase maintenance costs and require that teachers are paid for more months each year. Be sure that people understand that annual budgets will go up.

More detailed analysis of educational achievement and cost effectiveness issues is available on request from BCTF Research (Tel: 871-2251; Fax: 871-2294; e-mail: cnaylor@bctf.ca).

6. In the current climate of major educational change, significant changes to calendars are inappropriate. The B.C. government has initiated and mandated major educational changes:

- › Total revision of all curricula in B.C. schools is underway and will be implemented during the next three years, which will have a major impact on learning and teaching. Policies on curriculum modification are also being developed.
- › Reporting changes have recently been mandated.
- › A new Special Education policy has been released.
- › School district amalgamation is being mandated.
- › The whole structure of collective bargaining is being changed from local to provincial bargaining.
- › New policies of challenge and equivalency are being implemented.
- › School accreditation is now mandatory.

The above changes are all significant. They will affect all students and all teachers in this province. At such a time of enormous mandated change, do we really need to change the calendar as well? Will parents and community be happy to accept all the above AND change their holidays, arrange new child care (if available or affordable) and have the kids home in November instead of July?

Changes to the calendar are also inappropriate because they may make the system unmanageable. Where year-round schools were introduced in the USA, most systems were not changed in such fundamental ways as is currently occurring in B.C. Change to a year-round system is always a major shift and requires substantial planning and time. With the changes already announced, any major calendar shifts may negatively affect student learning, as the amount of change may be too great for teachers and district staff to manage effectively.

This section of the paper focuses on Dr. Shield's study in Davis School District, Utah.

In terms of student achievement issues, Dr. Shield's concludes that student test marks in the multi-track system 'seem' to surpass those of students in the traditional-calendar schools in some areas. But she also concludes that "the school calendar is not a major factor in determining the quality of the educational experience that children receive." If the calendar is not a major factor, why change it?

In terms of parent views, Dr. Shields provides data to illustrate that many parents in Davis prefer traditional calendars ("there tended to be higher levels of satisfaction among parent- respondents from traditional schools"), and concludes that "while the year-round calendar is perceived as providing added flexibility for some, its main impact on families is related to the fragmentation which may occur if different levels of school within the same district are on different calendars."

In spite of this conclusion, Dr. Shields implies in much of this section that parents are positive about year-round multi-track systems, and that problems might be easily overcome. In the area of summer programs, she states that parents "did not recognize, at least explicitly, that the wider community could make some adjustments which could address the issue" (of year-round students missing summer community programs). Dr. Shields also states that children on the summer track "missed some community activities due to lack of community understanding and co-ordination." The first statement implies that the community could change to accommodate year-round schools, while the second clearly states that the community did not adapt, and kids missed out on programs.

Dr. Shields' findings confirm reduced district services to year-round schools during the summer from itinerant staff such as psychologists. Dual calendars appear inefficient, as the economies of scale realized with a single organizational system are lost. Data show that communication and professional development are also problematic in the multi-track systems, with teachers being on different tracks. But such problems could also occur with single-track schools, especially where a few schools are on such schedules. There is also little comfort for the supporters of year-round schooling from what appears a typical multi-track administrator, who in Davis "has a never-ending job just to stay on top of the issues needing attention and frequently defaults his/her vacation time."

Where should we go from here?

Teachers and Dr. Shields view the nature of change differently. Perhaps that is because teachers are the people who are expected to make change work for students. While some university faculty may specialize in individual areas of educational change, teachers face them all, from curriculum and assessment to accreditation and calendar changes, to name just a few. Even so, when a significant change is demanded by government, teachers assess its value for students and whether it can be managed. Where change results in perceived improvements for student learning, teachers are generally supportive.

The finding of limited significant differences in student achievement between year-round and traditional calendar schools is, for teachers, a fundamental factor, while for Dr. Shields it appears minor. Teachers believe that the education system should not be facing more disruption and upheaval unless students benefit, and there exists considerable evidence that they do not benefit academically from year-round schools.

Dr. Shields states that teacher contracts "may tend to block the easy implementation of an educational or organizational change." Such a statement reflects a naive view of collective agreements. It reflects a view that contracts are a problem, and that the proposed change is beneficial. Contracts are agreements between districts and their employees, governing both sides. How would districts react to an 'easy implementation' proposed by a teachers' union which fundamentally changed the district obligation and provided arguable benefits for students? Hardly with unbridled enthusiasm. Change must be managed within contractual parameters unless such parameters are changed by mutual agreement.

To sum up, there appears little evidence to support the concept of year-round schools on grounds of improving student academic performance. Multi-track year-round schools change schools into fragmented organizations and disrupt families and community for little obvious gain.

Introducing single-track operations in a small number of schools may still cause disruptions for some families and may incur reduced district services, as well as costing more. Yet if a community believes such a school serves their needs, as in Williams Lake or Maple Ridge, and if appropriate processes are followed, teachers have not blocked their introduction.

If money has to be saved on capital costs, then let us consider the new options proposed by the Minister in the same systematic and collaborative way that has been managed with most of the year-round school pilots. Teachers have started to consider the extended-day option, which already exists for some senior secondary students.

Appendix 1: BCTF participation in year-round school investigation

1. The BCTF Research Division collected and analyzed over 300 papers written on year-round schools.

2. We collected and assessed press coverage of the issue from across North America which reflected community views on year- round schools.
3. Teacher representatives from schools and districts where pilots were being considered were invited to share and discuss their views on the issue.The BCTF supplied papers and analysis on request to such groups.
4. Teachers joined collaborative district groups investigating year-round issues.Parents and district staff who were also in these groups were very positive about teacher participation, as were teachers in terms of the chance to work with parents and other staff.
5. Three research papers have been written and produced on the issue of year-round schooling by BCTF staff, and presented to a number of the district year-round groups.
6. BCTF information was made available to any teacher or parent on request.An offer to provide access to BCTF data was made to any pilot district which had received ministry funding.
7. A BCTF representative participated in all district/ministry meetings where year-round school issues were discussed.

Appendix 2: Research Reviews and press clippings -- year-round schools

- ▶ Year-Round Schools Evaluation - Oakland Unified School District, 1993.(Ana Resnik)
- ▶ 10 largest Year-Round School Districts -- Survey of Educational Impact, Corvallis, Oregon, 1993.(Jo-Ann Taylor)
- ▶ Year-Round Schools and Academics, Potomac, Maryland, 1994. (Robert Rosenfeld)
- ▶ "Most Seminole County schools drop year-round calendar for 1996- 97,"*The Orlando Sentinel*. October 25, 1995.
- ▶ "School Calendars:Year-round popularity declines," *The Florida Times Union*, April 16, 1993.
- ▶ "Most schools reject all-year class schedule," *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 1993.

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