

Year-round school takes off

EDUCATION | Today, 11 start using format that has proved helpful for others

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Brand new second-graders should know how to tell time. But after a long summer break, many are rusty, forcing teachers to go back over the basics — which is the hour hand? — instead of diving into second-grade work.

That's not a problem at Alain Locke Charter Academy in East Garfield Park, which resumed class July 16 after a three-week summer break.

"They [still] know everything," said Beth Nelson, a Locke second-grade teacher. She used to spend weeks each fall reviewing. "I find everything I give them, they raise their hands and say, 'I'm done.'"

Locke switched last summer to a year-round calendar — 10 weeks of school followed by three-week breaks — and it seems to be paying off. Preliminary state test results are up over last year, including a 10 percentage point gain in reading. Teachers also report more time to plan ahead.

"I actually feel smarter," said 12-year-old Tierra Masupha. "I get a lot more knowledge."

The idea, long pushed by Mayor Daley, is starting to take off.

Today, 11 Chicago Public Schools open for the first time on a year-round calendar. Another four made the switch last month. The 15 new schools bring the total number of Chicago schools on the year-round calendar to 33. There are nearly 3,000 in the United States, about double the number 10 years ago, the National Association for Year-Round Education says.

Year-round students typically are in class the same number of days as in regular schools. Most year-round Chicago schools take a seven-week break in the summer and two- to three-week breaks staggered throughout the year.

Locke is an exception. As a charter school, it sets its own schedule.



Second-grade teacher Beth Nelson says less time is spent reviewing previous lessons.

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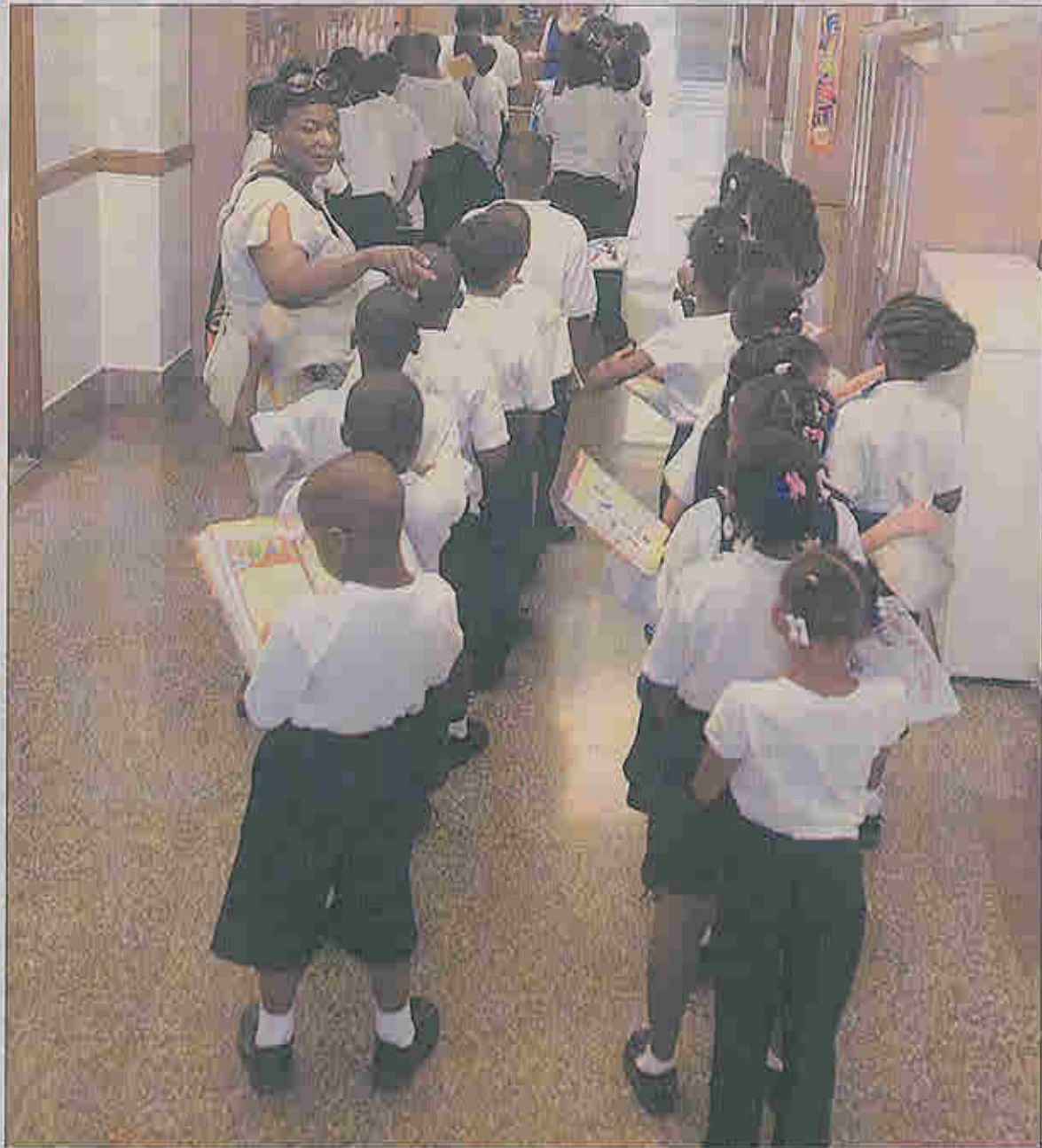
Since 1999, it has run 190 days, 20 more than most CPS schools. Class doesn't end until 5 p.m. each day.

Before the switch to year-round, some Locke parents feared they would be stranded without day care during breaks. In the end, parents have reported few problems. "It was less stress than trying to entertain them for 12 weeks," said Pat Day McCray, who has twins at the school.

Locke and most Chicago schools chose this calendar. But crowding forced several into it. Nine of the year-round schools divide kids into four groups, each on a different school calendar. Many parents resist such changes, as a group did in May at Hurley School on the Southwest Side.

Evidence of kids backpedaling over the summer is well-documented. Research on year-round calendars is limited; what exists shows some modest benefits, with the most positive effects on poor kids.

Daley and the Chicago Teachers Union have long supported year-round schooling, but Daley also wants a longer day and year. CPS' 170-day calendar is 15 days shorter than New York City's and much shorter than in Japan and several



School at Alain Locke Charter Academy runs 20 days longer than at most in CPS. | BRIAN JACKSON/SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

European countries.

In a June speech before the Executives' Club of Chicago, Daley appealed to the CTU, which is in contract talks with CPS, for more time

in school. Union leaders say they're not opposed to a longer day or year — but they want to be paid for it.

Locke teachers and kids say the breaks in the year-round schedule

keep them refreshed.

"Everyone wants a job like this," said teacher Beth Riegel. "You work hard for 10 weeks and then you get a nice break."