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Option worth exploring

This past Monday morning, students at Fairfax County's seven year-round elementary schools sharpened their pencils, filled up their water bottles and headed for the nearest yellow bus.

Now in its sixth year, Fairfax County's modified school calendar has officially passed the novelty stage in its development. The modified schedule also continues to get rave reviews from those most familiar with it, including teachers, parents, students and administrators.

Year-round education reorganizes the 180-day school year to provide more continuous learning by spacing the long summer vacation into shorter, more frequent vacations throughout the year. Students and teachers attend school for nine weeks (45 days), then are on a three-week vacation (15 days). That sequence is repeated four times each year. During the three-week breaks, called inter-sessions, students seeking extra help have access to it.

Proponents cite increased student achievement, improved attendance and expanded opportunities for remediation and enrichment. Many also believe the modified calendar minimizes holiday learning loss.

Unlike a majority of their counterparts, year-round students don't spend the better part of September and October "re-learning" material from the previous spring.

The traditional calendar now in place at Fairfax County's 129 other elementary schools clearly was not created with chemistry and calculus in mind. It was devised more than a century ago to serve agrarian communities that needed children to help on the farm during summer months. The need for three months off between June and September is, at best, diminishing.

It's too early to draw any firm conclusions about the modified calendar's impact on student achievement, but education leaders should be giving the subject more than a passing glance.

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