

REPORT TO THE BOARD OF EDUCATION OF DISTRICT 99

EARLY START CALENDAR IN DISTRICT 99

February 1, 2016

1. INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2015, while in the process of recommending a school calendar for the 2016-2017 school year, a number of voices came forward to request that District 99 consider a calendar that would end the first semester prior to the winter break. This began a four-month study of the advantages and issues associated with an “early start” calendar. The purpose of this memo is to summarize the findings from our study, including input from our faculty, staff, and students; the school community “outside” of our buildings including the associated elementary districts; and the experiences of large public high schools in the western suburbs of Chicago that have adopted an early start calendar.

For the purposes of this paper, a “traditional calendar” ends the first semester, including final exams, after the winter break; an “early start calendar” is defined as a calendar that ends the first semester before the winter break. Note that “ending the semester before the break” is substantially different from holding first semester exams before the break. The former starts the school year earlier and creates a true end of the first semester at the break. The latter is simply a change in the exam schedule.

2. ADVANTAGES OF THE EARLY START CALENDAR

A review of our research identified the following as perceived or actual advantages to the early start calendar for high schools:

- The most important function of the early start calendar is it creates a true break between the first and second semesters at the winter break, similar to a semester break at the college level. Most believe this is an important benefit for students, but anecdotal information from the experience of many schools suggests that such a break between semesters can also have benefits for teachers and staff.
- Giving finals before the break may allow teachers to reduce the amount of time they spend reviewing for the exams after the break.
- Advanced Placement (AP) exams take place on national testing dates throughout May; beginning the school year earlier allows students enrolled in year-long and second semester AP courses more instructional days prior to testing. It would also mean holding the AP exams in close proximity to the end of the second semester for year-long and second semester AP courses. It is important to note that more than one third of our current student body will take at least one AP course during high school and one of the District’s ongoing goals is to increase the number and percentage of students enrolled in AP courses each year.

- Currently teacher recommendations are made late in the first semester, but before teachers issue a final semester grade. With an earlier start to the year, teacher recommendations can be based upon an actual versus an anticipated grade. This will improve the course recommendation/selection process.
- Older students matriculating at College of DuPage for the second semester can do so with grades in hand, thus facilitating a more seamless transition.
- Among those students positively affected by finishing the semester before the winter break are students with disabilities. It will be easier for these students to prepare for final examinations and the transition to the new semester.
- Given that so many high schools that our schools compete against already have an early start calendar; adopting a similar calendar may improve scheduling for athletic and activity competitions.

3. DRAWBACKS OF AN EARLY START CALENDAR

A review of our research identified the following as perceived or actual drawbacks of an early start calendar:

- Our schools are only partially air conditioned. An early start calendar extends the likelihood of holding school on hot, humid days when learning conditions in specific areas of the building will be a challenge. This issue is partially mitigated by pushing the start as late as possible into August; it is a nonissue when all our classrooms and learning spaces are air-conditioned. The August heat will continue to affect the schedules of those associated elementary school systems that are not air-conditioned.
- District 99 is associated with five elementary school districts and several private schools also send students to us. While not required, it has been our practice, and the community's general expectation, for District 99 to align its school calendar with that of the associated school districts. The key alignment points are the beginning of the school year, the winter break, and the spring break. High school semesters have a very different connotation than elementary and middle school semesters and thus those levels have far less interest in ending before the winter break. Generally speaking, aligning an early start calendar with the elementary school calendars is going to be a challenge.
- Moving to an early start calendar changes the definition of "summer" for staff, students, and families. Beginning the school year earlier means summer will begin in late May and end in early to mid-August. Many families have expressed concerns about altering traditional family vacation schedules and vacation opportunities. Students who participate in traveling sport teams and marching band have a brief vacation "window" in early August; families have learned to plan around this window.

- Traditional fall athletics, activities, marching band and other programs have started in early August in accordance with the IHSA calendar. An early start calendar will affect those schedules.
- A move to an early start schedule will cause us to rethink many of our practices in the fine and performing arts. We will certainly alter the concert/performance schedule throughout the year, including the use of the auditorium. It will also cause us to limit our students' public performances and appearances.

4. AREA HIGH SCHOOLS THAT END FIRST SEMESTER BEFORE THE WINTER BREAK

Research about preponderance of early start calendars revealed that District 99 high schools may be in the minority of high schools in the western Chicago suburbs that do not use an early start schedule.

An incomplete list of these schools includes: Carpentersville District 300 high schools, the Naperville District 203 high schools, Reavis High School, the Niles District 214 high schools, Lake Park High School, Orland Park District 230 high schools, Maine District 207 high schools, Plainfield District 202 high schools, Leyden District 212 high schools, Oak Park River Forest High School, New Trier High School, Bolingbrook High School, Lyons Township High School, District 88 high schools, Lockport High School, Hinsdale District 86 high schools, and Homewood Flossmoor High School.

Many of the above schools have air conditioning in all classroom spaces, but some do not and several reported that they implemented the early start schedule years before they were able to install air conditioning in their classrooms.

5. INPUT/FEEDBACK FROM VARIOUS SOURCES

CADCA SURVEY: The Chicago Area Directors of Curriculum and Assessment (CADCA), an association of suburban high school curriculum administrators, conducted a survey of high schools with early start calendars recently. The survey participants represented schools that have had an early start calendar in place for more than a decade and some for whom the change to early start is recent. All the respondents reported that the schedule has been a positive change with few drawbacks.

[Please click here to read the CADCA survey results.](#)

DGEA STUDY: In the fall of 2015, the Downers Grove Educational Association (DGEA), which represents District 99 certified staff, conducted a process to glean feedback from teachers regarding their perceptions about moving to an early start calendar. Typically, teachers and certified staff members met in department meetings and offered feedback to representatives who then shared the feedback with the DGEA leadership. The process did not include a formal survey and thus did not result in a tally of teachers who supported, had

questions about, or opposed the change. A summary of the results mirrors the advantages and drawbacks summarized. Staff members saw value in ending the semester before the break and starting the new semester immediately after the break, with final exams and semester grades out of the way. Teachers also noted the additional time to teach the AP curriculum and the fact that AP exams would be given closer to the end of the second semester.

Teachers were most concerned about increased school days in hot weather, especially with no commitment to install air conditioning in those learning spaces not air-conditioned at this time. There were concerns about placing too much pressure on students with final exams before the break. Teachers also noted changing the traditional summer could be an issue, particularly in the first year. They also cited the potential loss of school holidays, changes in due dates for grades and reports, potential changes in the winter break schedule, and the perceived impact of the calendar on the fine arts.

[Please click here to see the DGEA report.](#)

DISTRICT 99 ONLINE SURVEY: District 99 posted an online survey from December 1 through December 8, 2015, on its website to glean feedback about calendar preferences from parents, students, faculty and staff members, and community members. The survey asked respondents to indicate whether they favored a traditional calendar (semester ends after break), an early start calendar (semester ends before the break), or no preference. It also asked respondents to provide a rationale for their preference.

The survey had 1451 respondents, including 720 parents, 420 students, 165 faculty, and 97 support staff members.

Note that it is likely some teachers did not respond to the survey because they had already shared their opinion with DGEA. This was not a scientific survey with a carefully crafted sampling frame providing a representative sample of our parents, students, or community; as such we are bound to assume that the survey respondents differed significantly from non-respondents in their views. Additionally, the survey question was rather general and thus we can assume that one respondent may favor an early start calendar provided certain conditions were met, but would not support an early start calendar under different conditions. The survey was promoted to current District 99 parents and the parents of incoming 9th graders, but we did not notify all parents within our associated districts about the survey. Those persons were not precluded from participation; they were simply not encouraged to participate.

Accepting all the above, the survey produced a large number of respondents and was a quick, efficient, and cost effective method to receive input from parents and students—two groups significantly affected by the calendar change—into the discussion.

Approximately 63% of all respondents favored the early start calendar with 4% having no preference. The majority of parents (63%), students (73%), and support staff (59%) favored the early start calendar. The majority of the faculty respondents (58%) favored the traditional calendar.

Most of the more than 1,400 respondents provided a rationale for their preference. Once again, the respondents' comments mirrored the advantages and drawbacks listed above. Parents and students who support the early start calendar value finishing the semester before the break and thus having a complete break from school and studying over winter break. Students who support the traditional schedule cited the heat in August, the stress of finals before break, and the effect of the early calendar on fine arts programs. Parents who supported the traditional calendar were also concerned about the heat in August. Parents also cited the importance of aligning our calendar with those of the elementary districts. The advantages and drawbacks stated by faculty and support staff in the survey were consistent with those stated earlier.

[Please click here to see a copy of the online survey results.](#)

LETTER FROM DISTRICT 58: I have made regular communication to the five associated elementary school districts regarding District 99's calendar deliberations. As each district has different circumstances to consider there are different levels of concern or apprehension regarding an early start calendar for District 99. For example, school Districts 60 and 61 are also associated with Hinsdale 86, which adopted an early start calendar for the 2015-2016 school year. District 58 would prefer to begin school as late as possible due to concerns about heat in un-air conditioned classrooms. Districts 66 and 68 are waiting until District 99 commits to a calendar before establishing next year's calendar. On January 20, I was presented a letter signed by the District 58 Board requesting that District 99 continue its practice of aligning its calendar with District 58. It also requested that District 99 agree to begin the 2016-2017 school year on August 29.

[Please click here to see a copy of the District 58 letter.](#)

7. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS PERTAINING TO 2016-2017

When the current calendar study began in the early fall of 2015, we knew that District 99 would have a new superintendent and a new principal at North High for the 2016-2017 school year. Since November, four building administrators have resigned with a potential fifth opening should the associate principal at North High be selected as principal. Both schools will manage significant change in their respective leadership teams. I believe this level of turnover is a game changer with respect to pushing forward with an early start calendar. The prudent move would be to start the school year as late as practical in order to allow the new leadership time to learn their new jobs and develop as leadership teams.

In addition to the administrative turnover at the building level, there will be a substantial number of retirements from the support staff ranks prior to the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year. These persons represent decades of institutional knowledge about how to run the basic management operations of the school buildings. Similarly the new support staff personnel will also need time to learn their roles prior to the beginning of the school year. Note that many will report to the newly hired/appointed administrators who will begin their new jobs on July 1.

Two drawbacks associated with moving to an early start calendar were redefining summer and loss of alignment with the elementary school calendars of the associated districts. It may be that both are irreconcilable and we must accept them in order to implement a schedule that favors our students. That said, deciding to change the calendar for 2016-2017 gives seven months' notice. Other high school districts that have recently implemented an early start calendar have given their respective parents and community more than a year's notice.

Our work to date on the early start calendar has seemingly identified the major benefits and drawbacks inherent in the early start calendar, other issues will emerge during the initial implementation. Those will have to be addressed by the leadership teams in place, and once again, given the turnover in leadership positions for next year, moving forward with the early calendar for 2016-2017 seems like an unwarranted challenge.

8. THE DISTRICT 99 CALENDAR COMMITTEE

In November 2015 a district-level committee formed consisting of three administrators; three DGEA members, including the current president; three Support Staff Association members, including the current president; and the South High CMG building foreman. The participants committed to three meetings to study and make a recommendation about the 2016-2017 calendar. The Committee began its work with the premise that its primary responsibility was to determine whether the District should retain a traditional calendar or adopt an early start calendar for the 2016-2017 school year. The first meeting included a review of the information gathered on the subject prior to that time. The committee also examined the frequently cited drawbacks about the early start calendar, including those that could be addressed (the length of the winter break, for example) and those that could not (the alignment with the elementary school district calendars). In the second meeting, the committee drafted early start calendars to address issues raised by teachers, students, and parents. During the third meeting, committee members reviewed additional draft calendars, heard reports about other issues associated with the early calendar, and discussed its recommendation.

The District 99 Calendar Committee's recommendations are as follows:

- Adopt the traditional calendar for 2016-2017 while also making the commitment to continue to study an early start calendar for possible implementation in 2017-2018.
- Maintain an ongoing calendar committee including membership from the administration, DGEA, the Support Staff Association, and CMG. This committee would meet regularly during the school year. This structure will also allow planning calendars for several years in advance instead of one year in advance.
- Continue to discuss and address ideas, concepts and questions raised as we have considered the early start calendar, including but not limited to: the role and scheduling of parent conferences, the role of final exams and the final exam schedule, and how we use school holidays and non-attendance days.
- Encourage the District to implement air conditioning in all classroom spaces as soon as possible.

[Please click here to see a copy of the agendas and meeting notes of the Calendar Committee.](#)

9. THE BOARD'S OPTIONS

Given that many persons and organizations are awaiting District 99's calendar decision, we have run out of time to further study the issue prior to approving a calendar for 2016-2017.

The following are four options for the Board to consider:

A. The first option is to adopt the traditional calendar proposed by the administration in November 2015. The calendar has school beginning on August 29, with the semester ending the week after the Martin Luther King holiday. The schedule is evenly balanced, includes all the school holidays, and is roughly aligned with the calendars of the associated elementary districts. Given the volume of administrative turnover in the District, it allows the maximum time possible for new administrators to learn their new roles and prepare for the upcoming school year. The traditional calendar also allows the new leaders to establish themselves without the immediate challenge of implementing a substantially different calendar.

[Please click here to see the draft of the traditional calendar.](#)

B. The second option is to reject the traditional calendar and adopt an early start calendar. Administrators and members of the District 99 Calendar Committee have developed a number of calendars that have school starting between August 15 and August 22, with first semester final exams held the week of December 19 through December 23. The second semester will end prior to Memorial Day. These calendars likely do not align with the calendars of the associated elementary districts, either in terms of the start of the school year or the start and length of the winter break. These

calendars also use state holidays and other previous non-attendance days as school days.

[Please click here to see the six drafts of an early start calendar.](#)

- C. The third option is to adopt the traditional calendar proposed for 2016-2017, while also making a *commitment to implement* an early start calendar for the 2017-2018 school year.** This option allows the new administration to establish itself while also allowing the entire district and community to examine and prepare for the impact of this change. Additionally, a delayed implementation maximizes the time available to inform the associated districts and families across the community about the pending schedule.

- D. A final option is to adopt the traditional calendar for 2016-2017, while making the commitment to *study* the early start calendar for possible implementation in the future.** This option also allows the new administration to establish itself while allowing the entire district and community to examine and prepare for the impact of this change. It also delays the potential implementation a year which allows more time to inform the associated districts and families across the community about the pending schedule. Finally it allows the District to reexamine the concept once more is known.

10. SUPERINTENDENT’S RECOMMENDATION

I recommend option “D”. Implementing an early start calendar in August of 2016 places too much strain on our school district and the associated elementary districts in our community. I believe our research to date has identified the major advantages and drawbacks to the early start calendar concept. Given that some of the issues are impossible to completely mitigate or resolve, the fairest method is to give fair warning and lead time to all affected so they can take the steps necessary to adjust. Additionally the dialogue about early start calendars in general has caused the persons involved to question other concepts associated with the calendar long held to be the status quo. These include, but are not limited to: the date and format for graduation, the role and format of parent conferences, the role of final exams and the final exam schedule, the decisions about when emergency days are scheduled and how they are used, how specific state holidays are used and recognized, and the process of developing the school calendar in general. District 99 can move forward with the early start calendar before any or all of these are resolved; but the continuing discussion should lead to ongoing, positive, and thoughtful change.

Respectfully submitted,

Mark A. McDonald, Ed D

Superintendent of Schools