
Recommendation

This report describes how state law limits the flexibility of local boards of education to determine their school calendars, which is why these boards continue to request restoration of local control over setting start and end dates for the school year. This report found that the timing of summer break during August is an important concern for the different stakeholder groups and that no option for modifying the school calendar law satisfies their competing interests.

The disagreement among stakeholders about when North Carolina should start and end the school year cannot be reconciled. This conflict poses a dilemma because no choice can satisfy all stakeholders and any decision will be perceived as favoring the interests of some stakeholders over others. As a result, this report does not make a recommendation for changing the school calendar law.

However, Finding 3 shows that school calendar flexibility can reduce summer learning loss for disadvantaged students, and this benefit can be addressed by the following recommendation.

Recommendation. The General Assembly should provide school calendar flexibility for schools and school districts identified as low-performing by the State Board of Education and direct the Department of Public Instruction to evaluate whether a modified school calendar increases student performance in low-performing schools and districts.

Throughout this recommendation, a school calendar with different start and end dates than allowed under current state law will be referred to as a modified school calendar. As discussed in Finding 3, peer-reviewed literature demonstrates that a modified school calendar with more frequent and shorter breaks throughout the school year than provided by a traditional calendar has the greatest benefit for low-income students. North Carolina already has a mechanism for measuring and identifying low-performing schools and districts that shows a clear correlation between low-performing schools and poverty. Furthermore, the 2016 legislative agenda for the State Board of Education included an action item requesting that low-performing schools be permitted to adopt a modified calendar.

To assist local boards of education with increasing student performance at low-performing schools, the General Assembly should authorize school calendar flexibility for low-performing schools and districts. This authority should begin with schools and districts identified by the State Board of Education as low-performing for the 2015–16 school year. School calendar flexibility would apply as follows:

- **Low-performing schools.** Local boards of education would have the flexibility to adopt a modified school calendar for only the schools identified as low-performing by the State Board of Education. Other schools within the district would continue to follow a school calendar with start and end dates mandated by state law unless otherwise exempted.

- **Low-performing school districts.** Local boards of education would have the flexibility to adopt a modified school calendar for all schools within districts identified as low-performing by the State Board of Education, regardless of each individual school's low-performing status.

Unlike the process authorized for recurring low-performing schools under the restart model, State Board of Education approval for school calendar flexibility would not be required. Local boards of education with low-performing schools or districts would include adoption of a modified school calendar as a part of the required improvement plan that is submitted to the State Board of Education. If a local board of education adopts a modified school calendar for low-performing schools, the improvement plan must

- outline goals to be achieved by operating under a modified school calendar;
- explain how operating under a modified school calendar will facilitate accomplishing these goals and increase student achievement;
- provide a description of the modified school calendar including the start date, end date, and scheduled breaks throughout the year;
- propose the targeted interventions to be offered during scheduled breaks or explain why targeted interventions are not being offered; and
- describe how the low-performing schools will measure student and parent satisfaction with the modified school calendar to determine how the modified calendar is affecting families.

To allow sufficient time to evaluate whether operating under a modified school calendar increases student performance, local boards of education should be granted the authority to maintain a modified school calendar for low-performing schools until three years after school performance has reached or exceeded a grade of "C." A low-performing school district should be granted the authority to maintain a modified school calendar for all district schools until three years after the percentage of low-performing schools in the district drops below 50%.

To determine the effectiveness of a modified school calendar, the General Assembly should direct the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to evaluate on an ongoing basis whether a modified school calendar increases student performance in low-performing schools. The improvement plan process would ensure DPI knows whether local boards of education have adopted a modified school calendar for their low-performing schools and districts. DPI should use the existing accountability system for all public schools to track low-performing schools following a modified calendar and compare performance over time to low-performing schools following the traditional calendar mandated by state law. Tracking the effects of a modified school calendar and use of targeted interventions during breaks would allow DPI to evaluate whether a modified school calendar increases student performance in low-performing schools.

The General Assembly should direct DPI to report annually on its ongoing evaluation of the effects of instituting a modified school calendar on

improving student performance at low-performing schools. The first annual report should be submitted to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee by March 15 starting two years after the first low-performing school or district begins following a modified school calendar.

Agency Response

A draft of this report was submitted to the Department of Public Instruction and the State Board of Education to review. Their responses are provided following the appendices.

Program Evaluation Division Contact and Acknowledgments

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