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Teachers see benefits in year-round schools

Some students, staff thrive on schedule

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Roosevelt-Perry Elementary teacher Julie Donlon used to spend four to six weeks each fall reviewing material she'd taught the year before -- along with class rules and procedures.

But today she spends only two weeks reviewing thanks to the school's alternative "year-round" calendar, where a six-week summer allows for a two-week break in the fall and another break in winter.

Less summer learning loss allows Donlon to cover more new academic ground each year, while the breaks refresh students and teachers.

"I've noticed a huge effect," she said.

In all, seven Jefferson County schools are on such a schedule.

And although it's the middle of summer, students will be returning to school tomorrow.

Statewide, more than 100 schools offer a similar calendar, according to the California-based National Association of Year-Round Education.

Although it can be challenging for some parents with children in different schools, Monica Munday said her children -- Ashlea, 9, and Jailin, 6 -- both thrived on the schedule at Roosevelt-Perry.

"They didn't forget what they had learned," she said.

Two years ago, the Jefferson County school board rejected a proposal to adopt a watered-down version of the year-round calendar at most schools.

Some welcomed the idea of additional breaks that could be used for vacations, academic enrichment or help for struggling students.

But critics -- including many parents who bombarded the board with e-mails and phone calls -- opposed cutting the summer short and feared that it would affect summer jobs, classes or camps, and might add child-care burdens.

Although some studies have suggested a link between the schedule and a rise in test scores, evidence of its benefits is mixed.

Roosevelt-Perry principal Pam Howell said it's at least partially responsible for gains at her school.

She said the school adopted the calendar because research shows it has the biggest effect among at-risk and low-income students. Nearly 99 percent of the school's students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Howell said some of her students don't do much reading or learning at home during the summer, making the summer learning loss significant.

Special education teacher Carla Kolodey said it helps her to assess student progress and rethink and redesign lessons if necessary. It also helps avoid teacher turnover, she said.

"You get less burned out," she said. "Right when you start feeling overwhelmed, you get a break."

At another school that offers the schedule -- Liberty High, designed for children who don't thrive in regular schools -- it gives students a crucial break after nine weeks, said principal Tom Carter.

"For our kids, to sit for an 18-week semester (on a traditional calendar), they really struggled," he said. "They'd get frustrated and cut class."

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