

# School's Out? Not So Fast

## Children in Year-Round Schools Gear Up for New Grades

By ADRIENNE MAND LEWIN

**June 1, 2006** — - The start of June used to launch a nationwide kid countdown to the lazy days of summer, free of textbooks and studying and full of playing outside -- or doing lots of nothing.

But for an increasing number of children, summer vacation means a few weeks off before starting a new grade, with the next break coming sometime in the fall.

Welcome to year-round schooling, where kids attend class even through the summer months, families take extended vacations in February and school systems use their facilities to accommodate the largest number of students.

According to the National Association for Year-Round Education, more than 2.1 million children in 47 states are enrolled in year-round schools in 2006. The majority are public schools, though some charter schools and private schools also are adopting the calendars. California, Arizona, North Carolina, Texas and Kentucky have the most districts using what's also known as a "balanced calendar."

"The question isn't doing away with summer vacation," said Sam Pepper, the group's executive director. "The question is how long should it be? We don't think it needs to be 13 weeks."

### Too Long or Not Enough?

Typically, students on a balanced calendar spend something like 45 days in class followed by 15 days off throughout the year for the required 180 days of instruction. Many schools with booming populations utilize "multi-track" schedules that stagger students' time in the building throughout the year, allowing for more to attend. Advocates say the practice also helps students retain information from grade to grade.

"The idea of a long summer vacation really is not conducive to learning because the review time in September cuts into the 180 days," Pepper said. "We're finding, especially among lower socio-economic students, this is really showing academic gains."

But some critics say a traditional summer vacation is crucial to children's development and they are missing out in year-round school.

"The fact of the matter is children learn outside of the school walls in the summer -- it's just not the same kind of learning they get in the classroom," said Billee Bussard of Jacksonville Beach, Fla., a former journalist who now runs the Web site [SummerMatters.com](http://SummerMatters.com).

"Mainly, school districts that go on this just don't have the money to build the schools that they need," Bussard said, adding, "Eventually, school systems have to build these schools anyway, and they wind up doing it at an inflated price."

And Barbara Rusch, an elementary school principal in Ypsilanti, Mich., said children don't necessarily gain from losing a traditional summer break.

"High school children benefit greatly from summer work experiences," Rusch said. "Elementary school-age children need time to explore nature, take trips, etc. Children learn in many different ways, and children are not little machines that can just keep going and going like the [Energizer] bunny."

But Pepper said the traditional schedule began when America was an agrarian society and children were needed to bring in the crops, which is no longer relevant

### **Facing a Space Crunch**

Multi-track schedules also provide efficient use of school buildings, Pepper said, increasing capacity by 33 percent regardless of population growth.

The issue recently came to a head in North Carolina where the Wake County Public School System has offered year-round schools on a voluntary basis for more than 12 years. "Rather than having everyone out for 10 weeks during the summer, we have a quarter of the school out in any given three-week break," said Chuck Dulaney, assistant superintendent for growth and planning for the district.

But that's about to change. For the 2007-08 school year, as well as the following year, the district faces an additional 3,000 elementary-school students and 2,000 middle schoolers, Dulaney said. Over the next five years, the school system will increase 35 percent -- adding an additional 40,000 students to its current 120,000.

"That's the growth crunch that we're confronting," Dulaney said. "And in order to keep the school construction program to a manageable size, we are opening all of our new schools as multi-track, year-round. We can no longer afford to build schools and operate on traditional calendars."

The district planned to institute a year-round calendar in more than 50 elementary schools. Parents objected, and instead last month the board passed a billion-dollar plan that will include more new buildings and mobile classrooms and change fewer schools to the new schedule.

"What's new is populating them by assigning neighborhoods to those schools rather than making it purely voluntary," Dulaney said.

Many parents in Wake County enjoy not having to find activities to occupy their children during a long summer break, Dulaney said.

"We're culturally aligned to something that has been going on for a long time," he said. "I don't think it's going on for the right reasons, it's just the way it's been done."

### **Savoring Family Time**

Once they make the switch, many parents of children in school all year are reluctant to change back. Jodi Riley of Hillsborough, N.C., has a son, William, who attended year-round school through fifth grade but is finishing sixth grade on a traditional schedule. "The year-round schedule was excellent for working parents," Riley said. "You only needed three weeks of child care every nine weeks, which was easier to budget than 12 weeks in the summer."

And William was happier with his schedule, too. "My son would work really hard during the nine weeks and then have an opportunity to rest and re-energize for the next nine weeks. He never experienced burnout and was always motivated

for school," she said, adding, "This year has been a huge adjustment."

Many parents also told ABCNews.com they enjoy spending family time together when they can avoid crowds and spend less. Wes Farrow's 7-year-old daughter is finishing first grade in a year-round school in Raleigh, N.C.

"We love it," Farrow said. "We get to take vacation when most other families cannot. The track system helps us save on child care... The children can also retain more school-book knowledge with the shorter breaks."

### **Managing Conflicts**

Similarly, Elaine Casey of Sparks, Nev., has a daughter going into seventh grade and a son going into fifth. She said that overall year-round school has been beneficial to both children because "it helps them remember what they learn, since they are not off for three months in between school years."

But in August, her daughter will be in a middle school with a regular calendar and, she said, "I think it's going to be complicated."

Other parents agreed that having children on conflicting schedules can cause problems. Karen Slavick of Novato, Calif., said that her son's year-round breaks coupled with a military family schedule made it difficult for her and her husband to see his children from his first marriage.

"Due to military moves, our co-parenting is done from a distance, with quality time spent with the children over the long summer break," Slavick said. "Year-round school reduced the time non-custodial parents have with their children for visitation."

And, she said, she's sure she's not alone. "I remember thinking, 'I know we're not the only ones experiencing it. I know that there are parents all over the place who have a little bit of time to spend with their children.'"

### **Advantages or Drawbacks?**

Not all teachers are sold on the schedule. Mike Humphrey of Kansas City, Mo., who taught at a year-round school, said the schedule has its drawbacks.

"We didn't have much time off -- one week between the old year and the new year," he said. "Burnout was very prevalent."

"It takes a real different kind of clock to be a year-round teacher," Humphrey added. "Teachers are immensely dedicated ... [but] you still need some time to go out and scream."

At the same time, Dulaney said, traditionalists should give the new system a shot. "I understand what they're saying ... but I don't see that playing out," he said. "In the real world, you find families who struggle to find ways to keep their children occupied [over the summer]."

And Pepper said complaints are mostly from people who have not tried the balanced calendar.

"Any type of a reform or change in education is always met with a lot of skepticism," he said, adding, "Once the students and the teachers are on the calendar, they don't want to get off it."