



Backgrounder on Balanced and Year-round School Calendars

Introduction

Across this province, parents and school district staff are being pressured to respond to far-reaching school calendar changes without enough time to study their implications. Many school districts are modifying calendars simply to cut operating costs. That's because most school boards are facing unprecedented budget shortfalls due to inadequate provincial government funding.

In some cases, as in "the balanced school year" and "year-round schooling", not only are the benefits unproven, but the alternative calendar usually cost school districts more to operate and may result in many parents transferring their children to other schools or other districts.

School calendar changes have been on a fast and furious rise in BC since 2002 when the Liberal government changed the *School Act* and *School Calendar Regulation*. Before the changes, the regulation required school districts "to gain approval of a local calendar from parents and school employees." All that is needed now is a limited form of "consultation", defined as giving one-month's notice of the proposed calendar to parents and school staff and the adoption of the new school calendar at a public meeting.¹

CUPE has investigated the merits of a variety of school calendar changes in a series of backgrounders. This document examines the balanced school year and year-round education.

What is year-round schooling (YRS)?

Year-round education rearranges the school year to provide continuous learning by dividing the regular two-month summer vacation into shorter, more frequent breaks throughout the year. Students in a year-round program usually receive the same amount of classroom time as students on a nine-month calendar (usually 180 days). However, YRS students attend school from September to November, January to March and May to July, with most of December, April and August off.²

¹ BC Ministry of Education "Legislation Update 4/2002" p.1. <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/legislation/legp402.htm>

² In some year-round programs, students vacation in July and start school in early August.

There are single- and multi-tracking schools in year-round education. If a school is on a single-track calendar, it means all the students use the same calendar and take the same holidays off. Multiple-track schools have groups of students attending school at different times and with separate vacation periods. Multi-tracking usually occurs because it's a cost-saving exercise and can reduce student overcrowding – a major problem in the US owing to inadequate government funding.

What is a balanced school year?

The balanced school year (also known as the *balanced calendar* or *modified calendar*) is a variation of year-round schooling. Often, schools are closed for longer Christmas and Spring breaks and the school year continues well into July.

Who's behind these school calendar changes?

In October 2001, the government announced a three-year funding freeze in education. The BC School Trustee Association (BCSTA) correctly labelled this spending freeze as a cutback because “With a frozen budget, school boards are forced to cut programs and services in order to cover general increasing costs, such as inflation on supplies and fee increases.”³

The Liberal government has made calendar changes an educational priority. Instead of pumping extra money into school districts for needed educational programming, the province introduced *Bill 28 - Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* (2002) early in its mandate. *Bill 28* gave school districts the unilateral right to establish extended day or year round schooling and declared teachers' contract provisions barring these changes *null* and *void*.

Why this heavy-handed approach? In exchange for freezing the education budget (in the face of staff compensation raises, higher MSP and WCB premiums – among the litany of unfunded cost increases), the government allowed school districts to re-jig school calendars, supposedly to “improve student achievement.” In reality, the vast majority of school calendar changes are implemented in response to disturbing budget shortfalls resulting from the province's education spending freeze.

Rural school districts are under constant pressure to balance their underfunded budgets by closing schools, eliminating special education programs and cutting support staff and teachers. Instead of criticizing the education funding freeze, the Liberal government's hand-picked Rural Education Task Force urged school boards last year to “seek cost savings through year-round schooling, four-day weeks, altered holiday breaks and other calendar modifications.”⁴

Balanced year schools in the US and Canada

Schools districts using this calendar are still quite rare in Canada. There are more schools on the balanced calendar in the United States because many states have allowed school districts to set their own yearly schedules.

³ BCSTA “Year End Report” in *Advocacy Update* (December 19, 2002) p. 1-2.

⁴ Government of British Columbia *Enhancing Rural Learning: Report of the Task Force on Rural Education* (2003) p. 34.

Typically, American schools embrace alternative calendars, such as multi-tracking, because they have no other choice. Overcrowding in schools is a serious problem in the US. Though it's not unusual for American schools to experiment with different calendars, the traditional school year – consisting of two months off in the summer with shorter breaks in December and March – is still by far the norm. Of the 53.7 million public students enrolled in US public schools in 2002/03⁵, only 4% were learning on a year-round calendar⁶. That's because opponents of modified calendars are strong both in voice and numbers and because many studies touting the great successes of YRS tend to be overstated.⁷

Canadian school districts often implement a balanced- or year-round calendar on an experimental basis. It is usually attempted in the hopes of achieving student achievement gains or because some think it will reduce school operating costs to keep them open on a more continuous basis.

The US experience

California has been a breeding ground for year-round education with over 1,000 multitrack schools that are home to more than one million students, mainly from poor and minority communities.⁸ Despite all the supposed academic benefits from YRS, the chief reason American school boards introduce the modified calendar is to avoid expensive construction costs.⁹ Instead of building more schools, one report on the Los Angeles public education system¹⁰ said the school district's answer to bloated enrolment figures was to implement year-round schooling, with elementary schools reaching the 2,000-pupil mark.

The United States is the source of most year-round or balanced year data. Sorting through vast amounts of contradictory literature makes a simple analysis difficult. Though some school districts may have implemented modified calendars successfully, what is rarely reported is how many districts abandoned these schemes either before or after having tried it. In almost every state that tinkered with year-round schooling, one can find a long list of schools or school boards that have rejected it.¹¹

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics *Projected number of participants in educational institutions, by level and control of institution: Fall 2002*. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d01/dt002.asp>

⁶ National Association for Year-Round Education *Growth Of Public Year-Round Education in the United States over a 15-Year Period* (2003). <http://www.nayre.org/statistics.html>. Calculations compiled from statistical tables at the NCES and NAYRE.

⁷ Charlie Naylor "Year-Round Education: Is it Worth the Hassle? A BCTF Perspective", BCTF (1996). The BCTF report questions the veracity of the pro-YRS studies. On page 2 Naylor writes: "Many such studies have been conducted by the National Association for Year Round Education (NAYRE), a highly partisan organization whose consultants earn significant amounts by promoting year-round education."

⁸ Duke Helfand *Year-Round Discontent at Hollywood High in Los Angeles Times* (Nov.20, 2000), p.A1. <http://hometown.aol.com/donohoyrs/latimes.htm>

⁹ Morton Inger *Year-Round Education: A Strategy for Overcrowded Schools* ERIC/CUE Digest Number 103 (December 2000), p. 1. http://www.ericfacility.net/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed378267.html

¹⁰ Howard Blume "No Vacancy: The school district's space crunch is much worse than you know. And no one has a plan that will fix it" in *LAWeekly* (June 9-15, 2000) <http://www.laweekly.com/ink/00/29/features-blume.php>.

¹¹ One such list is compiled at: <http://summermatters.com/rejects.htm>

The Saskatchewan Experience

Two Catholic school boards in Saskatchewan experimented with balanced school years in the late 1990's. The Regina Catholic Board reverted back to the traditional school year in 1999 after a short stint with the modified calendar.

Saskatoon Catholic schools took the experiment further but they, too, relented to parents' pressure in just three years. School board chair Jim Carriere announced: "We made this decision so our students would be more in sync with the community for family reasons, for business reasons and recreational reasons. The present (balanced) school year was out of sync with the province and the community."

This experiment also included some unfortunate incidents. One year, Saskatoon classes were cancelled and children sent home early in the first week of school because classrooms had become sweatboxes in the mid-August heat.¹² If Saskatoon schools found it hard to keep students' attention with an average maximum of 25 Celsius in August, hotter BC regions such as the Okanagan and the Cariboo may find they're even less ideal locations for summer schooling.

Handful of BC schools changed yearly calendar

Only a handful of BC's 1800 schools – one each in Maple Ridge, Mission, Cariboo-Chilcotin (Williams Lake) and Langley school districts – have switched either to a balanced year or year-round schooling. The Richmond school board recently voted to implement a year-round schedule on a trial basis at Spul'u'kwuks next year. It's not clear how many families will leave the school because of the change, but what is different in the Richmond and other Lower Mainland examples, is that parents usually have the option of sending their children to several nearby schools. In rural school districts, tampering with the traditional school calendar can wreak havoc with parents' lives.

A Williams Lake school, the first to establish a modified calendar in 1990, had extremely unique circumstances. Its schedule was altered to meet the needs of its primary industry – logging. According to a Langley school district report on school calendars, since “the loggers were unable to work during the spring thaw and fall freeze-up, the school scheduled three-week breaks at those times.”¹³ These special conditions cannot be replicated in most parts of BC, particularly with the decline of logging in many communities.

What do advocates for the modified calendars say?

*When holidays are better balanced with class time, students are more motivated and teachers are less stressed. As well, schools don't have to spend weeks in September reviewing information and re-establishing study habits.*¹⁴

- Carolyn Shields, UBC Professor in the Faculty of Education

¹² “Time to review new school year” in *The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon)*, Sept. 7, 1999, p. A8.

¹³ “It's About Time - A Discussion Paper: What does the research say about time as it relates to student achievement and equity” Langley School District (Feb 2003), p.7.

¹⁴ Janet Steffenhagen “Year-round schooling pondered by Victoria: 'Modified' school calendar improves students' performance, data shows” in *Vancouver Sun* (Oct. 30, 2001), p. B1.

Balanced year supporters often argue:

- Children learn better with vacations spaced out more frequently during the school year.
- Teachers avoid burnout by taking more regular vacations.
- Students retain more when breaks between instruction are shorter, and teachers don't need to spend as much time on review.
- Sometimes schools offer special education and sports activities during the month-long breaks. These are called intercessions. Short vacations throughout the year can provide time for students to receive remedial education, if funded by school districts.
- More students can be accommodated at one school through multi-tracking.
- The traditional school year is based on a 100-year old agrarian calendar that is no longer relevant since most students aren't needed to help their parents harvest crops.

What do advocates for traditional calendar say?

The only reasonable conclusion that can be reached from this body of literature is that changing the calendar, per se, is inert educationally. A reduction in class size might be beneficial. The addition of remedial or other programs might be beneficial. But none of these things is linked in any way to the calendar; they can be added without any modification of the traditional calendar. For many school systems (certainly for ours) it is very disruptive and a "reform" that has a high cost and little benefit.¹⁵

- Chris Newland, Auburn University, Alabama

Traditional year advocates say:

- Three one-month holidays and short breaks during the school year make finding child care difficult and expensive for many working parents.
- Shorter summers mean less time for high school students to make the most of work experiences and save money for higher education¹⁶.
- Some small businesses complain about losing some of the high school workforce during the busy summer tourism months.¹⁷
- A Texas study found that year-round schooling had an immensely negative impact on the state's economy. "The three primary economic impacts – each in the millions of dollars – from shifting school start dates are reduced tourist activity, higher school cooling costs, and lost income to migrant working families¹⁸."

¹⁵ M.C. Newland, PhD, "Academic Impact of Year Round Schooling: An Annotated Bibliography", Auburn University, Alabama (Sept. 26, 1998). Excerpted from <http://www.summermatters.com/reviews.htm>.

¹⁶ Students who hold jobs during high school are more likely to have jobs and earn higher incomes 12 years later, according to the US-based Employment Policies Institute. Among students who worked between 14 and 39 weeks during year - 81% were employed 12 years later, compared to 72% of students with no jobs during their secondary years.

¹⁷ Shelley Nicholl "Year-round school?: Trustees consider new school model touted as better for students" in *The Daily Courier (Kelowna)*, April 28, 2003, p. A1.

¹⁸ Carole Keeton Rylander (Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts), "An Economic Analysis of the Changing School Start Date in Texas" (December 2000) p.3. <http://www.window.state.tx.us/specialrpt/ssd/>

- Timing of summer breaks is tricky for families who have children on different schedules. Children may be forced to give up popular activities, such as summer camp.
- Utility (cooling or air conditioning) costs are higher in mid-summer, adding extra fiscal pressures to cash-strapped school districts.
- Teachers often upgrade their skills in July and August. Eliminating a two-month break limits their educational opportunities.
- Shrinking summer means less time for the family to be together, for children to be with grandparents, their siblings in other schools and members of the extended family.
- In many US schools attendance is normally lower when school starts in early August, compared to early September, because children are still vacationing with their parents.

Lack of conclusive evidence

There is no conclusive evidence to suggest that modifying the school calendar will enhance student learning in the long run. Even Kanaka school in Maple Ridge, which started its year-round experiment eight years ago, provides no proof that student achievement has improved after all this time.¹⁹

Gordon Comeau, president of the B.C. School Trustees Association says, “A modified calendar clearly offers more options for students and makes better use of facilities, but it has had little appeal, especially in small districts because families would have to agree on changes to the vacation timetable.”²⁰

Even one of the most vocal supporters of YRS, UBC Professor Carolyn Shields, admits there are disadvantages to the balanced and year-round calendars, such as finding alternate childcare arrangements, administrator burnout, higher utility (air conditioning) costs and scheduling conflicts with other school boards.²¹

Modified school calendars create instability for parents

The balanced or year-round calendar creates both financial hardship and scheduling instability for many parents. Last year, a district Parent Advisory Committee at Hatzic Elementary’s (Mission School District #75) published its survey results on proposed school calendar changes at a nearby school. Only 5 of the 109 respondents said “yes” when asked if they would transfer their children to Albert McMahan Elementary – a school that was slated to implement a balanced school year a few months later. Equally telling, 38 respondents said they definitely would transfer their children out of a school they currently attend if any year-round schedule were put in place. Seven more said they would “possibly” transfer students out.

¹⁹ Wendy McLellan “It’s July. They’re still in school -- and they’re loving it: Two B.C. schools are experimenting with a whole new concept of holidays”, *The Province* (July 13, 2003), p. A12 .

²⁰ Janet Steffenhagen, *Op Cit.*

²¹ See Carolyn Shields’ website: <http://www.educationalresearch.com/pages/projects/yrs/yrsbook.html>

What is more revealing is the nature of some of the parents' opposition (excerpted below):

- *"I am strongly opposed. There are events planned throughout the summer of this and other communities that would be missed, not to mention family gatherings. I don't understand the concept of this change. If the purpose in doing this is because a child forgets what he learns after having two months off, do you not think that the child forgets information after having one month off, but now you're doing that three times."*
- *"The present school calendar works. We would transfer our children out of a school changing to a new calendar. In a home with two working parents, one with a demanding professional career, we look forward to the traditional breaks as they coincide with the times we are able to break away. Changing the school calendar severely affects our focused family time."²²*

Perhaps this strong reaction is what forced Albert McMahon Elementary to become a "dual calendar" school in which parents can choose either the traditional or balanced calendar for their children.

Chilliwack district's evaluation of school calendar changes

School District 33 (Chilliwack) created a School District Calendar Committee in 2002 to research alternate school calendars for the purpose of seeing whether "student achievement (would) be enhanced". Composed of the school board's stakeholders – a school trustee, parents, administrators, management, students and teacher and support staff unions – the Committee carefully examined the traditional, balanced and year-round calendars, as well as the four-day school week, the extended day model and a modified traditional calendar. In short, they looked at the full menu of school calendar choices.

After an extensive literature review and a year of deliberations, the Committee concluded that, based on current information, "a calendar change in and of itself will not enhance student achievement." The Chilliwack report also cast doubt on the US comparisons, as they "may not be truly reflective of the British Columbia school system."²³

Some key questions for your school trustees and administrators:

If calendar changes are being proposed at your school district, here are some questions to ask:

- Have all the experiments in year-round schooling proven conclusively that student achievement will be improved? If not, please also provide us with information about schools where the balanced or year-round calendar has failed or been reversed.
- Will the modified calendar (balanced or year-round) raise school district costs?

²² "Hatzic Elementary Pac Survey Regarding School Calendar Changes" (February 10, 2003). See <http://hatel.sd75.mission.bc.ca/96.sept03/Pac/Survey.htm>

²³ Chilliwack School District Calendar Committee "Report to Superintendent of Schools (Jacquie Taylor)", April 30, 2003, p.6.

- Will some parents move their children out of the school (or school district) if we change the school calendar? Has a survey been sent to all parents to ask their input on the proposed calendar change?
- Will the school (or school district) offer a dual calendar so that parents who want their children to learn during the traditional school year will not have to move their child out of the school?
- Which specific programs, if any, will be offered during intercessions?
- How will school facilities used by community groups in the summer be affected?

Conclusion

Advocates for the balanced school year or year-round schooling often repeat the line that “the traditional calendar is based on an out-dated agrarian calendar.” This notion clearly misses the point. Families and communities – even businesses – operate according to that calendar. Sports and summer camp activities thrive on a full summer vacation.

Our school system should not be there to use parents and children as guinea pigs in controversial experiments, nor is it the domain of ivory tower academics. Parents are quite right in opposing school calendar changes unless they have proven to deliver educational benefits.

On this issue, CUPE’s research, like the BC Teachers Federation and other groups across North America, has concluded that so-called “balanced calendars” and year-round schooling are not worth the disruption they cause²⁴.

²⁴ Charlie Naylor “Year-Round Education: Is it Worth the Hassle? A BCTF Perspective”, *BCTF*, 1996.