

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

The PUSD Instructional Calendar

October 2015

Over the last five years, the District has conducted several surveys of parents and middle and high school students (in 2011, 2012, and 2015) concerning the school calendar. The survey results indicate strong support for ending the first semester before the Winter break because this is believed to be in the best interest of students. Nonetheless, there is split opinion about how to accomplish this change. The District is now exploring alternatives to its current calendar, for possible implementation starting in the 2016-17 school year, to make this change.

This FAQ is intended to provide basic information about the legal and policy considerations that guide development of the instructional calendar, the process for approving the calendar, and the reasons underlying the possible shift in when the first semester ends.

How is the School Calendar Developed?

The District's instructional calendar is developed as part of annual contract negotiations between the District and the Association of Piedmont Teachers (APT). Surveys of students and families inform these negotiations, which are also guided by the following legal requirements and policy considerations:

- The legal requirement that public schools provide 180 days of student instruction and 185 teacher workdays per school year. (The five non-student days include three staff development days and two days to set up and break down classrooms at the start and end of the school year.)
- The legal requirement that public schools observe federal holidays including Labor Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Presidents Day, and Memorial Day.
- The practical requirement that there be one instructional calendar for the K-12 District, balancing the needs and interests of students at all educational levels.
- The practical requirement that each school year be divided into two semesters with roughly equivalent *instructional* days (as discussed below).

- The related goals of maximizing student attendance and minimizing the loss of State funding due to student absences (also discussed below).
- The preferred practice of offering both a summer vacation of approximately two months and frequent breaks during the school year, as expressed in feedback received in past years.
- The preferred practice of starting the school year on a Wednesday, to ease students back from the summer break into the rigor and routine of school.

Based on input from students and families and the legal and policy considerations noted above, APT will consider and ultimately vote on several variations of the instructional calendar. The differences among the various versions of the calendar will concern: the start and end dates of the school year; the number and distribution of vacation days; and the distribution of days when there are no students on campus and the educators participate in professional development or planning meetings.

Once ratified by APT, Piedmont's Board of Education will approve the instructional calendar. The Board will likely approve the 2016-17 calendar at its meeting on October 28, 2015.

Why Modify the Current Calendar?

One of the District's goals is to support the social and emotional needs of students by reducing unnecessary student stress. One way to reduce unnecessary stress is to ensure that school vacations are in fact vacations from school.

Under the District's current instructional calendar, middle and high school students study and complete school work over the Winter break. The students take exams after the break and then almost immediately start the second semester. If, instead, exams and projects were completed before the break, students could spend their vacation time relaxing and recharging, and start the second semester rested and refreshed.

Surveys of District students and families show strong support for ending the first semester before the Winter break. In the most recent survey, completed on October 6, 2015, 78% of middle and high school students and 63% of District parents indicated that their "strongest preference for the timing of first semester finals" is before the break (448 students participated in this survey, along with 629 parents). Similarly, in the 2012 survey, 83% of middle and high

school students and 62% of parents indicated that their “strongest preference for the timing of first semester finals” was before the break. (The calendar survey administered in 2011 did not address the timing of first semester finals.)

This approach is strongly recommended by Challenge Success, the project of the Stanford University School of Education that consults with this and other school districts on student health issues, as a means to reduce unnecessary student stress. A survey of Piedmont High School Students conducted in 2014 confirms the importance of mitigating students stress to the extent possible. This survey revealed that 78% of the 710 participants reported they were often or always stressed by schoolwork, 63% of participants reported that schoolwork often or always kept them from having time with family or friends, and 69% of participants reported that schoolwork often or always kept them from getting enough sleep.

Finally, some educators favor ending the first semester prior to the December break to address a different concern -- the “loss of learning” that sometimes occurs over the break, followed by the need to reteach certain material after the break and before final exams.

For these reasons, the District is exploring alternatives to its current instructional calendar, for possible implementation starting in the 2016-17 school year, that provide for a true school vacation during the Winter break.

Although there is strong support for ending the first semester before the break, there is split opinion about how to accomplish this shift. In the 2015 calendar survey, 50% of students and 37% of parents expressed either strong agreement or agreement with starting school one week earlier, while 55% of students and 62% of parents expressed either strong agreement or agreement with having unequal semesters. Given this split, the District is exploring a variety of approaches to make this shift.

Why are Staff Development Days Held During the School Year?

Staff professional development is an ongoing process and is particularly important when, as now, schools are implementing new curriculum standards across multiple disciplines. Some professional development can be done outside of the school year. Nonetheless, to be most efficient and effective, staff development programs are typically paced so teachers have the opportunity to learn new content and techniques, apply these lessons in the classroom, and then reflect on and refine these lessons with colleagues. For this reason, most professional

development is held during the school year. The District includes three professional development days in each school year.

Why Does it Matter Whether the Two Semesters Are Equal in Length?

As noted above, the District divides the school year into two semesters with a roughly equal number of *instructional* days. (Although the second semester is typically longer than the first, this is because local, state, and national testing days are concentrated in the Spring, and these testing days do not count as instructional days.)

If one semester included more instructional days than the other, the imbalance would impact the planning and pacing of coursework, with the greatest impact on classes that last only one semester. A student who takes Economics during first semester, for example, might have fewer days to master the material and complete the coursework than a student enrolled in the same class during second semester. Other single-semester classes that would be impacted by unequal semesters include: Civics, Law and Society, Social Psych, Exploring Computer Science, Mobile Applications, and Introduction to Publications.

Assuming that the start of school remains roughly the same, ending the first semester before Winter break may create a significant imbalance between semesters -- the first semester may have as many as 8 to 10 fewer instructional days than the second.

In theory, the simplest way to equalize the number of school days in each of the two semesters would be to have both an earlier start and an earlier end to the school year. Summer vacation would stay the same length, although it would shift to start and end roughly one week earlier than under the current instructional calendar. Although this is simple in theory, students, families and staff have expressed strong opinions for and against any change to the start and end of the school year.

Another possible method of equalizing the number of school days in each semester might involve reducing the number of vacation days in the first semester. As above, students, families and staff have strong opinions concerning the number, configuration and frequency of vacation days. As discussed below, reducing the number of vacation days can affect attendance patterns and, as a result, State funding for the District.

Why Do Attendance Patterns Matter?

A school district's average daily attendance (or "ADA") during one school year directly affects State funding to the district for the following two school years. For this reason, Piedmont Unified considers attendance patterns and the financial implications of those patterns when developing the instructional calendar.

In the past, this District noted a high rate of student absences in connection with partial-week breaks at Thanksgiving and President's Day, as families took students out of school to extend the breaks for a full week. The 2011 calendar survey, which posed questions about the configuration of school breaks, confirmed this trend. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of the 720 families that responded to the 2011 survey indicated that they prefer having a shorter summer and *more frequent full week breaks* during the school year. A third of the respondents admitted that they were "likely or very likely" to take their kids out of school to lengthen a long weekend, increasing student absences and thereby impacting State funding for future years.

In order to maximize student attendance, and minimize the loss of State funding due to student absences, the District prefers to offer full-week rather than partial-week breaks for the Thanksgiving and President's Day holidays.

Why Does the School Year Start Before Labor Day?

This year, the first day of school was August 19, 2015 and the last day of school will be June 9, 2016.

Some parents have asked whether it is feasible to start the school year after Labor Day -- effectively shifting both the start and end of the school year back by two weeks. Many parents recall from their own childhood a school year that started after Labor Day, and wonder why the school year now starts in August.

One reason for the August start is that the school year is now longer than it used to be. Since the 1980s, California has lengthened the school year for public schools by 13 school days. Piedmont Unified typically ends the school year and holds graduation ceremonies during the second week of June. Working backwards from the mid-June end of school, accounting for the mandated number of instructional days and teacher work days, and preserving the customary holiday breaks, the school year starts before Labor Day.

A second reason for the August start is the pacing of Advanced Placement courses, which culminate in AP exams in early May. The AP testing dates are set by the College Board (not by

individual school districts). If the school year started after Labor Day, teachers and students would have two fewer weeks to cover and master the substantial course material. In other districts, this late start typically results in substantial summer coursework for students heading into AP classes. This increase in summer coursework may defeat parents' objectives in asking for school to start after Labor Day. Although parents of elementary and middle school students may be less aware and less concerned about summer coursework and the pacing of AP courses, they tend to become more concerned as their students reach high school.

An additional consideration is the schedule for high school athletics. The State of California mandates that certain Fall high school sports begin in early August. This early start of Fall sports effectively shortens the summer for many families, and may defeat parents' objectives in asking for a late start and end to the school year. As with AP courses, parents of elementary and middle school students may be less concerned about the schedule for high school athletics, although they tend to become more concerned as their students reach high school.

Furthermore, now that the District is looking to provide a true school vacation during the December holidays, a later start to the school year appears inconsistent with this objective.

What Do Other School Districts Do?

There is now a trend among California unified school districts toward ending the first semester before the December holidays specifically to reduce student stress. Elk Grove Unified, the largest school district in Northern California with 62,888 students, implemented this calendar change in 2006-07. In 2012-13, Antioch Unified (18,352 students), Palo Alto Unified (12,527 students) and Santa Clara Unified (15,298 students) followed. Other districts that have made the shift include San Jose Unified, Carmel Unified, Morgan Hill Unified, South San Francisco Unified, Fairfield- Suisun Unified, and Vallejo City Unified. Capistrano Unified will implement this change starting in 2016-17.

How Would This Change Impact Seniors Who Are Applying to College?

Some families expressed concern that holding exams before the December holidays could increase stress for seniors working on college applications or even coincide with application deadlines. Nonetheless, research suggests that the college application "crunch" does not typically fall in December.

For example, for the class of 2016, the University of California made its application available starting August 1, 2015 and applications are due in November. Applications to California State University are also due in November. Many private schools offer an early action or early decision option, also with applications due in November.

Over 600 public and private universities accept The Common Application, which also has been available since August 1, 2015. Although application deadlines vary, most regular admission deadlines fall in January or even February. According to a survey conducted by the San Ramon Valley School District, the following deadlines are fairly typical: January 1 (Harvard University, University of Oregon), January 3 (Stanford University), January 15 (Chapman University, Saint Mary's College of California, University of San Francisco, University of Southern California, University of Colorado/ Boulder), February 1 (Arizona State University, Baylor University, Brigham Young University, Oregon State University).

For what it may be worth, according to Challenge Success, student surveys conducted at high schools that have recently shifted semester exams before the holidays reveal that most seniors favor having final exams before the holidays.

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This FAQ addresses the most frequently asked questions about the District's instructional calendar. If you have further questions, please contact Superintendent Randall Booker at rbooker@piedmont.k12.ca.us