

**ALTERNATIVES TO THE CURRENT  
SCHOOL YEAR CALENDAR:  
INFORMATION FOR SCHOOLS AND  
SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS**

**August 2005**

## **Background**

Recommendation # 17 in the report of Alberta's Commission on Learning states "Encourage schools and school jurisdictions to explore alternatives to the current school year."

This document has been written to provide schools and school jurisdictions with information about the main alternatives to the current school year calendar, and is based on information gathering completed by Alberta Learning in 2003.

### **Some types of alternative calendars**

#### Single-track Modified or Year Round

All students in the school attend on the same modified or year round school year calendar. Typically, the summer holiday is shortened and vacation days are placed in other parts of the year, resulting in periods of instruction and vacations that are more evenly spaced than in the traditional calendar. Modified school year calendars usually begin in mid-August with a week off around Thanksgiving, a three-week winter break and a two-week spring break. A year round school year would begin the first of August and run the rest of the year with repeating sections of nine weeks of instruction followed by a three week break. Sometimes this schedule is slightly modified to fit with traditional winter and spring breaks.

Teachers and students are in school for the same number of instructional hours as are those on traditional calendars, although the number of instructional days may slightly differ since Alberta Learning does not specify the number of days in the school year.

#### Dual-track Traditional/ Modified or Traditional/Year Round

There are two groups of students in the school, one on the traditional school year calendar and the other on the modified or year round school year calendar described in the single-track section above.

#### Multi-track Year Round

For this school year calendar the student population in the school is divided into groups, usually four. At any time, one group is on vacation. There may or may not be periods in the year in which all four groups are on vacation. All groups are on vacation typically in the summer or around Christmas. Schools use this arrangement when they have more students than spaces in a school. A school with room for 600 students can, through four-group multi-tracking, accommodate 800 students since no more than 3 of the 4 groups (600 students) are in school at any one time.

#### Fixed Extended School Year

In this school year calendar, students attend for more hours and days than the number mandated by the province. The extra time may be added to a traditional calendar or a modified calendar and is typically put in place to serve student populations with unique needs or seen to be at risk.

#### Optional Extended School Year

Certain schools are open in ways which serve their student populations; such as being open at night and/or on weekends (for example Outreach Programs), being open (in a sense) at all times (for example, virtual schools).

### Four for Fives or Nine for Tens

Some schools run on a traditional or modified school year but schools are closed every Friday (four for fives) or every second Friday (nine for tens). The other school days are lengthened to ensure minimum hours of access to instruction are met.

### The Alberta Situation

The *Alberta School Act*, Section 56(2) requires boards to provide, at a minimum, a vacation period that extends at least from December 24 to January 2. The *Act* does not have any provision regarding the summer vacation period. The *Guide to Education ECS to Grade 12* requires schools to provide students with access to at least 950 hours of instruction per year in grades 1 through 9 (alternative minimum times for grade 1 are permitted to enable a smooth transition from ECS), and to at least 1000 hours in grades 10 through 12.

Within these requirements, boards are free to establish school calendars. Most schools follow the traditional calendar with a two-month summer break, but about 100 schools (out of over 2000) follow some form of modified schedule. These schools can be divided into two groups of about equal numbers: those schools serving special populations or with special programs (e.g. at-risk, youth detention, English as a Second Language, Outreach programs, online learning, 4<sup>th</sup> year high school, distance learning, schools in hospitals); and those serving regular populations. Of those serving regular populations, all but a few are elementary schools; and most are single-track with a modified calendar. Such a calendar normally starts school in early to mid-August, adds a week or two of holiday around Thanksgiving, has a longer Christmas break, adds a week or two around Easter, and June 30th like other schools.

### **Impacts of a modified calendar on participants**

The key impacts are provided in Appendix A.

### **Next steps**

If, after reviewing this information a school community decides to take further steps towards a modified calendar, a useful resource would be the *Alternative Programs Handbook*. Although prepared to support school communities wishing to explore alternative programs, many of the processes would apply to a school exploring a modified calendar. The *Alternative Programs Handbook* can be found at:

<http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/educationsystem/AltProgHandbook.pdf>

## APPENDIX A: Summary of Information Gathering Regarding Impacts Of A Modified Calendar on Participants

The following information has not been independently validated by Alberta Learning but reflects a review of literature, interviews with a sample of principals of Alberta alternative calendar schools, surveys sent to parents and teachers at such schools, and in-school questionnaires completed by students in these schools. This work was carried out in 2003.

Impacts identified in both literature and in interviews are indicated with an asterisk (\*)

PARTICIPANT	IMPACTS IDENTIFIED IN LITERATURE	IMPACTS FROM INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most studies which have attempted to hold other factors constant have identified gains in achievement for students from moving to a modified calendar relative to those on the traditional calendar; almost no studies have found losses in achievement</li> <li>• There is a reduction in the learning loss that occurs over the long summer break *</li> <li>• There are intersession opportunities to assist lower performing students</li> <li>• There is reduced stress and burnout for students *</li> <li>• There is a reduction in vandalism *</li> <li>• Student absenteeism is lower *</li> <li>• There is better student behaviour *</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modified calendaring is an important component of the increased flexibility required for effective support of other special student populations such as outreach, older students, and home education students</li> <li>• Special needs students seem to benefit from a modified calendar, as long as required supports are in place while they are in school. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds also benefit from the more consistent academic focus</li> <li>• Students return from breaks refreshed and motivated</li> <li>• There is more time to spend with family and friends.</li> <li>• Vacations can be cheaper and less crowded</li> <li>• As the modified calendar shortens the summer, which for many students is too long, there is less opportunity to become get bored and become involved in unproductive activities</li> <li>• Some students are in school when friends are not there</li> <li>• Students in multi-track schools may miss some school events</li> </ul>
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is reduced teacher fatigue, stress and burnout *</li> <li>• Teachers like the calendar because it provides more evenly spaced breaks *</li> <li>• Everyone returns from breaks rested and ready to get started *</li> <li>• Less review is needed after breaks *</li> <li>• There are typically fewer teacher absences *</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers can focus more intensely on learning during the shorter terms, knowing that breaks are not far away</li> <li>• There is more time for teacher planning and reflection, and organization of instruction, leading to better continuity and pacing for student learning</li> <li>• Teachers have the opportunity to take vacations in months in which there is less competition for travel and vacation facilities, and lower prices</li> </ul>

PARTICIPANT	IMPACTS IDENTIFIED IN LITERATURE	IMPACTS FROM INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many schools which change the calendar also modify some of their materials and instructional practices to the benefit of the students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many teachers appreciated the opportunity to choose the calendar on which they taught</li> <li>• There is a better school climate – perhaps because of the self-selected nature of the staff, the schools appear to have more innovative climates, with staff more willing to embrace change and explore alternative approaches</li> <li>• Resources (especially board level supports) are not always in place in August</li> <li>• Classrooms can get quite hot in August</li> </ul>
Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More planning, coordination and record keeping is required at the school</li> <li>• More administration time is required</li> <li>• In a multi-track situation, teacher materials must be stored and moved around; time is lost in activities associated with track changes; there is controversy regarding track assignments and potential segregation of groups; difficulty with staff and parent communication; some building cleaning and repair must occur while students are in school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In dual- and multi-track modified calendar schools, many administrators work almost year-round as it is difficult to be away when at least some part of the school is in session. This is especially true in smaller schools or those without an experienced vice-principal. Many principals noted that compensation is not in place to cover the extra time worked.</li> <li>• On the other hand, nearly all principals who were interviewed displayed considerable enthusiasm for the modified calendar and its impact on their schools.</li> </ul>
Parents and Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A number of parents indicated they had better vacation opportunities due to having children on the modified calendar, and that the cost of travel and accommodation was cheaper in the non-summer breaks *</li> <li>• Children can spend more time with parents while siblings are at school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alberta schools have consistently found that the level of parental support for the modified calendar increases over time.</li> <li>• A number of parents indicated that the modified calendar had a positive impact on the amount and/or quality of family time, for example: “The frequent breaks allow us to do more as a family”</li> <li>• Some parents have difficulty in taking holidays in the summer - certain parental occupations, e.g. farming, hunting/trapping, oil field, summer leisure, have schedules that fit better with the modified calendar</li> </ul>

PARTICIPANT	IMPACTS IDENTIFIED IN LITERATURE	IMPACTS FROM INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scheduling conflicts affect families with one or more children in the modified calendar elementary school and other(s) in the traditional calendar junior or senior high; this limits opportunities for family vacations, lessens the chances to use the older sibling for child care during breaks, etc. *</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For some parents, the modified calendar fits better with the learning model most suited to their child – e.g. home education, outreach</li> <li>Many families are used to and enjoy the traditional 2-month summer vacation and have plans for it; some activities are scheduled in the portion of the summer that would be affected by a change; parents cannot see why any change is required</li> <li>Some parents found it more difficult to set up day care arrangements for the two or three week breaks outside the summer months, although the service often was or soon became available at a cost similar to that for the same amount of time in the summer</li> <li>In a multi-track school, families might not get their first choice for the track</li> </ul>
Costs and Operations	<p><u>Multi-track schools:</u> The literature suggests that costs in multi-track schools are higher per school, but lower in per-student costs than would be involved in building and administering a school sized to that number of students – the main reason for multi-tracking is to conserve on school building costs and accommodate a large number of students in a school than it is built for. If the overcrowding grows beyond the ability of multi-tracking to handle it, and a new building is required, any savings will have been only short-term in nature; however, if the school grows and declines along with neighborhood demographic evolution, the savings might be long-term.</p> <p><u>Dual-track schools:</u> Costs can be a bit higher for dual-track schools due to the need to administer a larger part of the year.</p> <p><u>Single-track schools:</u> generally costs are similar.</p>	<p><u>Multi-track schools:</u> An Alberta study concluded that annual operating costs are about 7% higher in the multi-track school, however due to the lower cost involved in building a smaller school, amortization costs are lower.</p> <p><u>Dual-track schools:</u> Costs can be higher:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The administrative secretary is a 12-month not a 10-month position</li> <li>Substitute costs are a factor when only one track is in</li> <li>There is a longer caretaking year</li> <li>Higher utilities costs are associated with opening for more days</li> </ul> <p><u>Single-track schools:</u> generally costs are similar, with the exception of busing in August and the need for air conditioning in some cases. Those schools that are not air-conditioned either see the heat in August as a problem or have adapted with fans, flexible dress code, etc. Some administrators pointed out that it is often warmer in June or September than in August.</p>

No comments were found in the literature regarding impacts on school districts. Comments from Alberta respondents were as follows:

<b>PARTICIPANT</b>	<b>IMPACTS FROM INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS</b>
School Districts	<p>Generally, school districts have been pleased with the success of modified calendars, and see them as an important element in providing choice to parents and students. In the Calgary Board of Education, which has the largest number of modified calendar schools in Alberta, none of the schools that have introduced a modified calendar have changed back to a traditional calendar and it is felt that the modified calendars have had an extremely successful track record to date.</p> <p>Most of the benefits cited by school districts were the same as those cited by students, parents and teachers in the above sections. Districts also noted some problems that have arisen at the district level, many of which have been overcome as the modified calendar system matured:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To adequately serve all schools, district offices need to be open and adequately staffed with school support resources for 11 months rather than 10</li> <li>• There is a need for more busing during August</li> <li>• Caretakers have traditionally used summer for “deep cleaning”; there is less time for this on a modified calendar</li> <li>• A district can manage its suite of modified calendar schools better if all are on a single modified calendar</li> <li>• There is a need to carefully track teacher time as it could exceed maximum contractual days</li> </ul>