

Debunking the Semestering Myth: *A Response*

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After reading the article "Debunking the Semestering Myth" [11(1)], I believe a response to this "research" is necessary. There have been many studies completed which indicate no relationship between school organization and student achievement, although these studies show correlations between organization and other educational factors, such as student attitude. But this report suggests that there is a causal relationship between semestering and student achievement and that the relationship is negative. The authors imply, at least in mathematics, that, if a school introduces semestering, student achievement will decline and that, if a school abandons semestering, student achievement will improve.

There are ways to conduct research which will test such hypotheses. One is to test student achievement before semestering is introduced and then again after it is introduced. Another way is to do the same testing in a school that is abandoning semestering. A better way, although impractical, is to identify a large number of schools some of which are planning to introduce semestering and others not and then randomly assign schools to semestering for a period of at least a year. Then we could find out whether semestering had any impact and whether a school's interest in semestering is related to its success with the same.

The data for the study were not gathered in such a manner. They were gathered so that international comparisons could be made among the curricula of various countries and so that relationships between curricula and student learning could be monitored. Under such circumstances, it is reasonable to observe student achievement in semestered schools and to compare it with student achievement in nonsemestered schools. There is an interpretation problem, however, if a difference is observed. The cause of the difference is not necessarily semestering as it would be in research studies focused on semestering. In this study, the causes could be ability of students, past performance of students in the schools involved, past performance of the teachers involved, time allocated to mathematics, or others.

In their report, the authors recognized that there may be a difference in results of student achievement in December and May, but they fail to compare the instructional time for students in the two organizations. Students in mid-May in the year-long classes have completed 90.8% of their instructional time in a course, whereas students in the semestered organization have completed 81.5% of their time. One would assume that this difference in instructional time could have an impact upon student achievement in topics in the course and on the results on the questions from the SIM study. In fact, there are numerous other factors impinging upon student achievement as related to school organization. How long has the school been semestered? What was the previous achievement of students before a change in organization? Was semestering implemented with staff support or opposition? And other questions abound.

The authors decry the fact that previous studies have used surveys of participants to gather data, but they employ the same process to comment on teachers' opinions of the amount of teaching time in a semestered organization. The authors do not comment on the fact that, in the year-long 40-minute periods, time is lost daily for travel between classes, whereas, in the semestered 70-minute class, travel is outside the instructional time. As a result, there is no difference in effective instructional time if five minutes is lost daily for travel from the 40-minute period. In the report, the authors cite evidence that there is less time allocated to mathematics in semestered schools, and the reader is left with the impression that this is a given for semestered schools even though there are specific minimum time requirements for courses under any organizational pattern in Ontario schools. In fact, the report implies that semestering means less time and hence lower achievement.

In summary, although the analysis of the data presented can be classified as "interesting," it does not prove or disprove the myth presented as a hypothesis by the authors. The publication of the report as research with the accompanying inflammatory comments as conclusion downgrades the use of such valuable studies as the Second International Mathematics Study (SIMS) from which the data for the report was taken.

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