
The Copernican Plan and Year-Round Education

Two Ideas That Work Together

BY WILLIAM D. GEE

Combining the Copernican Plan and year-round education would make both proposals more palatable to the general public, Mr. Gee maintains, and he tells readers how to go about it.

WILLIAM D. GEE is a first-year teacher at Santa Fe (N.M.) High School.

THE STATE of the education system in this country is a perennial cause for concern. Many people feel that the system is antiquated, that it reflects the values of an agrarian society, and that it is not sensitive to the highly industrialized, information-based lifestyle of today. Indeed, even parenting has changed radically. "As parents give up more of their childrearing functions to the schools, they will have to accept educational leadership in domains heretofore unaccepted."¹ Such demands placed upon the education system have become enormous, but a great many people still wish to cling to the present system.

One way to change this attitude is to alter radically the scheduling in our schools. Several proposals to change the school schedule have been put forth, and a number of experiments have been conducted. I offer here a description of a model for combining a year-round school program with a different schedule. This model is certainly not the only option, but I hope that it will be able to fill the diverse needs of many types of schools across the country, for I believe it will prove sensible and cost-effective.

One need only speak to a few parents, teachers, and administrators to realize that we are currently suffering a philosophical crisis in education. "Our education efforts are failing to produce either a work force capable of competing with those of other industrialized nations or a citizenry capable of meeting its critically important responsibilities under our form of government," writes Joseph Carroll, a former superintendent and the originator of the Copernican Plan.² We educators need to find a new model for structuring schooling that is effective in meeting today's needs and reflective of the global society in which we live. Most of us would agree that reliance on Carnegie units, widespread social promotion, and a three-month summer vacation do little to help prepare our children for the future. Most teachers and administrators would also agree that, in a time of shrinking resources, any kind of radical change must be accomplished within current operating budgets. The model that I am proposing here does both of these things by combining elements from two successful projects to create what I call the Copernican Year-Round Plan.

The Copernican Plan

The Copernican Plan, a variation on the idea of block scheduling, was first introduced by Carroll and has been reported in two articles in the *Kappan*.³ The plan has little to do with the 16th-century scholar for whom it is named, except that it fundamentally challenges our notions about schooling and is likely to encounter considerable resistance from teachers, administrators, and parents. Carroll hastens to point out that Copernicus was ultimately proven right and that, despite resistance in many quarters, our views about the nature of the solar system were radically altered. Carroll is equally confident that his plan will radically alter our thinking about schools. He argues

that his plan will increase retention, decrease teacher work-loads, and provide an environment more conducive to learning, without adding to current school budgets.

The plan is simple. By making the class periods longer and changing the schedule so that teachers have fewer students to deal with in a semester, we can enable teachers to be more creative and to give their students the opportunities they need to become well-rounded people. Instead of a six-period day, with lunch and study hall, students under the Copernican plan will have two 85- to 90-minute classes per day, with a lunch and one or two electives. These classes meet for 90 days, and then the students move on to other classes for those time slots. The schools would also dispense with their traditional Carnegie unit credit system, in which successful completion of classes automatically brings students closer to graduation. Under the Copernican Plan, credit is awarded for mastering the objectives of a course, and students graduate at the end of the semester in which they complete the required number of credits.

The advantages of this scheduling system are numerous, and several prototypes across the country have demonstrated its effectiveness. One of the biggest complaints that teachers have about the current scheduling system is that once students have begun an activity, the bell rings, and it is time to pack up and move to the next class. Ninety-minute periods will allow teachers time for mini-lessons, group activities, and demonstrations. Movies, multimedia presentations, and visits from guest speakers will not take more than a day or two, and students can have time to reflect on the material and discuss topics in depth. Teachers can also get to know their students better, so they can make richer, more informed judgments about their students' work.

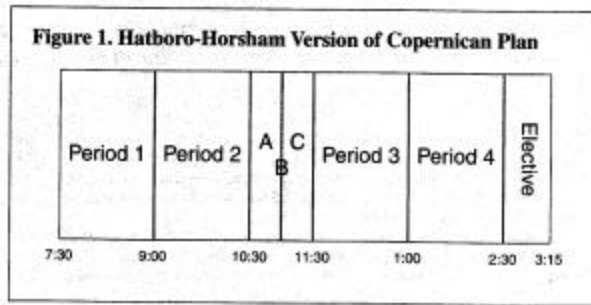
The first pilot program to test the Copernican Plan was conducted in 1989 in Masconomet Regional High School in Boxford, Massachusetts. The experiment was not strictly controlled, because the "Renaissance Program" (the local name for Masconomet's Copernican Plan) was presented as a "choice" for students. It should also be noted that schools that choose to adopt the Copernican Plan should make it an "all or nothing" situation; the school-within-a-school approach produces only unhealthy competition among faculty members and may even taint the findings with regard to the program. Nevertheless, the findings of this particular experiment were strongly in favor of the Copernican Plan. A Harvard University team that evaluated the plan at Masconomet concluded that the "justification now falls on those who favor the traditional schedule" and "implementing a Copernican-style schedule can be accomplished with the expectation of favorable pedagogical outcomes."⁴

A number of districts are implementing the Copernican Plan, including Hatboro-Horsham and Central Bucks County Regional in Pennsylvania and Burlington Township High School and Pennsbury in New Jersey.⁵ Both Hatboro-Horsham and Central Bucks County have reported a high degree of success with the program.

I visited Hatboro-Horsham High School to see the program firsthand. The enthusiasm of the faculty members and students for the program was overwhelming. The teachers I saw have successfully adapted to the 85-minute class periods, so that there is always something interesting to do during class. When I asked students and faculty members whether they would ever want to go back to a traditional schedule, the response was overwhelmingly negative.

Figure 1 is a graphic depiction of Hatboro-Horsham High School's Copernican schedule. The A, B, and C blocks in the middle of the day represent three half-hour lunch periods during which students can eat lunch, meet with teachers, and attend clubs or other extracurricular activities. The final block in the day is for an elective 40-minute class.

The keys to successful implementation of any plan of this nature are effective and the ability to learn from experience. With proper implementation, the Copernican Plan can lead us into the next phase of scheduling reform, the adoption of year-round schools.



Year-Round Schools

Year-round education (YRE) is not a new idea. Rather, it is an old idea that is gaining new ground in schools across the country. "Nearly 1.5 million students in more than 25 states now attend public elementary and secondary schools that function on a year-round schedule."⁶ The reasons why these schools have abandoned the traditional calendar in favor of YRE vary from district to district. Many have done so because of overcrowding, while others have done so in an effort to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of schooling. Some districts have attempted to implement a year-round schedule, only to be stopped by parents and community leaders who were either afraid that the program would be too expensive or were simply resistant to change. This is clearly a many-faceted issue about which emotions run high. But the success stories far outnumber the failures, and the overall costs of YRE have proved to be quite manageable.

School districts might wish to operate on a single- or multi-track YRE schedule. Several such models for YRE schedules are presented by Charles Ballinger, Norman Kirschenbaum, and Rita Pokol Poinbeauf.⁷ The most popular YRE program (favored by 69% of YRE districts) is the "45/15 plan." In this plan students are in class for 45 days and out on a 15-day vacation. There is additional vacation time during the winter holidays. Those districts with a school population that can be housed in existing facilities can use the 45/15 plan as a single-track plan, in which all students are in school during the same 45 days each quarter. If the student body is too large for the district's facilities, as is the case with many urban districts, then the district may adopt a 45/15 multi-track plan, in which there are four "tracks" and 25% of the students are on vacation at any given time. Other plans have also been implemented across the country in an effort to correct some of the flaws that have become apparent in the 45/15 multi-track plan. Ideally, though, the single-track plan is the most flexible and desirable plan.

Public Opinion

When trying to make any radical change in the way a school operates, public opinion is of paramount importance. Without strong backing from the community, any reform program, no matter how progressive or cost-effective, will fail. If a school district wishes to implement a YRE program, the community needs to be kept informed at every step along the way.

One example of poor communication occurred in Jefferson County, Colorado. In the early 1970s, the school board decided to switch to a year-round system because of increasing enrollment, a lack of classroom space, and a taxpayer revolt. The school board saw this as a temporary measure to deal with a purely fiscal crisis. What the school board did not anticipate was the enormous success of the program, which caused Jefferson County to become a model for schools across the country. By the early 1980s, when the taxpayer revolt had died down and new schools were being built, the district went back to its traditional nine-month schedule. The school board had failed to see YRE as anything more than a temporary solution to a financial problem, and the public was left unaware of the

benefits of the YRE system. No one had educated the public about the enormous savings in operation costs that YRE was producing, no one told the school board that academic retention was at an all-time high, and no one informed the newspapers that going back to an antiquated nine-month schedule might be a mistake.⁸

An ill-informed public can be your worst enemy in any reform effort, but even an informed public might not support change. Most people are conservative by nature, and they always have been. The School of Education at West Chester University conducted a poll of 398 local parents to assess the support for YRE. Only 10% approved of such a program, while 83% disapproved. The most commonly given reason for opposing YRE was the problem of finding adequate day care for children on differing tracks or schedules. Many other respondents mentioned that they did not wish to have their summer vacations interrupted or that they felt children needed the summer to relax and mature.⁹

Many of the problems mentioned by the parents in the West Chester study do not seem to revolve so much around the children as they do around the parents themselves. When asked directly why they are opposed to YRE, the answer from adults is overwhelmingly that it's not like the school that they attended.¹⁰

The Copernican/Year-Round Plan

Both the Copernican Plan and various YRE proposals have had success in research and practice. But both have met harsh resistance from the public. I believe that combining the two would make them more palatable to the general public. Here's how it could be done.

- Step 1: Most districts view scheduling the school day as an administrative prerogative. Since facilities, teacher contracts, and current operating budgets remain virtually unchanged under my combined plan, serious resistance from the public is unlikely on financial grounds. It is important that both faculty and administrators visit a school district in which the plan has been successful, so that they can appreciate the benefits of the program. If advocates of the plan can keep the school board informed of its progress, the board can keep the public informed.
- Step 2: Assuming that the present facilities are adequate for the needs of a school's population, the success of the Copernican Plan can be used to introduce a YRE program. (If overcrowding is an issue, skip to Step 3.) YRE should be introduced subtly at first, but, as the evidence of the Copernican Plan's success becomes clear, the pressure can be stepped up. This process might take two to three years, depending on how skeptical the school board and the public is regarding the success of a radically new plan such as this.
- Step 3: Since the Copernican Plan is already working on a 90-day schedule for the 180-day school year, it would be very easy to convert it into a 45/15 YRE program, in which the classes would change over the summer and winter vacations. This would make the transition from one Copernican class to the next smoother than under the current system. This would also apply to multi-track programs, but the course offerings in a multi-track program would have to be stricter because of teacher availability. Athletic teams, clubs, and interest groups would meet all year so that they could take advantage of the summer months. Under the present system in several school districts, cash incentives are already in place for those who supervise extracurricular activities. These incentives might need to be renegotiated, or more coaches might need to be hired.
- Step 4: After both plans have been fully implemented, it is very important to keep the public informed. This includes releasing all test scores, budget information, and national standings, so that there is no chance that misinformation might leak to the press or be brought up at school board meetings.

Once the Copernican/YRE system is up and running, the advantages to the students and the community will be clear. Students benefit from the best possible education, and the community benefits from new employees who are

not only well educated but also placed into the work force gradually through staggered graduations throughout the year.

The Copernican/YRE program combines two good ideas in a way that is academically sound and cost-effective. As the roles of families and schools in the lives of children change, it is important that schools learn to adjust and adapt to these changes so that the needs of our nation's children can be best served.

1. David Elkind. "Get Ready for the Post-Modern Family: Changing Parental Values Leave Greater Role for Educators," *School Administrator*, June 1990, p. 15.
2. Joseph M. Carroll. "The Copernican Plan Evaluated: The Evolution of a Revolution." *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 1994, p. 105.
3. Joseph M. Carroll. "The Copernican Plan: Restructuring the American High School," *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1990, pp. 358-65; and idem. "The Copernican Plan Evaluated," pp. 104-13.
4. Carroll, "The Copernican Plan Evaluated," p.109.
5. Burlington Township began by using a program similar to that used at Masconomet. It was producing the same kind of unhealthy atmosphere among the faculty and was replaced by a complete Copernican-style schedule in 1995-96.
6. Daniel U. Levine and Allan C. Ornstein, "School Effectiveness and National Reform," *Journal of Teacher Education*, November/December 1993, p. 342.
7. Charles E. Ballinger, Norman Kirschenbaum and Rita Pokol Poinbeauf, *The Year-Round School: Where Learning Never Stops* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Fastback No. 259, 1987).
8. William D. White, "Year-Round No More," *American School Board Journal*, July 1992, pp. 27-30.
9. Deborah Sardo-Brown and Michael Rooney. "The Vote on All-Year Schools," *American School Board Journal*, July 1992, pp. 25-27.
10. Sonia Taitz, "School Days - and More School Days," *New York*, 25 June 1990, p. 26.