

BACKGROUNDER

SCHOOL CALENDAR OPTIONS

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Background:

This report has been prepared further to the Board's request that the Superintendent provide an overview of options in relation to an altered school calendar.

It should be noted that due to the extensive writing that has been done on this topic, citations and references will not be provided but are available upon request. I have borrowed extensively from the overviews and meta-analyses that have been done by others, including Dr. Bruce Beirsto in Richmond and calendar teams in the Langley, Delta, Boundary, and Gulf Islands School Districts.

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A Brief Overview of the School Calendar:

Across North America and elsewhere the school year has traditionally run for nine or ten months with a two to three month break, usually in the summer months, and two breaks during the school year (in North America two weeks at Christmas and one week in the spring). The calendar was originally established in this format for reasons related to agriculture and the need to have young people available for farming. The model has remained in place for many reasons, primarily related to the preferences of families, students, employees and communities.

Within the traditional school year, governments have established requirements for the number of hours of instruction within required areas of study and have declared minimum instructional time within the school year. For example, in British Columbia the *School Calendar Regulation* prescribes the number of instructional, non-instructional, examination and administrative days for a given year, with the number of instructional days in a year ranging from 185 to 187 days. Over the year students are required to receive the equivalent of 2.4 hours per instructional day in kindergarten, 4.75 hours per instructional day in grades 1-7 and 5.15 hours per instructional day in grades 8-12.

The Regulation requires the first day of school to be the Tuesday after Labour Day and the last day of school to be June 30 or, if June 30 falls on a Monday or Tuesday, the Friday before. Vacation periods are also established in law. Collective agreements have also provided clarity in regard to the calendar, primarily by determining the length of the work day for teaching and support staff.

In British Columbia there is also a provision for a school or district to be run on a local school calendar which deviates from the standard school calendar. The local calendar must offer the required number of minutes of instruction for the year, and must be adopted by a Board after no less than one month's notice of all of the details to the community, including employees and parents. This must be done in time to announce the following year's calendar by the end of May as required by the School Act.

Altered School Calendar – Closure Days or Extended Breaks:

Closure Days

Altered school calendars have been adopted most often in BC by reducing the number of instructional days by adding minutes to other days in the school year, with the expressed rationale being to reduce costs and provide for improved health and learning. Altering the calendar by closing on certain days and adding the required number of minutes to other days can be achieved in a number of ways including:

- Four-Day Week: Reducing by roughly 30 of 186 instructional days.
- Nine-Day Fortnight: Reducing by roughly 15 of 186 instructional days.
- Periodic Closures: Selecting, then strategically placing, a number of closure days. This includes the option of extending the usual breaks, with the most common version of that being a two-week spring break as will be described below.

The most notable example of an altered/reduced calendar is the four-day week which has been in place in School Districts 51 (Boundary) and 64 (Gulf Islands) for a number of years. The Superintendents in those districts report that there have been budget savings and that there is at least no harm done in terms of health and learning, although there are many anecdotal comments in regard to positive and negative effects.

Extended Breaks

An emerging phenomenon in BC is the advent of the two-week spring break, which has been brought in primarily in hopes of seeing health and learning benefits and secondarily to realize small budget savings. This change has been brought in either through union agreement to “front-load” non-instructional days rather than spreading them across the year, or through adding minutes to days in session, or a combination.

The net effects are still being studied but the evidence so far is that the effect appears to be neutral. A positive effect has been reported in terms of the preferences (more accurately the feelings) of many employees and some parents. A less positive effect has been reported in terms of concerns about daycare or support for students with special needs. Another strong concern is in regard to the potential for learning loss that occurs during the second week of spring break. Many people, including secondary students and teachers, have expressed concerns that the addition of a few minutes to a day does not offset the loss of an entire day of instruction.

Altered School Calendar – The Balanced Calendar:

The balanced calendar has been the subject of substantial research and experimentation for decades. A balanced calendar is designed to spread schooling, and therefore teaching and learning, over the 52 weeks of a year.

Traditionally, a school year has included 40 weeks of instruction as follows (the **9-2-1** model):

Weeks in session		15 (Sep-Dec)		10 (Jan-Mar)		15 (Mar-Jun)
Weeks off	9 (Summer)		2 (Winter)		1 (Spring)	

Extensive research, and considerable experimentation, very little of which has resulted in long term structural change, has been directed at three reasons for change:

1. Reducing summer learning loss, a phenomenon which has been demonstrated unequivocally to affect children who are considered at risk, who have learning challenges, or who come from less advantaged families. Research demonstrates clearly that certain children (often described as vulnerable) experience learning loss over the nine week summer break; they actually regress in learning by as much as 3-4 months. More capable or more advantaged children experience learning gains consistent with the time away from school, 2-3 months, due to their summer learning activities provided by family and circumstance (reading, travel, summer programs and more).
2. Improving staff and student wellness through shorter duration blocks of instructional time and longer breaks throughout the year.
3. Change for the sake of change, based on a rhetorical argument that goes something like, “Since the current calendar is based on a 100 year old agrarian model, and since we don’t have crops to take in, then we need to change it to get into modern times.” I see the first two reasons being more compelling than this one, but do see this being a clear rationale for flexing the learning experience regardless of the calendar, as explained in the next section (Flexible Scheduling).

The Balanced Calendar

A balanced calendar can take many forms, each of which is a variation on the 9-2-1 model, and each of which still contains 40 weeks of instruction. It should be noted that as a balanced calendar is considered it could be alongside other changes as described in this paper including a reduced number of days (previous section) and flexible learning environments (next section).

Two balanced models tend to dominate the literature and reform efforts, including those in BC. Those models both require a significant downsizing of the summer break, and both come with considerable opposition.

The **4-4-4** model provides for even distribution of breaks and has been introduced in various places, including in California, both to reduce summer learning loss and to offset overcrowding in facilities. The model is often multi-tracked, with cohorts of children attending year-round on different schedules, meaning that the school is not shut down during the break periods, just occupied by different students on different shifts.

Weeks in session		14 (Sep-Dec)		12 (Jan-Mar)		14 (Mar-Jun)
Weeks off	4 (Summer)		4 (Winter)		4 (Spring)	

The **6-2-2-2** model is a single-track model being considered in various districts in BC, including School District 36 (Surrey) for the 2011/12 school year. This moves three weeks of summer break into the school year – two weeks in October and an additional week attached to spring break. School would start three weeks earlier in August, resulting in a balance of days in each semester for secondary students. The rationale for the proposal is to improve health and reduce summer learning loss.

In		7 (Aug-Sept)		9 (Oct-Dec)		10 (Jan-Mar)		14 (Mar-Jun)
Off	6 (Jul-Aug)		2 (Oct)		2 (Dec)		2 (Mar)	

Potential Benefits

Balanced calendars have been in place in various countries and within Canada for many years and have been studied extensively. Locations with histories of balanced calendars include parts of England, Australia, Hong Kong, California, Saskatchewan and Alberta, specifically Calgary. The Calgary experience began with staggered multi-track scheduling due to overcrowding, but many schools have retained the model even after that need abated.

The arguments and research evidence that support a balanced calendar include:

- A cumulative positive effect on student achievement
- A decrease in summer learning loss
- Better retention of learning due to less down time

- Teachers reporting less review time needed in September
- Particular advantage for students who require or benefit from additional support, including students with special needs, English language learners and students of First Nations or other aboriginal heritage
- Parents reporting a reduction of summertime boredom for their children
- Greater opportunity for intercession classes offered during the breaks
- Principals reporting less stress, more collaboration, greater motivation for students and staff, and less student discipline
- Decreased vandalism
- Increased opportunities for family travel at different time of year
- More regular connections for non-custodial parents
- Reported improved health or wellness for employees and students
- Potential for utility and snow removal savings with longer winter breaks

Potential Downfalls

There are potential down sides to a balanced calendar as well, including:

- Family effects including less ability to take family vacations during the summer when many people prefer to travel
- Potential for lack of availability of daycare
- Children and families in one district being on a different schedule than friends, relatives or even siblings in another district
- Community programs are less accessible as they are normally scheduled to coincide with traditional breaks
- Challenges for extra-curricular programs and schedules including athletics
- Potential for increased utility costs related to air conditioning in the summer
- Restricted summer employment opportunities for students and 10-month employees
- Less opportunity for staff and students to upgrade credentials in the summer
- With no demonstrable improvement in achievement for higher achievers, a perception that the balanced calendar, with its shortcomings, has been in response to the needs of a small number of students with challenges and vulnerabilities

Altered School Calendar – Flexible Scheduling

Most considerations of alterations to school calendars are focused, in research and in practice, on reducing the number of days (primarily for budget reasons) or balancing the school year (primarily for health and learning reasons).

There is a third reason to rethink the school calendar, and in my view it is at least as compelling. That is a call for change in relation to the organization of time within the school calendar regardless of the model, particularly at the secondary level. I will expand on that after providing a few comments about elementary and middle levels.

Elementary Schools

In considering the organization of time for our K-5 elementary schools, and for children aged 5 to 11, it makes sense to stay with a system that is similar to what we have now. Whether the days are in a standard or altered calendar, there is general agreement with the idea of 185-187 days of school experience per year for children of this age.

It also makes sense for each day to be roughly an 8:30am to 3:00pm experience. Within that day, there is already considerable flexibility for how learning is facilitated, particularly given that students are for the most part with one teacher who is teaching most subject areas in ways that integrate rather than delineate the artificial lines between subjects. Elementary schools, with their open timelines, are also well suited to serving students with unique needs in a fully inclusive environment.

Middle Schools

As we consider our grade 6-8 middle schools, and children aged 11-14, the notion of 185-187 days continues to make sense. However, the concept of an 8:30am start for every child makes less sense given the developmental needs of adolescents as it relates to sleep patterns. Research on adolescence has made it clear that the physiology of many young teens makes an early start to the day highly inconsistent with learning.

The other challenge for our middle schools is that despite our best efforts to reduce the number of teachers for each child and to expand learning blocks by moving to three blocks per day rather than six, there is still too much “artificial movement”. Students are made to stop learning in one subject area so that they can move at a pre-determined time, both physically and cognitively, to a different place. This interruption of learning is something that will need ongoing attention as we attempt to optimize learning for adolescent learners.

That said, Saanich middle schools are providing great service to their students; these schools are populated by experts in middle level education who love their work and who innovate constantly in support of children and learning. As with elementary, there is no compelling case for changing the structure of middle level education more than is already being created within the schools across the district.

Secondary Education

The shift in heading from “Schools” to “Education” is purposeful. In Saanich, as elsewhere in BC and beyond, we have been engaged in a vibrant “secondary renewal” conversation for many years. This is not because we find any fault with secondary education or secondary schools. In fact, it is just the opposite. Given the constraints within which our secondary system exists, it is a remarkably engaging, innovative and successful place of relevant and responsive teaching and learning.

But the constraints are many, and it is time to be more focused in determining what they are and what kind of changes can be enacted to liberate learning for 14 to 18 year-olds. The call in this paper is going to be more for external liberation than internal. I believe that inside the system, and inside our five secondary schools, there are people who are doing all that they can to innovate in everything from teaching practices to uses of technology to assessment to supports for students with unique needs.

We see every day that our teachers and administrators are inquisitive, current, energetic and creating positive change even while facing the realities of an increasingly busy and complex world. Yet even as they embrace change and create more relevant and responsive learning environments characterized by student engagement, they are bound by restrictions that are not of their making.

They are, in no particular order:

1. A Barrier to Deep Learning: Too Much Content

There are areas within secondary curriculum that lend themselves to deep learning and engagement, primarily in areas that are by definition global and large scale. In fact, Global Perspectives and similar locally developed courses are good examples of that, as are courses like senior Physical Education with their focus on outdoor excursions.

However, in the academic areas it is a generally held truism that there is too much content. Teachers are unable to slow down and move students into deep learning because they need to cover content that is both required by the curriculum and in many cases tested on a final provincial exam. This challenge of too much content, compounded by provincial exams that require recitation of masses of basic knowledge, is significant and troubling at the grade 10 level, but is also true of grade 11 and 12 academic courses in Math, English, Social Studies and Science.

2. An Artificial Constraint: The September to June Calendar

Students are inclined in the 21st Century toward any-time, anywhere learning, making the 10 month calendar and the 6 hour day as noted below real barriers to the kind of learning that would be more suitable for the student of today. Also, with students having lives that are so full and so multi-dimensional, whether through work, travel, family commitments, or other priorities, the concept of “school starts in September and ends in June” has become passé. One way that young people have adapted their worlds to this constraint is to be more frequent users of on-line educational services and summer programs.

3. A Limiting Factor for Teaching and Learning: The School Day

As with the September to June calendar, the 9:00am to 3:00pm school day is fast becoming an artifact of the past, not because we are organizing for a 24 hour learning day, but because students are creating that new reality. Increasingly, students are flexing their schedules to have school fit them, rather than vice versa. They are accessing flexible and online scheduling as provided in schools like ILC and SIDES, and are customizing their own schedules in neighbourhood schools to meet their needs and priorities. One risk to our neighbourhood schools is that with increased access to other options for students comes a threat to the programs and culture of schools as we have known them.

Thankfully our neighbourhood schools have evolved with the times and are responsive to the needs for students to access flexible schedules. They offer many classes before the traditional start and end times of the day and teachers have found ways to provide students with flexible timelines for work even within a fixed-time system.

4. Interruptions to Learning: The Schedule Within the Day

Recently, I visited a secondary school before the start of the regular school today and sat in on (and participated in) a choir class being co-taught by a staff member and a community mentor. As the clock approached 9:00am and the mentor was given a two-minute warning, there was a palpable loss of flow for everyone in the room.

The engagement, the real feeling of optimal learning, was interrupted by the clock. The teacher, mentor and I lamented that at the time, and the teacher followed up later with a clear message that had time not been a factor the class could have spent one more hour, or more, to really embed some complex learning. The suggestion was that one more hour that morning would have created learning equivalent to what would take five more one-hour interrupted sessions to attain.

So what is the lesson here? This is a situation replicated countless times every day in every school that is organized by fixed-length blocks of time. We need to find ways, systematically and structurally, to provide students with experiences that honour the well understood principles of learning. For this discussion that includes that students learn at different rates and in different ways.

5. A Question of Relevance: The Graduation Program

One question that is emerging with increasing regularity around the province is in relation to the relevance of the Graduation Program in BC. Even with many changes over the years, we are still expecting students to pass (not necessarily master) the same core courses as have been required for decades, some of them with relatively little change in content.

When one reviews the current literature in terms of what students need to know and be as citizens of the 21st Century there is incredibly poor alignment with the experiences that we are providing through our grade 10-12 program. We have done a marvelous job of filling in around the edges to create relevance and engagement, primarily through the good work of teachers in developing programs, but we have not asked the right questions in the right ways and in the right places about what must be different. This is not a local issue for school districts as much as it is a need for a wide-ranging discussion at the macro level.

There is, of course, good news. As noted already, our secondary schools are emerging into a new age. Our neighbourhood schools have maintained their long-standing success with core academic classroom learning and have added vibrant and engaging programs too many to mention, but ranging from technology to arts to service to athletics. Our Individual Learning Centres are providing safe and supportive flexible learning environments, and the South Island Distance Education School is a world leader in providing on-line flexible learning environments to all of our students including those in the other secondary schools.

The next step in this evolution is to make sure that the successes of each of these environments is visited upon the others through the creation of genuine hybrid environments that respond fully to the needs of each individual learner.

This ideal will be more possible to realize when we move beyond our own initiatives for change and engage with other leaders across the province, and with government, in lifting the constraints referred to above. Success in this undertaking will take more than good will and good energy; it will take political imperative and legislative or policy change at the provincial level. I am committed to being a part of that change agenda and will at the same time continue to support the many positive initiatives underway in Saanich.

Financial Implications of Calendar Changes

The financial implications for any of the altered calendar options described so far are dependent on a number of factors, including the size of the school district, the timing of alterations in relation to the calendar, and the extent to which the governors of the system are willing to make savings through reduced work hours, particularly for support staff. It should be noted that the previous section on the need for flexibility does not lead to logical conclusions in terms of finances, however calendar changes that relate to closure days or a balanced calendar do. This paper will not provide any detailed consideration of cost savings in relation to an altered calendar.

Hybrid Models:

While this paper has focused on three separate concepts (closure days, balanced calendar and flexible scheduling) it is advisable for any consideration of calendar changes to considerate of the possibility of hybrids. The possibilities, each of which merits discussion, include:

- None of those changes
- Only closure days OR balanced calendar OR flexible scheduling
- Closure days AND a balanced calendar
- Closure days AND flexible scheduling over a traditional school year
- Balanced calendar AND flexible scheduling
- Closure days AND a balanced calendar AND flexible scheduling

Considerations:

Further to the options and implications described in this paper the Board may wish to consider the potential for some form of balanced year no earlier than for the 2011/12 school year. Due to the rationale for a balanced calendar being primarily related to teaching and learning, the balanced calendar should be considered separately from deliberations on the 2010/11 budget.

The other consideration for the Board is the development a long-range project, in partnership with other districts, designed to examine flexible scheduling, and all of its permutations and ramifications, for secondary schooling. Our analysis would draw first on local expertise and perspectives then would expand into analysis of research and conversations with the broader education community in BC. This is a topic of currency and interest within the K-12 and post-secondary communities throughout the province. The method for this inquiry would be inclusive of staff, students and parents as well as community members as appropriate.

Respectfully,



Keven Elder
Superintendent of Schools