

*Jackson Christian School's Strategy on Calendaring
& Counter Research Regarding the Balanced Calendar*

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Introduction

The purpose of this white paper is to communicate Jackson Christian School's (JCS) position on the balanced calendar discussion occurring in Jackson County. This paper will communicate the school's strategy as the Intermediate School District (ISD) and local public schools make decisions regarding a common balanced calendar. This paper also presents scholarly research that counters the many purported benefits of the balanced calendar. According to the academic research, the balanced calendar concept is not new and may not yield the intended results.

Background

Jackson Christian is one of many schools located throughout Jackson County. The county's educational landscape is a mix of traditional public schools, public charter schools, and private schools. In brief, there are twelve public school districts, three public charter schools, and four private schools. As a private Christian school, JCS enrolls students from all twelve school districts and even a few from outside of Jackson County. Demographically, the school population mimics county demographics. Economically, the majority of school families are middle-class, but 9% of the families enrolled at the school live at, or below, the national poverty line. Denominationally, the school enrolls families from forty-five different local churches representing various Christian theologies.

From an academic perspective, most families in the school community point their children toward a four-year university, or some variation of a post-secondary education. Each

year, about 90% of graduating seniors enroll in college. The balance of the student population usually begins working careers, or attends a trade school.

Regarding participation in extra-curricular activities, JCS students are extremely busy. Students participate in extra-curricular activities such as choir, music, art, drama, and many play multiple sports throughout the school year. Many students also compete in recreational youth leagues and other forms of non-school competitions. As important, these same students stay involved in a local church, participate in church youth events, and attend family events.

Families choosing JCS do so because of the mission, “Equipping students to impact the world for Christ.” As a private school, JCS is free to achieve that mission by openly teaching and professing the Gospel, while stressing the need for Christ’s rule in a young person’s life. The school teaches students from a Biblical worldview perspective without encroachment from the state of Michigan or the federal government.

However, the school does not exist in total isolation. Given the school family’s large variation in socio-economic status, demographics, and students with special needs, services from public schools are a requirement. For example, many families at JCS depend on professional services offered by the Jackson County ISD and many receive bus transportation from the Jackson Public School (JPS) system. Additionally, many JCS students participate in extra-curricular activities alongside students from other local schools. Thus, while JCS is free to teach a Biblical worldview to those meeting admissions requirements, loose connection to the public school system is unavoidable.

The Local Discussion on the Balanced Calendar

Before discussing the balanced calendar, it is beneficial to understand the widely recognized definition of the term. According to scholarly articles and journals that specialize in

educational issues, schools that adopt a balanced calendar “redistribute their 180 instructional days evenly throughout the calendar year” (McMillen, 2001, p. 68). In another article defining a balanced calendar, schools reorganize “the school year into several instructional blocks, interspersed with shorter and more frequent vacations” (Williams & Bechtel, 1997, p. 1). In summary, a balanced calendar redistributes the 180 days of required instructional days across a 12-month calendar instead of the traditional 9-month calendar.

As of the writing of this white paper, the local public school leadership is gathering community input for building consensus on the creation of a common balanced calendar. Local school boards will vote later in 2015 regarding adoption of a common calendar. If approved, then all public schools in Jackson County would adopt the same balanced calendar.

According to the public forums held by the local public school superintendents, there are numerous factors to consider regarding the decision around a common balanced calendar. First, the intent is to do what is best for the students in the individual districts, a goal of any educational reform. The public school superintendents indicate they are seeking input from multiple sources attempting to assess the impact of a balanced calendar on the overall community. The superintendents are also providing information to their district’s families in the hopes of addressing specific concerns. Finally, all twelve of the public school districts have agreed that a consensus must exist between all twelve districts before any schedule change would occur.

Jackson Christian School’s Strategy

It is important to remember that the current calendaring strategy already employed by JCS does not create a calendar perfectly aligned with the ISD calendar. JCS students begin school a week before Labor Day. School for JCS students is usually complete sometime the first

week of June, while public school students are typically not done until the second week of June. Moreover, the school does not take the same professional development days (i.e. in-service) and does not follow the same report card distribution dates. Other than major holidays, there are few overlaps between JCS's and the ISD's calendar.

Therefore, given the developing situation from the local public schools, JCS's administration will continue to employ a strategy to create a calendar that may not always perfectly align with the ISD. If the local public schools and the ISD approve and publish a balanced calendar, JCS will compare that calendar to its own calendar. As is the strategy today, any revisions to the JCS calendar will attempt to balance needs of all JCS families.

An Overview of the Academic Research on the Balanced Calendar

Much of the material presented in community forums by local educational leaders focus on the positive benefits of a year-round, or balanced, calendar. Presentation of the available scholarly research in this white paper attempts to stabilize the discussion by illuminating contra, or opposing, evidence to the published benefits. That is, there is abundant academic research casting doubt on the purported benefits of a balanced calendar. In an attempt to remain away from news media articles, op-ed columns, and public opinion, the scholarly works referenced in this section are works from scholarly journals, academic databases, or university research projects.

Scholarly research on the topic of a balanced calendar addresses a number of related topics that affect schools and the surrounding community. The research addresses terminology and clearly equates the balanced calendar to the notion of a year-round school (Evans & Bechtel, 1997; Silva, 2007; McMillen, 2001; Worthen & Zsiray, 1994). Additional research from academic journals discuss the narrow conditions necessary for scholastic improvement to occur

if a short summer break is implemented as suggested with a balanced calendar (McMillen, 2001; Wu & Stone, 2010; Silva, 2007). Similarly, supposed academic improvements during the intersession time also come with tightly defined conditions (Silva, 2007; Kneese 2000a; Lauer et al., 2004).

Moreover, quantitative research studies attempting to correlate year-round schooling to increase attendance (Palmer & Bemis, 1999; Sexton, 2003) and decrease suspensions (Sexton, 2003; Crow and Johnson, 2010) fall short of statistical significance. Finally, scholarly research shows that changing to a balanced calendar can create negative effects on professional development for teachers (Silva, 2007; Kneese, 2000b). In summary, implementing the balanced calendar may not provide the purported benefits when the entire knowledge base of existing academic research is considered.

The Academic Research on the Balanced Calendar

The following section provides opposing research to the purported benefits of the balanced calendar. This research section will not provide exhaustive evidence on the topic. Rather, the intent of this section is to bring a more complete discussion of the balanced calendar to the forefront.

-Terminology

As for terminology, the language suggested by local educational leaders has sometimes negated the connection between a balanced calendar and the calendar suggested by a year-around school. Research literature on school calendars reveals two different strategies for modifying the instructional days in a school year. The first strategy extends the instructional time in schools by minutes, hours, or even days (Evans & Bechtel, 1997, p.3; Silva, 2007, p.4). This strategy

encourages lengthening the school day, or adding days to the calendar beyond the traditional 180-day calendar.

The other strategy, known as “year-around-school” (Silva, 2007, p. 7), generates calendars referred to as “modified calendars or balanced calendars” (p. 7). McMillen (2001) indicates, “Although year-round education exists in many different forms, it involves essentially the reorganization of the traditional school calendar so that the long summer vacation is replaced by several smaller breaks evenly spaced throughout the year” (p. 67-68). Similarly, Worthen & Zsiray (1994) define year-round education as “reorganization of the school calendar into several instructional blocks, interspersed with shorter and more frequent vacation breaks than is true of the traditional calendar” (p.6). The year-round school calendar definitions developed by these researchers are very similar to the balanced calendar definition offered by local educational leaders. Assuming the definitions offered by these researchers are legitimate, one could assume the local educational leaders are in fact proposing a year-round school.

-Knowledge Loss (Summer Melt)

The research literature addresses the issue of academic losses, or summer-melt, after a long break from school. Researchers agree there is little academic benefit to most students when schools adopt a year-round calendar. For example, in one study of North Carolina schools, McMillen (2001) found “no statistically significant differences between year-round and traditional calendar students in [math and reading]...providing additional confirmation of the lack of evidence of any year-round effect” (p. 73). In another study, Wu & Stone (2010) observed in one California school district that, “[academic] performance of year-round schools...was not different from that of non-year-round schools” (p. 93). In other words, within

the limits of these two studies, implementing a balanced calendar did not improve academic achievement for most students.

However, when investigating strategies to help students with low socio-economic standing, research shows that a year-round calendar might have a slight positive effect (Silva, 2007). Unfortunately, the possibility of this effect is conditional. When researching the impact of summer losses on low-income students, Silva found that “year-round designs...may reduce the negative effects of summer learning losses by eliminating the long summer vacation, but such proposals do not always target the students in need of increased learning time”(p. 6). Stated differently, a year-round calendar *might* help students with low socio-economic standing, but only if school districts are intentional in designing programs that focus on these students.

This area of research provides two important cautions when considering a balanced calendar as the remedy for summer-melt. First, local educational leaders must be realistic in their expectations about the improvements expected with a calendar change given the weak statistical correlation between a balanced calendar and academic improvement. A second caution is in order for parents with lower socio-economic status. These parents should be wary of promises for scholastic improvements in their children unless the district is intentional in designing and delivering services that take advantage of the re-distributed schedule.

-Intersession

One of the time slots available to deliver additional academic services in the balanced calendar model is during the intersession. Silva (2007) defines the term intersession as “programs during the breaks [vacations] for students who want to catch up or get ahead” (p. 7). According to the academic research, intersessions allow an opportunity for low performing students to close the achievement gap throughout the school year (Kneese, 2000a). By spreading

out the 180-day schedule, vacation breaks throughout the school year allow time for interventions and academic programs to close achievement gaps.

However, closing the achievement gap by using the designed-in breaks as time to deliver interventions, or remedial instruction, is not a panacea. The Mid-Continental Regional Educational Lab (Lauer et al., 2004) found that delivering academic content to close the achievement gap was as effective whether it was delivered in school, in the summer, or during other breaks. Moreover, Silva (2007) indicates that, “Time’s potential as a reform depends largely on whether the time is used effectively and on its use as a resource to serve students most in need of extra learning opportunities, both inside and outside of school” (p. 9). In other words, the most important aspect of improvement *is not when* an intervention happens, but that the intervention is *intentionally targeting* needy students.

Therefore, similar to reducing the losses of knowledge experienced over the summer, academic improvements do not happen simply because the instructional time is year-round. Educational leaders must be intentional in the design and delivery of programs to specific students during the intersession. The interventions and academic help afforded during the designed-in breaks from the balanced calendar will have little impact on struggling students in Jackson County unless those helps are intentional and targeted.

-Student Attendance and Suspensions

The academic research also addresses the notion that the year round calendar improves attendance. In a meta-study of a dozen research studies, Palmer and Bemis (1999) found weak correlation between implementation of year-round calendars and student attendance. The study revealed no statistically significant difference in attendance between those students who participated in a year round calendar compared to those in a traditional calendar.

In a related study focused on the effects of year-round schools, Sexton (2003) found similar results. When comparing groups of students who attended classes under a year-round schedule to those of a traditional calendar, “One group’s attendance appeared to be no better than the other” (p. 77). In a more recent study, Crow and Johnson (2010) also found no differences in student attendance in Texas elementary schools that adopted year-round schools.

The effects on student suspensions were similar. According to Sexton (2003), “The data...yielded no statistically significant difference in the year round education and traditional education students’ first time placement in... [suspensions]” (p. 79). Implementing year-round schools did not reduce the first-time suspensions within the student body.

In all, the research casts doubt on the impact of attendance and behaviors for schools choosing to implement a balanced calendar. These studies suggest that a balanced calendar will not yield the desired improvements. Parents in Jackson County should be cautious in believing there will be vast improvement in attendance and behavior patterns related to the implementation of a balanced calendar.

-Professional Development

The research on the year round calendar also highlights challenges related to scheduling and delivering teacher professional development. In a traditional calendar, teachers have the typical summer break open for a number of personal and professional activities. Silva (2007) points out that, “Teachers...rely on this time to take professional development courses” (p. 9). Supporting evidence from Kneese (2000b) indicates that teachers often use their extended summer breaks to take professional development courses needed to renew or expand certifications. Unless planning and coordinating professional development is a priority, teachers

in Jackson County may not have equal opportunity during the traditional summer break to attend courses with their peers around the state.

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