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PREVIEW

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COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARD THE YEAR-ROUND
OPERATION OF SCHOOLS IN NEBRASKA

by

Jean R. Snell

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Professor Dale K. Hayes

Lincoln, Nebraska

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TITLE

COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARD THE YEAR-ROUND

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BY

Jean R. Snell

APPROVED

DATE

Dale K. Hayes

April 13, 1972

Robert H. Cole

April 13, 1972

Virginia E. Corgan

April 13, 1972

Ward Sybouts

April 13, 1972

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE

GRADUATE COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

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Thomas Barrett

Ronald Browne

Dale Hayes

William Heinicke

Thomas Krepel

J. S. Rao

Wayne Samuelson

James Selzer, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Computing Center.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The history of American public education reveals that the present school year of 180 days took shape a century or more ago in accordance with the needs of yesterday rather than today.¹

Maintaining such a calendar simply because "it's always been that way" seems incongruous with stated concerns for using students' time to greater advantage and for making more efficient use of existing school facilities, faculties, administrations, and supporting staffs.

The idea of the year-round operation of schools is not new. Various year-round calendars have been adopted by districts since the early 1900's. Most were adopted to solve a particular problem such as a temporary shortage of space and were abandoned when relief of the existing problem was achieved. Current experience at St. Charles, Missouri, however, indicates that the public would elect to maintain the year-round school in the event facilities are constructed to relieve the problems of overcrowding.²

Year-round calendars are once again in vogue. Some districts such as Valley View in Lockport, Illinois,³ entered the year-round

¹Year-Round School Project Staff, Attitudinal Study of Year Round School Operations in Nebraska (Lincoln, Nebraska: Department of Educational Administration, The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1971), p. 6.

²Statement by Gene Henderson, personal interview, November 10, 1971.

³Robert M. Beckwith, "The Valley View 45-15 Continuous School Year Plan," American School and University (November, 1970), p. 20.

arena to solve space problems, but increasingly districts such as Fulton County, Georgia,⁴ and Dade County, Florida,⁵ are looking to year-round operation (YRO) from a curricular change vantage point.

Regardless of what the reasons are for renewed interest in YRO its feasibility must be ascertained economically, educationally, and sociologically before initiation can logically be generally suggested in communities.

Feasibility studies tend to dwell on the economic questions and school organization questions in arriving at conclusions that a given district should or should not implement YRO. The writer believes that making such a determination without first examining attitudes concerning any implementation is a backward approach to the study. Since it is possible for a public to reject a technically feasible plan on any subject, prudence requires that an evaluation of the locus of critical decisions precede economic or technical feasibility studies.

This study therefore dwelled on community perceptions of an altered school calendar and community attitudes on adoption of a schedule different from existing school calendars.

Since it was impossible to convene a large enough group representative of key community reference groups in an attempt to assess attitudes toward year-round school, a modification of the Delphi forecasting method was used to enable the sampling of a large and

⁴Fulton County Board of Education, Fulton County Schools Four Quarter Plan (Atlanta: Fulton County Board of Education), p. 1.

⁵Memorandum dated October 8, 1970 from Leonard Britton as cited in the report of the September 29, 1971 Dade County, Florida Board of Education meeting.

representative group of persons interested in and in a position to influence school policy determination.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Successful implementation of programs in social institutions requires that the individuals and groups which comprise the institution either be convinced of the merits of a program prior to initiation or be convinced after implementation by the results of the program. In a system such as the public schools, the costs in student and faculty time and effects on the normal day-to-day operations are far too great during the initial period of operation of a new program to rely only upon persuasion after the fact of implementation. The first approach of a commitment to the idea prior to implementation seems the wise way to move in an organization which has traditionally been slow to change.

The problem in this study was to determine if attitudes toward concepts associated with year-round school operations vary among selected community reference groups in the State of Nebraska.

Specifically this study sought to survey ten community reference groups, School Administrators, Teachers, School Board Members, Students, PTA Officers, Business, Professionals, Mass Media, Agriculture, and Government, to:

1. Determine the general status of opinions--positive or negative--toward the year-round operation of schools.
2. Determine if differences of opinions exist among the ten groups on specific items associated with the year-round operation of schools.

In attempting these determinations, the following was done:

1. A review of literature was made concerning change in social institutions, power structures in communities, and the Delphi method of forecasting.
2. The Delphi technique was adapted as necessary to fit the peculiar circumstances of the study.
3. An instrument was developed and tested.
4. The instrument was applied three times in rapid succession.
5. The data was analyzed for differences among groups in expressed opinions.
6. Conclusions based on the statistical analysis were made.
7. Personal observations of the writer were made.
8. A series of recommendations were presented.

A further description of the procedures of this study is included in the Methodology Section of Chapter I.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Innovations of all kinds are tried and abandoned in the public school systems of the United States. Many seemingly educationally sound and fiscally responsible programs fail to continue. Very few "innovations" can stand the test of time.

Lack of acceptance by the people implementing the programs, students involved, or parents is quoted by engineers of new programs as a major reason for failures. The same sort of failures are recognized in many federal bureaucracies set up for the benefit of others--poor, Black, Indian, unemployed, and others. In short, these people

ask, "Why weren't we consulted or involved in the design of these programs that you call 'Ours'."

Since the same philosophy prevails in change in all social institutions, it can be significant to determine if the attitudes of people can accurately be estimated with the use of the Delphi Technique. Accurate estimation of attitudes will allow planners to take into account the positions of the people affected by change. As a result, the adopted innovations will be more in harmony with the people to be served and the possibility of continued success of such practices will be enhanced.

It was further the intent of the investigator to collect data which would not be treated in this thesis but which would serve to prompt further investigation of the year-round school in Nebraska.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

For purposes of this study the following terms as defined below were used.

Consensus of opinion: That range on the Likert scale which contains the middle fifty percent of the responses. The interquartile range.

Desirability: The favorable or unfavorable response by respondents to the possibility of including opinionnaire items as priorities in public school operation.

Impact: The perceived ability of the public school system to achieve the goals (opinionnaire items) with implementation of year-round operation of schools.

Year-round operation (YRO): Any calendar configuration which places the total resources of the public school system at the disposal of the school patrons throughout the entire calendar year on a scheduled program basis.

ISSUES

Current Demands on Education

Current literature in education is riddled with accountability and allied concepts. The treatment in the literature and in the media is not one of academic curiosity but rather one of serious questioning of current educational operations in the United States public school systems. Students question why they are unemployable upon graduation from the best systems. Politicians question the application of millions in federal funds when dropout rates continue unabated, and while new and innovative programs terminate with the termination of federal funding. Patrons of local districts openly question budgetary requests of district administrations in board meetings where such items are discussed and in polling booths where school budgets are often approved or disapproved. Far reaching monetary requests such as building bond issues are failing at an 85 percent rate indicating that carte blanche for the schools has vanished.

The apparent disenchantment of patrons and supporters of schools is pushing them to attempt alternatives to the available traditional school. Some cities such as Gary, Indiana, have even gone to the total contractual operation of one of its elementary schools

in search of viable alternatives.⁶ Differentiated staffing, open schools, schools without walls, and numerous other innovations are living proof of the open questioning of current practice.

Those who would insist that traditional education is producing in line with the investments of society need only to look to the experience of Youngstown, Ohio, or New York City where interrupted school terms did little to the final achievement levels of the affected students.

The former U. S. Commissioner of Education, James Allen, in stating The Administration's position on education said that:

. . . We should immediately set for ourselves the goal of assuring that by the end of the 1970's the right to read shall be a reality for all--that no one shall be leaving our school without the skill and the desire necessary to read to the full limits of his capability.⁷

From information available at the federal level, it appears that the ability of the current schools to produce in line with investment at least in the area of reading was being seriously questioned.

The Calendar--A Solution, Not a Problem

Searching for answers to some of the above mentioned problems has lead to a myriad of ever changing legislative acts and guidelines for the development of "innovative programs" for one motive or another. However, the output of such activities has been largely limited to administrative or curricular manipulation to either intensify the

⁶Gordon McAndrew, "Gary Indiana Contracts for the Operation of Entire School," Compact, Vol. 5, No. 7 (February, 1971), pp. 10-11.

⁷James E. Allen from an address to the National Association of State Boards of Education, September, 1969. (Mimeographed)

instruction of particular students or to make available a particular program to increasing numbers of students in the same time frame. Some programs have been initiated of a compensatory nature which make use of summer months but most programs simply operate within the September to May school year.

To this point, few districts have chosen to critique the existing school calendar while they vigorously critique all other aspects of the school operation. Increasingly, though, districts are realizing that the school calendar need not be a formidable foe, but might in fact be an "educational resource"⁸ and that the arbitrary 180-190 days of use of school installations might be questioned along with the output attacked by the increasing lists of critics of contemporary American education.

The Possibility of Change in Public Schools

Though many people discount the possibility of changing the traditional school year, there are elements considered essential for organizational change apparent in the school system. A primary element, "dissatisfaction"⁹ is being voiced by students, parents, teachers, administrators, indeed, everyone even remotely connected with the schools. Dissatisfaction is evidenced by protests ranging from sit-ins to resounding failure of bond issues and in the number of challenges of the school systems in the courts.

⁸Harold LeVander, "The Calendar as an Educational Resource," Compact, Vol. 4, No. 6 (December, 1970), p. 3.

⁹Homer Barnett, "Personal Conflicts and Cultural Change," Social Forces, Vol. 20, No. 2 (December, 1941), pp. 160-171.