

## 'Track E' schools take off



Hay Elementary in Austin and 131 other Chicago Public Schools kicked off the school year a month earlier under a year-round school schedule. [Photo by Divya Sundar]

This year, 91 elementary schools switched to a year-round schedule, bringing the total to 132. These schools represent 25 percent of all elementary schools in the Chicago Public Schools.

While some schools changed their calendar to deal with overcrowding, the overwhelming majority adopted a so-called "Track E" schedule to cut the summer learning loss that hampers many disadvantaged children.

Here are the main questions parents are asking and the answers.

### How is a Track E school calendar different from a traditional one?

Track E schools are in session for the same number of days as other CPS schools, 170 days. Report card pickup and distribution, holidays and professional development and staff development days are the same on both calendars.

Here is what's different. Track E schools start in August, trimming the summer vacation by four weeks. They get a two-week break at the end of September, and one week is tacked on to both winter and spring vacations. The extra out-of-school weeks that occur during the traditional school year are called intercessions. The last day

of school for all schools, including Track E, is June 18. (See calendar on page 2.)

### Why is this calendar being used? What's so special about it?

CPS officials, teachers and principals cite several reasons: The major one is that a shorter summer break cuts down on summer learning loss, which means teachers don't have to spend as much time reviewing materials from the previous year "Breaks make more sense," says Libby Principal Kurt Jones. "With the exception of winter break, all the intercessions come at the end of a quarter, and that gives kids a chance to relax before starting a new quarter. This also gives teachers time to breathe."

## What the research says

Studies on whether year-round schooling produces higher student achievement are conflicting. Some studies have found that it does, and others have found that it makes no difference.

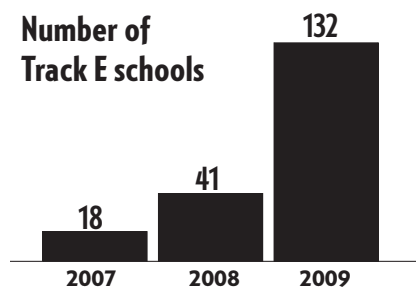
However, one major study found that students from poorer communities who go to school year round out perform their counterparts who follow traditional schedules. Harris Cooper, a professor and researcher at Duke University, came to this conclusion after a rigorous review of 39 studies on the subject.

For students over all, Harris found that year-round calendars have a small, insignificant positive effect on achievement and that there simply isn't enough research to conclude that year-round schooling produces higher achievement.

## By the numbers

Areas with the most Track E schools:

Austin (10)	E. Garfield Park (7)
Englewood (10)	Auburn Gresham (7)
North Lawndale (9)	Gr. Grand Crossing (6)
Humboldt Park (7)	West Englewood (6)



5 Number of multi-track schools to relieve overcrowding

90,000 Number of students on year-round schedule

Of the 132, only one is a majority white school (Dirksen near O'Hare Airport). The rest are predominantly African American and Hispanic.

## What's different about the Track E calendar?

While the majority of dates on the school calendar are the same for both Track E and regular CPS schools, a few are not. Here are the ones that differ:

- **August 10**  
*First day of school*
- **September 28 - October 9**  
*Intersession*
- **December 14 - January 1**  
*Extended winter vacation*
- **March 29 - April 9**  
*Extended spring vacation*

## Which days coincide with the regular CPS calendar?

- **September 7, Labor Day**
- **September 25, Staff development**
- **October 12, Columbus Day**
- **October 23, Staff development**
- **November 6, Prof. development**
- **November 11, Veterans Day**
- **November 18, Report card pickup**
- **November 26 - 27, Thanksgiving**
- **December 4, Staff development**
- **January 18, M.L. King Jr. Day**
- **January 29, Prof. development**
- **February 11, Staff development**
- **February 12, Lincoln's Birthday**
- **February 15, President's Day**
- **February 22 - March 19, IAA testing**  
*(special education students only)*
- **March 1, Pulaski's Birthday**
- **March 2-12, Elementary ISAT testing**
- **March 26, Prof. development**
- **April 21, Report card pickup**
- **May 31, Memorial Day**
- **June 17, Teacher Institute Day**
- **June 18, Last day of school**

## How does a school become a Track E? Who decides?

Principals apply, and the Board of Education renders the final decision. Principals are required to inform their local school councils in advance and are encouraged to consult school staff and parents. But, ultimately, it is the principal's decision. Principals must apply by January and are notified in February. The Chicago Teachers Union contends that CPS told some principals to switch to Track E this year, but CPS denies that.

## How have teachers responded to the switch?

According to Chicago Teachers Union, the majority of teachers like the Track E schedule because of the academic advantages it offers. The shorter summer break lessens learning loss and reduces the time teachers spend reviewing material from the previous year. Many teachers also point to the intersessions as an opportunity to adjust their lesson plans according to their students needs—flexibility that the traditional calendar does not give.

However, teachers and their union say the lack of air conditioning in classrooms creates unfavorable learning conditions in August, typically the hottest month of the year. Recently, the Board of Education vetoed the union's request that all year-round schools have air conditioning.

## Does Track E increase student achievement?

Research studies have come to different conclusions. However one analysis of 39 studies found that low-income students in year-round schools outscore their counterparts who follow a traditional schedule.

CPS data shows that Track E schools have slightly outperformed the district in test score gains. In 2008-2009 Track E schools made a gain of 5.5 percentage points in ISAT math scores, compared to 3.0 percent for traditional schools. Test score increases in reading were equal at 1.1 percent—for both Track E and traditional schools. However, because so many Track

E schools are underperforming, they still lag behind traditional schools in actual test scores. Nevertheless, Track E schools seem to be closing the gap in student achievement. ISAT composite scores at Track E schools show that the achievement gap with the district narrowed from 10.1 percentage points in 2008 to 9 percentage points in 2009.

But one Englewood principal gives this warning: "Just because you go on Track E, doesn't mean your scores go up. Track E is not a magic wand, there also has to be a change in the vigor of the curriculum.

## Have any Track E schools switched back to the traditional calendar?

So far, no.

## How is attendance counted if a student transfers from a regular schedule school to a Track E school?

Since Track E schools start about a month earlier than traditional schools, a student who transfers from a traditional has technically missed one month of instruction. But students who transfer during the academic year are not marked absent for the days they have missed, nor are they required to make those days up. Depending on when the student transfers, he or she may catch up by the end of the school year. Teachers typically work with students who have experienced a net loss of school instruction to get them caught up.

## I hear that more schools will switch to Track E for the 2010-2011 school year. How many?

We won't know until early next year. However, it is likely that 2010-2011 will usher in another large group. CEO Ron Huberman has said that he wants to see the number of schools moving to Track E next year match this year's 91, and would "love, eventually, to get all our schools to be year-round schools." CPS maintains that for now, the switch to Track E is not centrally mandated, though principals are strongly encouraged to consider Track E as a model that has social and academic advantages.

—Contributing: Divya Sundar

**In the Know Sponsors:** *Catalyst Chicago* would like to thank The Boeing Company for supporting the development of this new publication. We also would like to thank JPMorgan Chase, our first distribution sponsor. Anyone interested in helping bring *Catalyst In the Know* to particular communities or groups of schools should contact Community Editor Debra Williams at [williams@catalyst-chicago.org](mailto:williams@catalyst-chicago.org).

# Reviews from the field

On the first day of school, *Catalyst* made the rounds to a few new year-round schools in Austin and Englewood to find out what parents and school staff think about the new schedule. We also talked to a parent at Yale Elementary, which is on its second year as a Track E school, for advice to other parents. Here's what everyone had to say:



## Jonathan Carter, Ellington Elementary, parent

"The Track E is better for the kids because they're in school. Time-wise, parents have to adjust but in the summer you still have to find someone to take care of the kids. If you're a parent who complains, then it's not about the kid anymore—it's about the parent. If you care you won't mind adjusting your schedule. It's better for kids—it keeps them focused. I like it because it keeps them fresh and not rusty. They spend less time in the streets and watching TV and more time on homework."

## Latoya Coleman, Hay Elementary, parent

"I'm not crazy about it (Track E). I had to take one of my kids out from a better school and put him at this one [Hay] so that both my kids could be on the same schedule. I think the breaks are a problem for working parents. Because they come so often and are so long you have to worry about finding a babysitter for weeks at a time. The breaks hinder me from working more hours because I have to be at home to watch the kids."



## Hannah Miller, Libby Elementary, kindergarten teacher

"I think Track E is going to be great. Talking to the 1st grade teachers, so many students forget what they learned in kindergarten over the summer. Track E will minimize that summer loss. The intersession breaks are really helpful because they are better for lesson planning. During the regular school year you don't have time to make adjustments or switch plans. Intersessions give you the chance to make those changes."

## Tiffany Cartwright, Banneker Elementary, parent

"I think [the year-round schedule] is better. Children get a break each session which makes their minds refreshed. They also retain the knowledge they have gained and keep out of trouble. I know that in the summer, my children are in a safe environment. It gives me piece of mind."



## Diana Carr, Yale Elementary, parent

"In the first year, the adjustment can be hectic, especially for parents. My advice to parents is to get used to it. When it happens, be ready. Also get to know other parents. Maybe sometimes a parent takes your child to school and you take theirs. I talk to a lot of parents and they trust me with their children. I bring kids to school if their parents' work schedules get in the way. They also drop them off at my house."

## Resources

### Do Track E schools have to offer intersession programming?

No. But principals can offer them if they like. They have to use their school discretionary funds to provide them. (See back page to see what one Englewood school does). In the meantime, here are some places that offer intersession programs when your children are out of school.

### CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT

Intersession programming lasts six hours a day—the amount of time students would otherwise be in school. Children participate in arts, crafts, movie days, organized games, homework help, and environmental education. Currently, the district offers intersession programming at 30 parks in the city which service Track E schools.

Registration fees range from \$27 to \$90. To see if the Park District is offering intersession programming near your school, call (312) 742-PLAY, or visit [www.chicagoparkdistrict.org](http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.org).

### OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROJECT

The Chicago Out-of-School Time Project is a partnership between CPS, Chicago Park District, Chicago Public Library, After School Matters, and over 300 community organizations, including the YMCA and Boys and Girls Club.

Search the project's interactive database to find intersession or after-school programming that meets your needs. Go to [www.afterschoolchicago.org](http://www.afterschoolchicago.org) to search for programming by activity type, zip code, grades served, and schedule.

### BOYS AND GIRLS CLUB

For programs and locations, call 1-800-854-CLUB or visit <http://www.bgca.org/>.

### AUSTIN YMCA (West Side)

501 N. Central Avenue  
For more information, contact executive director, Cyril Nichols, 773-287-9120.

### SOUTH SIDE YMCA

6330 S. Stony Island  
For more information, contact Chasity Graves, 773-947-0700.

### CHICAGO YOUTH CENTERS

Locations on the west side: North Lawndale, Humboldt Park; on the south side: South Shore, Bronzeville, Bridgeport, Roseland and Pullman. For more information, call 312-913-1700.

# Letter from the editor

Welcome! In your hands is the debut issue of *Catalyst Chicago's* new grassroots newsletter, *Catalyst In the Know*. It was created for and with input from parents and interested community members.

For almost 20 years, *Catalyst* has provided in-depth reporting and analysis of school improvement efforts in Chicago's public schools. We did this through a monthly news magazine. Now, we are adopting a variety of print and online formats to serve our many audiences better.

I am particularly excited about *Catalyst In the Know* because, as a young mother, I faced many decisions with little information. One of my children was very bright, and the other had developmental disabilities. I agonized over where I should enroll them. What options were available? What should I look for? What questions should I ask of school staff?

That was more than 25 years ago, and now as a grandmother of two, I am watching my son and daughter-in-law wrestle with school related questions of their own. This year, my oldest grandson's school was one of those that switched to a year-round schedule. And even though the school year is well under way, my children are still trying to figure out how this change is going to affect them as a family.

Our situation is not unique. This summer, I talked to groups of parents and community leaders to find out what topics they wanted to know more about. Year-round schools popped up over and over again. Hence, our decision to feature this topic in our debut issue.

Parents also told me they want to learn more about navigating special education, choosing a preschool and preparing their children for college. We will consider these and other topics for future issues.

Current resources will allow us to publish *Catalyst In the Know* twice a year and distribute it to as many as 300 schools, organizations and religious institutions. We have chosen distribution points in communities with large numbers of year-round schools—Austin, Englewood, West Englewood and Humboldt Park. We are grateful to Blocks Together, COFI, Communities in Schools of Chicago, The Federation for



Community Schools and the Pastors of Englewood for their help in lining up distribution partners.

We will post the issues online in English and Spanish so that people in other communities can download them. Meanwhile, we will seek other sponsors to allow us to distribute the newsletters more widely.

I also encourage you to take advantage of other *Catalyst* resources. The *Catalyst* web site, [www.catalyst-chicago.org](http://www.catalyst-chicago.org), is home to most of them.

- **Catalyst Notebook** reports about the new directions in CPS, state laws, Renaissance 2010 and other important issues.
- **Catalyst Caucus** is an online forum about these issues, and you can join in.
- **The Catalyst Community Calendar** allows you to promote education-related events for free.
- **Catalyst In Brief**, published several times a year in the Resources section of our web site, rounds up key facts, research and resources on major issues.

Also, please consider becoming a *Catalyst* member to support the work we do and to receive our quarterly publication, *Catalyst In Depth*. For more information, go to [www.catalyst-chicago.org/membership](http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/membership).

And finally if you have a story idea, have a suggestion or just need to be heard, you can reach me at 312-673-3873 or by e-mail at [williams@catalyst-chicago.org](mailto:williams@catalyst-chicago.org).

Best Regards,

Debra Williams  
*Catalyst* Community Editor

## Intersession idea

- **Bass Elementary, Englewood**
- **Children served:** Last year, 90-100, all grades
- **What's been offered:** academics, arts and fitness programs, Go Green and recycling programs.
- **Staff involved:** Five or six Bass teachers and staff from the schools' after school program
- **Meals provided:** lunch and snacks
- **Student incentives:** Students with perfect attendance and positive behavior are taken on a field trip at the end of the session.
- **Costs:** \$3,000 to \$5,000 in discretionary funds and a \$50,000 community schools initiative grant.
- **Principal's tips:** "Sit down with your staff and plan out the whole year, and involve everyone on this one—from your engineer to your lunchroom staff. Then figure out what you need—materials, professional development, and how much staff, and look for grants and your school's discretionary funds to pay for the extra programs."
- **For more info:** call Principal Granzlee Banks at 773-535-3275.

## Parent tips

Reading newspapers or magazines encourages children to read outside the classroom. Here are other ways to help youngsters build their reading skills. They work whether your child is a preschooler or a preteen.

- **Cookbooks**  
Give kids a cookbook and a pack of Post-its and let them pick out several recipes they'd like to try. Make a meal together.
- **Comic books**  
Comic books and graphic novels are becoming popular again. The illustrations and often offbeat topics should keep kids interested.
- **Food labels and products**  
Ask your child to read the back of a cereal box, bag of chips or the directions on how to use a new cell phone.
- **Back of videos/DVDs**  
Challenge your child to read about movies before they pick them and to choose the ones that sound like they have a good plot.

Source: *Reading is Fundamental*