

Balanced Calendar Q&A

This Q&A was compiled in partnership with a stakeholder group consisting of Washington state leaders and the Executive Director of the National Association for Year-Round Education.

Background

In Washington state, a traditional school year lasts 180 days. Students have a few short breaks along the way and a long break in the summer. Many students experience a loss of learning and continuity during the extended break. Students who have consistent access to enriching activities throughout the year are more successful in school (Pedersen, 2016). How can we increase access to these enriching activities for more students? One potential solution is a “balanced calendar.”

Questions & Answers

What is a balanced calendar?

Instead of concentrating 180 school days into nine months, a balanced calendar spreads them throughout the year. Schools may use the breaks to host “intersessions,” where they can provide additional learning experiences if needed.

Does it work?

Schools that follow a balanced calendar tend to have higher achievement scores (Pedersen, 2016). A traditional summer break lasts 10 to 12 weeks, compared to 5 to 7 weeks in a balanced calendar. Shorter breaks mean more consistent student-teacher partnerships and less learning disruption. Students need less review time at the beginning of the new school year so there is an embedded opportunity for expansion of curriculum and learning experiences.

Does it mean more school?

Balanced calendars usually keep the same number of school days as traditional calendars, but they add *flexibility*. With input and feedback from families, education leaders decide what is best for their local community. Teachers who work in a balanced calendar have reported that it is easier to plan instruction in shorter chunks between breaks rather than for a full semester (Pedersen, 2016). In addition, ending the first semester, trimester, or second quarter *before* winter break creates more energy and readiness for students and teachers when they return (Hasser & Nasser, 2005).

What is an intersession?

There are times when additional school days make sense. These additional days, called intersessions, can be added to the school calendar to provide opportunities for more student learning and enrichment. All additional workdays are collectively bargained to determine how the days will be allocated and how teachers and support staff will be compensated.



How does a balanced calendar affect students...

...in foster care or experiencing homelessness?

Students in foster care or experiencing homelessness are eligible to receive support through several state and federal programs. These students often have disruptions in their education which can make it difficult for them to be on target for graduation. A balanced calendar can provide additional opportunities for credit accrual and recovery, as well as interrupt the effects of cumulative learning loss in developing individual school graduation plans.

...with disabilities?

Students with disabilities may not have access to highly specialized resources (occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and language specialists, adaptive equipment) during long summer breaks. Transition services, such as job shadows, can take place during intersessions without taking the student out of classroom instruction.

When interventions take place at the end of each summative period, there is evidence of a reduction of students needing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or qualifying for special education services over time (Smith, 2011; Evans, 2007).

...who are migratory?

When migrant students move between districts with traditional and balanced calendars, the state's Migrant Education program provides supplemental academic help as well as secondary credit accrual and exchange.

...in off-campus school programs?

For students in Running Start or who are learning a trade, consider local community college and skill center schedules for potential impacts on students participating in those programs part-time.

...in advanced programs, like AP or IB?

A balanced calendar can provide an opportunity for involvement in special projects and targeted learning opportunities. When considering calendar modifications, schools should take into account the program design and testing schedules for Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and Cambridge International programs.

Does it affect high school credits and graduation requirements?

[State graduation requirements](#) remain the same. Each school district is responsible for supporting every student to earn necessary credits for graduation, meet their [graduation pathway](#), and complete a [High School and Beyond Plan](#).

What should schools consider when exploring school year calendar changes?

Communication and community engagement

Identify and engage key stakeholders early, including educator groups, families, students, and community partners. Thoughtful communication and engagement can go a long way toward establishing common ground and creating transparency in the process and decision-making. Communicate with families about how changes to the school calendar may affect existing practices and schedules for report cards and student conferences.

Use of instructional time

Intersessions can be used to support continuous forward momentum for all students. Schools should consider how to make use of time for supplementary opportunities to learn as intervention or enrichment.

Collective bargaining agreements

Identify areas that need to be addressed with current local bargaining agreements and work collaboratively to problem-solve and negotiate to reach a consensus with all impacted bargaining units. In general, the school year calendar agreed to during the collective bargaining process will also determine when report cards and student conferences occur.

Educator and staff support

Transitioning to a balanced calendar requires some rethinking of instructional time and the scope/sequence of instruction and intervention supports for students. Throughout the planning and exploration process, districts should work closely with their instructional staff and teams to identify where support is needed and proactively factor this support into the transition process and collective bargaining agreements, as necessary.

Child care, after-school care, and parenting agreements

Connect with families and community partners early, including child care providers. Gather their feedback about the prospect of a school year calendar change. Some families have shared that it is easier to budget for six weeks of care in the summer with periodic week breaks throughout the school year, than it is to pay for care for 10 to 12 consecutive weeks during a traditional summer break (Flaminio Interview, 2022). Some child care providers have cited the shift to a balanced calendar has offered a growth opportunity for their business (Ballinger & Kneese, 2006).

In the exploration process, include families who operate under a parenting agreement or who are in single-parent households. In some cases, a balanced calendar may provide more opportunities for equity in shared custody arrangements, especially where one parent has custody during the school year, while the other has custody during summer break.

What about high school sports?

High school athletics are often viewed as a barrier due to scheduling challenges, but conflicts can be mitigated. For decades, school districts across the nation have successfully supported interscholastic sports among schools with different school year calendars. In fact, the modern balanced calendar has ties back to the 1890s. Washington's Interscholastic Activities Association (WIAA) has successfully navigated a variety of school year calendars. Despite changes in leadership, WIAA has stated their support of allowing districts to determine the right school year calendar for their students and communities.

If a school district accepts balanced calendar grant dollars from OSPI, are they required to change their school year calendar?

No. The purpose of the grant is to provide school districts with the opportunity to *study* a balanced calendar approach. If districts go through the study phase and decide not to modify their school year calendars, that's OK.

More Information

- [North Thurston Public Schools Balanced Calendar FAQ](#)
- [Balanced School Calendar and its Effects on Student Achievement in Two Rural Georgia Schools](#)

Glossary of Terms

- **Balanced Calendar:** The term refers to a variation of the year-round calendar which organizes the school schedule by reducing the summer vacation and redistributing those weeks throughout the year as vacation or intersession. The curriculum and the number of instruction days are generally identical to the traditional calendar (National Association for Year-Round Education, 2000).
- **Faucet Theory:** Faucet theory developed by Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (1997) is the belief that during the academic school year, the faucet of resources flows for all children; during the summer intermission the faucet of resources is turned off (Rozelle & Mackenzie, 2011).
- **Intersession:** The term refers to intervals of time between instructional sessions used for educational-related services. These might include remedial activities, enrichment activities, and recreational activities or camps (Kneese, 2000).
- **Multi-track:** A multi-track schedule staggers the instructional and vacation/intersession periods of each track throughout the entire year so that some students are receiving instruction while others are on vacation (Kneese, 2000).
- **Single-track:** A single-track schedule generally calls for an instructional year of 180 days, with short breaks (intersessions) interspersed throughout the year (Kneese, 2000).

- **Summer Learning Loss:** Summer learning loss amounts to the amount of educational ground children lose during a summer recess from school (Gordon, 2011).
- **Summer Recess:** Summer recess is the time a student is not in school during the summer months. This break is typically up to 12 weeks annually in the United States (Hattie, 2009).
- **Track:** A track schedule involves a group of students who are assigned to attend school during the same instructional session. These students are on track and off-track at the same time (Kneese, 2000).
- **Traditional Calendar:** The term refers to an academic schedule that usually begins around Labor Day and ends early in the summer, with a winter break, designated holidays, and a long summer vacation of 10 to 12 weeks (Shields and Oberg, 2000).
- **Year-Round Education and Year-Round Schooling:** The terms are often used interchangeably in the literature, but differ technically. Year-round education means shortening the summer vacation to add more school days to the school year for some students. Year-round schooling, on the other hand, is a change of schedule that does not materially increase the days each child spends in school (National Association for Year-Round Education, 2006b).

Calendar Comparison

Draft 2021–22 School Calendars

	Balanced Calendar	Traditional Calendar
First Day of School	August 3	August 18
NO SCHOOL	August 13	
NO SCHOOL	August 16	
NO SCHOOL	September 3	
NO SCHOOL: Labor Day	September 6	
NO SCHOOL: Fall Break	October 11–15	
NO SCHOOL: Fall Break	October 18–22	

	Balanced Calendar	Traditional Calendar
NO SCHOOL: Thanksgiving Break	November 22–23	
NO SCHOOL: Thanksgiving Break	November 24–26	
NO SCHOOL: Winter Break	December 20–31	
NO SCHOOL: MLK, Jr. Day	January 17	
NO SCHOOL: Mid-Winter Break	February 18–20	
NO SCHOOL: Mid-Winter Break	February 21–25	
NO SCHOOL: Spring Break	March 25–April 1	
NO SCHOOL: Spring Break	April 4–8	
NO SCHOOL: Memorial Day	May 30	
NO SCHOOL: Memorial Break	May 30–June 3	
Last Day of School	June 22	June 10