

Q & A About An Early Start Calendar

1. **Will the State Testing dates change with our early start calendar?** If we are taking a week off in October, a week off in February, and the state testing stays the same, we are taking away 15 teaching days and still testing on the same date. Then we have to teach 3 weeks longer and we have already had to jam the entire curriculum into the year before the state test. What will I be teaching during the month of May and June?

A: The state testing dates would stay the same. Since school would start two weeks earlier, the amount of time to prepare for these tests remains the same. We still have 180 days of instruction and the same amount before the scheduled testing period.

How exciting those weeks could be after the testing! We could teach, just for the joy of teaching...not to prepare for a test. We could plan lessons that bring hands-on exploration using tools taught all year so students can “see” where their learning fits into real life, how to use what they spent the whole year learning in various experiences. The stress of pushing content to prepare for tests would be less and the joy of learning can be focused on.

2. **What about snow days?** How do they effect the calendar? Do they get tacked on to the end or do we lose the days on the vacation in February or April?

A: Snow days would be dealt with the same way they are now. If we go over our allowed amount, a decision will be made of when and how we make them up with staff input...just like we do now.

3. **What about the sports calendar in the HS?** As a coach I have to deal with families leaving during winter recess, with the proposed early start calendar we will have families leaving in February right at the end of the season or during the district tournament? What about the football playoffs? If the fall October break occurs during the playoffs aren't we handcuffing the football team if they make the state playoffs?

A: This was brought up with several districts that have moved to an early start calendar. Adjustments and sacrifices are always made when students choose different activities. In talking with the head football coach, he is very supportive of this calendar and feels he will make it work for his team and families. This has always been an issue over Winter Recess for our winter sports and over Spring Break for our spring sports. Students and coaches just make it work.

- 4. I understand that this does not affect the administrators in our district as they work during these periods, but as teachers we do not.** We end up working the same number of days, I understand, but we are working more of the summer when the weather in Michigan is the nicest. Then the trade off is vacation during October and February when the weather is not as attractive?

A: That is true. The purpose of the early start calendar was not so much to pick the best months for weather but to spread out the vacation time/rest time to regroup and refresh. Some districts reported families took fall vacations or winter ski vacations already. It is an adjustment to think of how to use different times of the year to relax and regroup. Districts support time within the year to take a break from the incredible task of teaching and learning.

- 5. Have we asked the people in our community if this is something that they want?** We could lose students to other neighboring districts that do not adhere to an early calendar (Kalamazoo, Portage).

A: The Superintendents of Van Buren have been talking with business owners, school families, different school organizations, but it has been really important that we get the feedback from our staff first and foremost. There are 52 school districts in Michigan who have moved to an early start calendar. Allegan is in talks right now. Jeff Mills, Superintendent for Van Buren ISD, shared that he would reach out to neighboring counties to see what their thoughts were on an early start, as so many of our families work/go to school in both counties. Everyone we talked to who are attending schools that are on an early start calendar shared how much their families and staff love this schedule. We had a well-attended community presentation of almost 300 community members with thoughtful questions and comments. The audience was made up of business owners, families, staff, and students. It was a great evening of thoughts and conversation, addressing and considering all the pros and cons.

- 6. If we go two weeks at Spring Break, we are concerned about the review time for our tests that come after Spring Break.**

A: We can decide as a district to go one week at Spring Break which will then change the start or end dates. As it is now, when we offer a full week and a partial week the week before, we lose a significant percent of our students to early vacations and then the instruction and review is not reaching as many students.

7. If we live in Portage or Kalamazoo, the difference in calendar may be difficult, or costly, with day care.

A: An article in the December 27, 2016 milive entitled “**Should Kalamazoo-area schools start before Labor Day? Survey shows support**” reported a 51% approval of an early start calendar but I am unsure of their plans for changing the school calendar. In terms of day care challenges, one idea we have been discussing is the possibility of running a daycare/preschool program in one of the vacated buildings after 2018. We could offer daycare on campus where folks are not charged when school is not in session. How lovely to have your little one so close to attend to when needed.

8. Some of us are taking summer classes that do not end by mid-August. How do we get around that?

A: That is the first question I do not have a clear answer for. Let me take that to the leadership and faculty advisory committees for some feedback.

9. Impact on summer employment for teachers?

A: The early start calendar would require teachers to adjust their working schedule to be prepared to return to the classroom by two weeks. This calendar does offer an opportunity to work over various times of the year to then financially support other holidays and vacations (ie. work in October to help fund Christmas activities).

10. How would this schedule help our students prepare for college?

A: Many of the universities and colleges are starting before Labor Day and many school districts have asked for Community College Waivers to be able to begin the year when community colleges do. As we work toward an Early Middle College opportunity for our students, it will be important to align our schedule so it does not negatively impact our students who choose to enter into the Early Middle College program. Colleges also finish their first semester before the holiday break. With the early start calendar, 1st semester would be complete by the holiday.

11. Research evidence does not suggest there are achievement gains in a year-round (balanced) calendar except for very early (preK) and in very overcrowded schools,

neither of which describe Mattawan. Selling the balanced calendar as a way to increase student achievement is not valid. What is the reason for this proposal?

A: The reason for looking at an early start calendar (different than a balanced and year-round calendar) with breaks throughout the year goes beyond student achievement, although I do believe having the opportunity for down time to process, regroup, and refresh so that students and staff are ready to start again is beneficial. In studying Mattawan, I looked at the whole child and the whole staff member. This consideration is not 100% on student achievement. It also falls into customer satisfaction, the well-being of our students and staff, and keeping the love of learning alive and well...which I believe leads to increased student achievement for both the K-12 years and the post secondary opportunities.

12. You talked about starting 2-3 weeks early in August. On the proposed calendar, August 2020 starts 4 weeks early (4 weeks before Labor Day). Would it continue to be 4 weeks after that? I wonder as my extended family has always gone on an August vacation that this will definitely affect us (we go out of the country). Do you see it continuing to be starting early in August from here on out?

A: The calendar that was available on the evening of the community presentation was a rough draft. We will always collect feedback of any revisions needed, but the plan would be closer to two weeks before Labor Day for the first three years. Data collected and feedback from Mattawan students, staff, and community members would drive any changes after that. There was conversation of some districts wanting to start by August 1st. This would have to be a discussion with much feedback and data collected to support this early of a start.

***Note, there is new legislation (Senate Bill 271) in discussion in Lansing. The bill would amend the Revised School Code to eliminate a requirement that a school district or public school academy (PSA) not begin its school year before Labor Day; and specify that, beginning with the 2017-2018 school year, a district's or PSA's schools could not be in session on any Monday or Friday in August.**

We will keep an eye on this conversation and try to see where this idea and our data can come together for a calendar that meets the needs of the students, staff, and our community.

