

Academic Calendar Ad Hoc Committee Report *2/28/2022*

Recommendation

MCCPTA calls on MCPS to begin planning for the deployment of a Year-Round Education (YRE) pilot within 3 years. The pilot should provide lessons and best practices with an eye towards expansion of YRE across MCPS district within a decade. By 2032 MCPS should be providing YRE in every school in the district. This move to YRE should include, gradually if needed, the implementation of all 10 recommendations¹ from the 2017 Innovative School Schedule report from the Maryland Board of Education.

Important Definitions as applied in this report

The literature review on the academic calendar has highlighted a lack of standardization around terms when it comes to year-round education. To minimize confusion, the report outlines definitions as they will be applied within this document below:

Year-Round Education (YRE)– This is an academic calendar that has the same number of school days as a traditional academic calendar (180). However, rather than having an extended break during the summer, those breaks are chunked across the school year, which is divided in “semesters” or terms. This report does not provide detailed recommendations on what structure YRE should take within MCPS, but several models exist including: 45/15 (9 weeks of education and 3 weeks off), 60/20, etc.

Innovative School Year (ISY)- This initiative by MCPS is a program directed at a limited number of underperforming schools to improve educational outcomes. The program varies from YRE in very important ways (see below).

Background

The COVID pandemic and subsequent movement of instruction to a “virtual environment” has had a devastating impact on the educational growth of an entire generation of youth in America. While a tiny fraction of students (generally those with the most supportive home environments) were able to maintain some level of educational growth from March 2019 to August 2020, and an even smaller percentage of students have thrived in the virtual environment, the vast majority of students, particularly the most vulnerable students, have seen dramatic losses in educational development.

¹ Note: Some of the recommendation would need to occur at a state level but MCPS could lobby where appropriate and/or implement elements as appropriate.

In Montgomery County, where schools remained effectively 100% virtual from March 2019 until March 2020, the loss of learning was significant. For example, literacy readiness for second graders dropped 35% from the 2018-2019 to the 2020-2021 school years. The data for MCPS showed that the drop was even more pronounced among minority communities; for example literacy for African-American second graders dropped by 38% and Hispanic second graders had a 46% drop. In fact, double digit drops in literacy rates and math proficiencies were reported in almost every grade when comparing 2018-2019 to 2020-2021. It would be very difficult to overemphasize how dramatic the learning loss in the virtual environment was.

In March 2021 Michael Bloomberg, former Mayor of New York City and founder of Bloomberg Philanthropies, wrote an OP-ED² in the Washington Post calling for schools to remain open for the Summer of 2021 to remediate learning loss as a result of virtual learning. Among other things Bloomberg wrote *“We are facing the greatest challenge to public education since some states and districts defied the Supreme Court’s ruling in Brown vs. Board of Education and refused to integrate their schools. The evidence that remote learning has been disastrous for children, especially those from low-income families, could not be clearer. Students have effectively missed a year of school, and many were already far behind to begin with. The harmful effects could haunt them, and our country, for generations, worsening racial income and wealth gaps that are already far too wide — unless we take bold and urgent action now.”*

This call to action sparked an interest within MCCPTA to explore the academic calendar within the MCPS context. The MCCPTA Board voted in support of the creation of an Academic Calendar Ad Hoc Committee (ACAC) which would analyze this issue specifically through MCCPTA’s mission which is “To make every child’s potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children”.

This report and recommendation are the result of that analysis by the ACAC.

Methodology

The ACAC began by performing a literature review of readily available information. A bibliography of the reviewed documents is included at the end of this report. However, it was in the review of the available literature that the ACAC came across the July 2017 report by the Maryland State Board of Education entitled *Innovative School Schedules: Recommendations to Enhance Student Achievement*. This report represented a relatively recent, local, and highly comprehensive analysis of the issues at play. The ACAC did review additional sources (as outlined in the bibliography) to expand on the issue and opportunities noted in the report. However, much of the work around literature review and clarification of costs, risks, and benefits had essentially been completed by that 2017 report. Much of ACAC’s role, when it came to literature review, related to expanding on the elements found in that report and analyzing the issues through the lens of the MCCPTA mission.

In addition to the literature review the ACAC did conduct a limited number of interviews with community members who had experience with MCPS’s Innovative School Year (ISY), which is not a YRE program (see below), but which represents the totality of MCPS’s recent experimentation with a truly

² [Opinion: We need our schools to stay open this summer](#). Only Biden can make it happen. March 10, 2021 Washington Post. Bloomberg.

different academic calendar model to date. The interviews provided insights into perspectives on the ISY in MCPS and included both parents and teachers from ISY schools. By and large those interviews highlighted many of the issues which were noted through the literature review with regards to YRE.

MCPS and YRE

The most significant attempt by MCPS with regards to modifying the academic calendar is the ISY. This initiative is not YRE for a variety of reasons:

- 1) ISY is fundamentally targeted at underperforming Title 1 schools. The goal is to provide remedial education to a specific subsection of the student body rather than reducing learning loss or transition stress across all students. In one of the initial MCPS communications regarding the initiative MCPS wrote “performance at both schools is below the districts performance in literary and mathematics according to the Evidence of Learning Framework³”.
- 2) ISY extends the number of days taught while still following the traditional academic calendar for the most part. Most of the year the ISY schools follow the same calendar as the school year except at the start and end of the academic calendar where the ISY have additional instructional days.
- 3) ISY introduces additional instructional elements, specifically a “mindfulness curriculum” and Project Lead the Way.

It is unclear from the documents available (and from interviews from MCPS central office staff) if MCPS intended this as a pilot or if ISY is in any way time bound. It may be that MCPS staff who proposed this considered potentially deploying ISY in other underperforming schools if it was successful.

Unfortunately, given that the first year of deployment was interrupted by the COVID pandemic it will be several years before ISY’s impact can really be evaluated.

Given the difference between ISY and YRE, ISY’s experience is only minimally relevant towards YRE and MCPS should pursue the implementation of a YRE pilot without waiting or considering the impact or lessons from ISY. Fundamentally ISY is different than YRE, in motivation, design, and implementation, therefore, MCPS needs to deploy a separate YRE pilot to evaluate that approach in our specific context.

Rationale for Recommendation

The modification of the academic calendar is a dramatic and wide-ranging action with significant impacts across the social, economic, and political fabric of a community. The next section will unpack many of the stakeholders who are likely to be impacted and the various implications of such a shift for those stakeholders.

However, this analysis and the subsequent recommendation of the committee are uniquely based on the application of a single lens. Specifically, the PTA Mission “To make **every** child's **potential a reality** by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children” (emphasis added).

While YRE does present some challenges, studies have confirmed that on average students lose approximately one month of learning during summer months, those same studies also highlight that that single statistic masks significant differences among different populations. Students from low-

³ MCPS Memorandum July 19, 2018 Subject: 2019-2020 Innovative School Year Calendar

income families generally lose double that level of instruction (2 months)⁴. From an equity perspective what is especially concerning is that in addition to experiencing larger losses during the summer, studies have shown that these losses are cumulative resulting in increasingly large gaps between affluent and less affluent students⁵. In addition to reducing learning loss YRE has also shown to reduce stress among student populations who, under the current system, are faced annually with the “first day of school”.

The data shows that generally YRE’s shorter periods of separation from the education infrastructure often led to smoother transitions from one year to the next and reduced stress among the student body. It’s important to note that this was remarked on by several interviewees with regards to the ISY program within MCPS.

Given the significant emotional toll that COVID-19 has inflicted on our student population the potential psychosocial benefit from a switch which is likely to reduce student stress can hardly be overestimated. Beyond psychosocial benefits YRE was also noted to improve outcomes among ESL students who face significant challenges with the current system.⁶

It’s important to note that the purpose of the three-year pilot⁷ is to trial the roll out of YRE in order to efficiently manage its expansion and not to evaluate its effectiveness. Ultimately the data is clear on the benefits of YRE and the July 2017 report for the MD BOE settled this question.

Since the pilot is not intended to relitigate the effectiveness of YRE it should not focus on under performing schools or simply enroll one level of education (e.g., only elementary schools), instead it should look to incorporate as many of the various elements which compose the education landscape of MCPS to see what adjustments should be made. One possible approach could be to select certain clusters to pilot the approach and then draw lessons from that roll out as it’s expanded to all clusters within MCPS.

This report does not go into detail on all the benefits that YRE offers in comparison to the traditional agrarian academic calendar but the preponderance of evidence from the literature review makes it clear that YRE offers a significant number of benefits to students.

When interpreted through its role of advocacy for all children the implementation of a YRE must be a primary focus of MCCPTA regardless of the considerations of stakeholders outlined below.

Challenges/other considerations

While the interest of the stakeholders outlined here are not part of the mandate or mission of MCCPTA, an appropriate analysis that failed to consider possible sources of resistance to YRE would represent an incomplete and quixotic approach to our recommendation. The ACAC has pushed the limits of its tasking by including an analysis of these stakeholders and possible mechanisms to address those concerns wherever possible below.

⁴ *Innovative School Schedules: Recommendation to Enhance Student Achievement (pg. 6)*

⁵ ADD Document

⁶ Note that this report does not touch on food security issues over the summer but that is another significant advantage identified in YRE across the literature review.

⁷ Note that the deployment of the ISY was implemented in roughly the same timeframe (3 years) so a pilot deployment of YRE within 3 years is consistent with what MCPS has done in the past.

Teachers/Staff

YRE has at times encountered resistance from teachers and teachers' unions. The source of this resistance varies from the ideological to the practical. For some teachers the possibility of having the summer free represents a significant reason for why they entered the teaching profession, and many pursue other economic activities during the extended summer break. The removal of this perceived "benefit" from teachers, even if offset by increased salaries, may result in some teachers opting out or not joining MCPS.

On a more practical level teachers whose children are not in a YRE or in a YRE with a different calendar may face challenges with identifying childcare or coordinating vacations with spouses or children.

These two elements identified here are the most relevant elements identified in the literature review with regards to teacher resistance to implementation of a YRE. However, this list is not intended to be exhaustive and specific challenges may arise that are unique to the MCPS context⁸.

Possible approaches which may reduce resistance from Teachers and their union could include:

1. Allowing MCPS teachers to request their children be allowed to attend MCPS regardless of residence. Despite all its challenges MCPS retains a reputation for high quality education. Offering teachers the option of enrolling their children, with consideration for school capacity and other related issues, within the MCPS system could simultaneously address concerns around ensuring childcare and provide a special incentive for joining MCPS staff.
2. Increase salaries to compensate teachers for the loss of summer income while stressing that YRE does not actually increase the number of school/workdays.
3. Stress potential benefits of YRE to teachers; for example, teachers would have the opportunity to pursue vacations during non-peak tourism seasons which would reduce vacation costs.
4. Allow MCPS teachers to earn extra income by working as substitutes in school systems that retain the traditional agrarian academic calendar.

It is also important to note that studies have shown that teachers in YRE have consistently shown lower burn out rates and greater staff satisfaction than among teachers who remain in the traditional agrarian academic calendar. The more frequent breaks that YRE offer help minimize the risk of staff feeling overwhelmed.

Parents

The availability of several months where their children don't have school allows some parents to pursue extended times on family holidays. For those families the summers represent a unique opportunity to engage in certain experiences. In some cases, it includes returning to a country of origin, which the YRE will limit or eliminate all together.

These parents tend to be among the more affluent and have the means to avoid learning loss of the summer and in fact, can offer their children special learning opportunities (e.g., science camp) during

⁸ One element to flag is MCPS currently suffers from a significant trust deficit with teachers and parents. The implementation of a YRE and its potential expansion district wide will require a concerted effort to rebuild trust in the MCPS for parents and teachers.

those extended breaks. In effect, the children of these elite families do in fact run the risk of missing out on unique opportunities and consequentially these parents are likely to resist the move to a YRE.

While those concerns should be acknowledged, the relatively minor hardship imposed on a minority of better off families is vastly outweighed by the benefits that would accrue to most other families. Here MCCPTA can take a lead role in articulating the need for YRE and pushing the community to overcome what could potentially be a concerted effort by a well-connected minority to scupper a move towards YRE.

Additionally, the move to more frequent and shorter breaks may even offer these families new opportunities for them to expose their children to a variety of experiences throughout the school year rather than a single extended one during the summer.

It is important to note that the YRE may potentially present some challenges for a larger group of families when it comes to childcare. Currently there are a variety of options offering childcare services over the summer (see next section) and there may be lag period, especially if YRE is not adopted in neighboring districts, as child-care entities re-tool to provide coverage during the more frequent, shorter breaks that exist in a YRE.

Summer Camp providers/Tourism operators

The current agrarian academic calendar has resulted in a windfall for the tourism-based economy. With a large percentage of families having children under the old agrarian calendar this creates a glut on demand during those peak periods so that tourism providers can charge premium rates to families. Tourism based economic actors in Maryland are likely to engage in intensive lobbying to block the largest school district in the county to move (or even pilot) YRE. Maryland politicians have already shown themselves to be receptive to these interests despite the harm that the traditional agrarian academic calendar presents for students. Most notably Governor Hogan attempted, at the behest of the local tourism lobby, to limit the ability of local jurisdictions to provide education between June 15 and Labor Day.

MCCPTA again can provide an important counterweight to this strong interest group by advocating for YRE on the basis of the benefit to children, particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged children. In fact, the disastrous impact of virtual education in Maryland may offer a unique policy window in which energized parents can counter the effect of a lobby group pushing for the status quo to the detriment of children.

In the effort against the tourism lobby, it would be good to note that, while bad for providers of tourism services, the YRE provides tourism consumers with a unique opportunity to reduce their vacation costs. Additionally, it is likely that some tourism providers will effectively adapt to the YRE and fine tune their product offering to respond to the new, shorter, and more frequent breaks, thus resulting in more regular and perhaps greater income flows for those agile tourism entities.

Much like tourism providers, the extended summer break has given rise to a booming “summer camp” business. The spike in childcare needs during the summer months has presented a very lucrative opportunity for these providers, with camp costs ranging from a few hundred to several thousand dollars a month. Many of these providers may lose out from the implementation of a YRE but, like the tourism providers, will likely adapt to the new childcare needs for the smaller breaks under the YRE.

Costs

Throughout the literature the most significant challenge identified towards YRE has been potential cost increases. In addition to requiring increases in staff salaries the implementation of YRE means schools need to be able to function year-round. For some older MCPS schools this may present the need to update HVAC systems or provide cooling alternatives which will allow the schools to operate in the summer.

This is a real constraint that MCPS will face and should be considered when choosing the pilot schools. However, in their 2017 report the MD BOE found that YRE represented the best available return on investment, writing “extending the school year may be the most costly innovative school schedule option. However, it is expected to yield the greatest return on investment for enhancing student achievement in Maryland”.

Here again COVID-19 presents a window of opportunity to advocate for additional funding and to direct that funding towards the YRE effort. MCCPTA should support MCPS in these advocacy efforts.

MCPS may also want to compare some of its current expenditures through the lens of equity and student achievement and evaluate if existing programs could be cut to free up funds by reapplying those funds towards YRE implementation.

Bibliography

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