



# Memorandum

vancouver school board



DATE: September 24, 2010  
TO: Committee I  
FROM: Steve Cardwell, Superintendent of Schools  
RE: **Research Report on Balanced Calendars**

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Please find attached the research report "Balanced School Calendars: Pros and Cons". This document is being presented to Committee I to provide information on alternative school calendar options.

Thank you for your time in reviewing this report.

## Balanced School Calendars: Pros and Cons

### Report Summary:

This report details the rationale and schedules of several Canadian schools using a single-track balanced school calendar and provides current research on the advantages and disadvantages of this type of scheduling.

A balanced school calendar, otherwise known as year-round schooling, is a way of configuring a school year calendar with an emphasis on an even distribution or balance of instructional days and school breaks over a period of twelve months. Although this schedule maintains the same instructional hours as a traditional school year, the breaks are distributed more evenly throughout the year. There are variations of schedules within the balanced school calendar and schools run on either a single-track or multi-track calendar. This report primarily focuses on the single-track calendar.

Currently, the Vancouver School District calendar is based on a traditional school year that starts in September and ends in June, providing students and staff with some short breaks throughout the school year, and one long break in the summer. Although there are advantages to this type of calendar schedule, the ever changing composition and needs of the students in this district make it reasonable to question whether a traditional school calendar remains the most beneficial option for our students. This report provides insight into the issues and attributes of the balanced calendar option.

The research in this report indicates that there are opposing views on this topic and both views must be considered when evaluating the balanced school calendar schedule. Advocates for a balanced calendar feel that many aspects of learning improve in a year-round schedule, including student attendance, attitude, and academic achievement, and that teachers have greater job satisfaction, as well. They state that teachers, students, and parents seem to like this system. To add to these benefits, the balanced calendar can be highly effective in reducing school operating costs. Opponents to the balanced calendar argue that there is no substantial increase in academic student achievement when students are on a year-round schedule as opposed to a traditional schedule and that the research proposing the benefits of a balanced calendar is limited and inadequate. In addition, students, parents and caretakers must deal with schedule challenges and adaptation to change. Finally, cost saving claims are unsubstantiated.

There are a number of school districts in the metro region considering a balanced calendar. It is suggested that our school district review the benefits and disadvantages of both the traditional and balanced calendars and that consideration be given to exploring alternative school calendars.

**Schools on Balanced Calendars:**

The following is a list of schools in Canada that are using, or in one case proposing to use, a balanced calendar. I have included each school's individual calendar schedule and the school's or district's rationale for using a balanced school calendar. Along with this information, I've compiled a general list of pros and cons for balanced school calendars. It's important to note that much research has been done by the authors of the sources used in this document. Where possible, I have acknowledged their research sources within the context of the information listed below. All bulleted information in this document is quoted directly from the sources and any paraphrased information is represented in italics.

**Spul'u'kwuks Elementary, Richmond, BC**

Current School Calendar ("Balanced School Calendar." *Spul'u'kwuks*):

- Three months of school followed by one month break rotation
- December and April four week vacation period
- August five week vacation period
- Single-track schedule

Rationale ("Balanced School Calendar." *Spul'u'kwuks*):

- Time required to review concepts and skills (especially in September) is reduced.
- New curriculum can be introduced more quickly.
- *ESL students* receive more continuous English language instruction.
- All students maintain their sense of "student-ness" and learning behaviour more easily.
- Students and staff also have balanced breaks throughout the year allowing for physical rest, relaxation, and renewal.

**Kanaka Creek Elementary School**

Current School Calendar ("Kanaka Creek Elementary"):

- Schools starts September 8/09
- Winter Break December 7/09 – January 3/10
- April Break – April 5 – May 3
- Summer Break – Month of August
- Single-track schedule

Rationale (Beairsto 4):

- It spreads out the learning throughout the year.
- Better retention of skills.
- Less teaching of skills needed in the fall.
- Children get bored with 2 months off school in the summer.
- Less student burnout.
- Better vacation options for families.

## Additional Information:

The following information is based on the Mission Public Schools Vision 2020 document. This document is not specific to this school, but addresses general goals and objectives for the Mission School District. This district is considering three possible calendar options, one of which is the Kanaka Creek/Maple Ridge model ("Vision 2020..." 72). Several objectives are listed as part of their vision including the following three, which have been associated with the benefits of a balanced calendar:

- Minimize summer learning loss for vulnerable students (70).
- Increase continuity of student support services (70).
- Minimize transition time for school start up and shutdown (70).

**Douglas Park Community School, Langley**

Current School Calendar ("School District #35..."):

- School starts September
- Break/Intercession – beginning of November – one week
- Christmas Break – two weeks
- Spring Break – two weeks
- Break/Intercession – May – two weeks
- Summer Break – 5 weeks starting last week of July

Rationale (Waithman & Shields 10 -11):

- Remedial sessions can be offered four times a year (10).
- An early dismissal day once a week accommodates staff professional development (10).
- A more sustained and protective schooling environment is provided where students stay connected on a more continuous basis (10).
- Provides an innovative climate where creative programming can be implemented by parents, staff, and community support agencies (10).
- Enables the school to sustain a community-based model which encompasses resources from numerous partner agencies (11).
- *Booster camps, which are popular and successful, are offered to students during the intercession breaks* (Beairsto 4).
- Calendar serves a vulnerable student population (Beairsto 4).
- Shorter summer is better for many of the students who are at loose ends (Beairsto 4).
- Staff find the additional vacation period rejuvenating (Beairsto 4).

**Glendale Elementary, Williams Lake, BC**

Current School Calendar ("2009 – 2010 Glendale School Calendar"):

- School starts in September
- One week break in November (November 9 – 12)
- Three week winter break (December 18 – January 8)
- Four week spring break (April 12 – May 7)
- Three days off (July 2, 9, 16)
- Two days off (July 28 and 29)

- One month summer break (July 30 – Sept. 6)
- Single-track schedule

Rationale (“Glendale Balanced School...”):

- *Research by Dr. Carolyn Shields and Dr. Steven Lynn Oberg greatly supports the merits of a balanced calendar.*
- Especially for workers in the logging, hospitality and construction industries, the four week break from mid-April to mid-May allows families to vacation together.
- Students and parents, who have experienced both calendars, tell us that they prefer the five week summer vacation. It seems to be just about the perfect amount of time off for both children and parents.
- Many parents have commented that they love the three weeks off at Christmas. There were two main reasons for this; one is that the extra week allows them to vacation abroad more easily and the other was that the stressful nature of the holiday is mitigated by the extra week off.
- School has the lowest absentee rate in the district (Beairsto 4).
- Students experience less summer learning loss (Beairsto 4).
- Student motivation/engagement is increased (Beairsto 4).

### **Garden City Elementary, Richmond, BC**

School Calendar Proposal (“Balanced School Calendar.” *Garden*):

- Starts in September
- Three week winter break
- Three week spring break
- School ends mid July (six week summer break)
- Single-track schedule

Rationale (“Balanced School Calendar.” *Garden*):

- Continuous education reduces the amount of material students forget over the extended summer vacation.
- Student attendance may improve with fewer absences as a result of extended holidays not overlapping with days in session.
- (More) evenly spread out breaks may improve student motivation and re-energizes them resulting in improved focus.
- More continuous language instruction for students who speak English as a second language.
- Better for students with special needs or at-risk students (e.g. less disruption to routines).
- Less time needed to review at the beginning of the school year.
- Less staff burnout with three (more balanced) planning/vacation breaks.
- Greater flexibility for parents in planning holidays as well as minimizing the impact of finding daycare for (more) extended period of time over the summer.

### **Roberta Bondar Public School (K-8), Toronto, Ontario**

Current School Calendar (Hamilton et al 72):

- Year-round schooling system and modified school day
- School starts in early August
- Two week break in October
- Three week winter break
- One week break in February
- Two week spring break
- July off
- Two 45-minute nutrition breaks (replacing traditional one hour lunch and 15 minute recess)
- Suburb school, most students come from first generation immigrant families
- Single-track schedule

Rationale (Hamilton et al 72-73):

- This schedule frees us to provide priceless instructional time and enrichment to our 1,100 students (73).
- The arrangement minimizes summer learning loss (73).
- It puts time on the side of the students (73).
- *The school is able to offer* optional remedial or enrichment classes during each break (72).
- Intersessions provide students who need additional help with extra time for learning or a chance to learn through unconventional methods (72).

### **Study Profile: School A (K -Gr. 8) and School B (K – Gr. 9) in Ontario**

Current School Calendar (Winter 403-404):

- Year-round schooling system (403)
- Summer break starts is five weeks beginning in July (404)
- Instructional and non-instructional time is organized into smaller segments and is spaced throughout the year (404)
- School starts in the second week of August, and runs with about nine weeks of in-school time balanced with two-week breaks throughout the year (403)
- Both calendars (modified school year and traditional school year) are offered at each school – dual-track school (403)

Rationale (Winter 401, 405 - 406):

- Younger children manage the nine week learning blocks better than a full term (405).
- Two-week breaks refresh and recharge the younger students (405).
- Retention of routines is good after the two-week break (405).
- Social skills are maintained after the five-week summer break (405).
- Pacing suits younger children better than older (405).
- Retention of academic skills is better after the two-week and five-week breaks (405).
- Immature and academically at-risk students can handle nine-week blocks and benefit from the short breaks (405).

- Behaviourally challenged students can “hold-it-together” for the shorter blocks (405).
- Less teacher and student “burn-out” (406).
- Changing and evolving lifestyles, working contexts, and community involvement relate less to the traditional calendar (401).
- Suits stay-at-home parents (406).
- Many working parents can each manage to get a week off to cover the two-week breaks (406).
- The five-week summer break is easier for many working parents who can balance holidays and avoid expensive daycare and summer camp costs.
- No need for long-term childcare (406).
- Teachers in busy early years’ classrooms benefit from a balanced year (406).

Re: Running both modified school year (MSY) and traditional school year calendars at each school:

- August start is calmer with over one-half of the school still off (406).
- Teachers on traditional calendar also have more time and space (e.g. for the gym, in the schoolyard) when the MSY students are on holiday (406).

### **General Pros and Cons of a Balanced School Year:**

The following information comes from a variety of sources. The lists are intended to provide a snapshot of the main pros and cons for balanced school year schedules. The primary focus is on single-track systems.

#### **Pros:**

- *Eliminates or reduces* the “learning loss” that takes place during the long summer break (Ballinger, 1999; Shields & Oberg, 2000) (Winter 401).
- *Provides a* continuous learning pattern (LeClaire et al 9).
- Makes for a more even learning curve (Bennett).
- Improves student achievement (Bradford, 1993; Kneese, 1996; Mutchler, 1993; Peltier, 1991; Perry, 1991) \*Shields and Oberg (1999) caution that there may not be a simple relationship between achievement and the modified calendar (Winter 401).
- *Students have a more positive attitude to schooling* (Fardig & Locker, 1992; Shields & Laroque, 1998) (Winter 401).
- *Benefits ESL students as they will have less learning loss during the breaks* (LeClaire et al 9).
- *Benefits students identified as “at risk” as well* (Capps & Cox, 1991; Gandara & Fish, 1994; Perry, 1991; Serifs, 1990) (Winter 401).
- Students can make up a course, get remediation or enrichment during their vacation time through intersession classes (“Research Brief...” 2).
- Because of shorter vacations, students spend less time reviewing material at the beginning of each grading period (“Research Brief...” 2).

- Less absenteeism by both students and teachers, and a reduced student dropout rate (Glines & Mussatii, 2002; Shields & Oberg, 1999; Zykowski, Mitchell, Hough, & Gavin, 1991) (Winter 401).
- The shorter instructional periods result in a reduction of teacher fatigue and burnout and higher teacher morale (Levine & Ornstein, 1993) (LeClaire et al 10).
- Many teachers believe that the continuity of instruction leads to a better quality of instruction (Quinlan, George, & Emmett, 1987) and that that the year-round schedule impacts positively on the way in which they plan for instruction (Shields & Oberg, 2000). They are able to plan more regularly for shorter blocks of time (LeClaire et al 10).
- *Teachers seem less stressed and have a more positive attitude* (Fardig & Locker, 1992; Shield & Oberg, 1999) (Winter 401).
- The organization of the instructional time allows teachers to be reflective practitioners because they are able to plan at regular intervals during the academic year when it is needed the most (Shields & Oberg, 2000) (LeClaire et al 10).
- There is more time for teachers to work together collegially ("Research Brief..." 2).
- Greater satisfaction among parents, teachers, and students (McMillen 67).
- It may be easier for two teachers to split a contract. ("Research Brief..."2)
- Multi-track programs can result in significant cost savings if the programs are carried out well (*Worthen and Zsiray, 1994*) (McMillen 67).
- Families can take vacations at less travelled times ("Research Brief..." 2).
- Decreased vandalism ("Research Brief..." 2).
- Fewer discipline problems ("Research Brief..." 2).
- Multi-track programs utilize school buildings throughout the year (Winter 400).

### Cons:

- The number of quality studies conducted and published in this area is limited (Kneese, 1996) (McMillen 67).
- Despite several studies on the topic, most existing research on year-round education suffers from important methodological limitations (McMillen 67).
- It's merely a scheduling change that has little increased educational value (Alberta's Teacher's Association, 1991) (Winter 401).
- A substantial body of work indicates that there are no significant differences in achievement between students on a modified calendar and those on a traditional one (Harp, 1993; Zykowski *et al.*, 1991) (Winter 401).



- Allinder, Fuchs, Fuchs, and Hamlett (1992) find that evidence on retention of previously learned material is mixed at best, may vary according to subject, and that claims regarding achievement differences should be viewed with caution (Winter 401- 402).
- Brothers and sisters as well as children of teachers could all be on different schedules ("Research Brief..." 3).
- Single-track programs cost as much or more than traditional school programs *according to Worthen and Zsiray, 1994* (McMillen 67).
- The issue of cost effectiveness is very complex, and much of the analysis in literature appears inadequate (Naylor "BCTF Research Report: Cost...")
- Caregivers and community daycare centres may have different schedules (Winter 407).
- Absence of air conditioning in older schools ("Are holidays too long?").
- Resistance from parents and staff who are wedded to the traditional schedule ("Are holidays too long?").
- *Teachers won't be available to work summer jobs, including summer school* (Bennett).
- *Teachers of children attending schools in other districts would have to find daycare for their kids for a portion of summer break* (Bennett).
- A balanced year could affect provincial exams (Bennett).
- It also creates problems for high schools that are on semester systems (Bennett).
- It would not be harmonized with other school districts in the province (Bennett).
- Continuing education coursework for teachers may be difficult to pursue in the summer (LeClaire et al 13).

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