

School calendar is topic of the day

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

School calendar for 2012-13 was the hot topic at the Feb. 8 meeting of Holyoke School District Re-1J Board of Education.

Extensive discussion centered around stating parameters for the superintendent to follow for creating a calendar.

General board sentiment noted building the calendar is a balancing act. It requires balancing student achievement goals, personnel goals and listening to the community goals, which at times seem contradictory.

After lengthy discussion, the board gave Supt. Bret Miles the following parameters for creating one or more calendars for presentation at the Feb. 27 board meeting:

—maximize instructional time.

—maintain or possibly increase the amount of time for professional development or work time.

—acknowledge the need for time to utilize student achievement data.

—provide breaks and vacations that meet needs of staff and community.

—no specific requirement as to number of student days, but no board member will support fewer than 175 student days.

Miles will make his calendar proposals available to employees prior to the Feb. 27 meeting presentation. The board will have a chance to comment on the recommendations, and if there's

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an agreeable calendar, it will be on the March 6 meeting agenda for approval.

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Parameters given much consideration

When asked early in last week's meeting, Supt. Miles said his recommendation is a 180-student day calendar. He added the administrative team believes they can hold at 180 days and build in more time for staff.

Former board member Steve Millage was adamant in his support for 180 student days in the calendar and encouraged the board to maintain that.

"I don't see how we can give better education for our kids by going less days," said Millage.

With the goal to be in the top 25 percent in the state, Millage emphasized the need for 180 student-teacher contact days. "European schools go 220 days, and we have to keep up with them," he added.

Millage also expressed concern for staff sick days being replaced by personal days several years ago. He feels this probably leads to more staff absences leaving students with substitutes. He reiterated his point about the importance of student time with teachers.

On the contrary, board members expressed most of the calls and conversations they've had from district patrons are advocating for less days in the calendar.

Kim Killin said when the board approved a 180-day calendar for 2011-12, it was because of concern for achievement.

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With this, she acknowledged they're putting monumental pressure on staff. One of her concerns is for professional development, especially with new teachers.

She noted appreciation for discussion about student registration and testing being completed prior to the first day of school so the year can begin in earnest when classes start.

Back to staff pressure, she noted the after-school centers have added responsibility. Initial reports from the grading pilot show success in the commitment of staff to make sure kids move on.

"We've made great strides," said Killin. But is it because there's 180 days in the school calendar?

Based on what's been accomplished with extreme reduction in number of ineligible students and increase in student completion of work, Killin said she would like to look at a couple of extra days vacation at Christmas time or a spring break.

"I think there's a balancing act in achievement and pleasing the public with time for family," Killin added.

Linda Jelden said the state mandate for what's required by law is based on number of instructional hours, not on number of days. In comparing other school districts, she noted the importance of looking at timeline details within the number of days scheduled.

Jelden firmly believes one can't simply talk about the calendar in isolation. With the implementation of after-school centers in the grading pilot, as well as other academic considerations, "we can't say it's only because of the calendar."

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“We know test scores are a big issue, and we’re addressing it in a lot of ways—including the calendar,” said Jelden.

“I’d like to get out of the notion of quality versus quantity,” Jelden added. She cited quality in classes, technology, staff and professional development being key pieces to achievement as well.

While Jelden is not opposed to giving a couple more days off, she acknowledged there’s no way to give all the options suggested: a week at Thanksgiving, a couple more days at Christmas and a spring break.

Professional development is critical in Jelden’s opinion, and she said there needs to be time in the calendar to work on collaborative areas.

Dennis Herman cited the contrast of so many pushing for a shorter calendar vs. the public pressure of scoring an F on ColoradoSchoolGrades.com. While he’s not opposed to cutting some days, he would like to see instruction time maximized.

Kris Camblin also cited the balancing game between the community input, the goal to be in the top 25 percent and staff considerations.

Jon King said he puts a lot of faith in the administration and sticks by the recommended 180 student-teacher contact days. He added he would also like to see a spring break.

Michelle Van Overbeke said the calendar makes for a long haul for elementary students who are on the same day structure as the JR/SR High.

She said people have suggested adding three more days to the already-scheduled two days in mid-March to make for a full week spring break.

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Because of CSAP testing, Miles said that wouldn't be his choice of timing for a full week. He would rather a long break be after CSAPs are complete.

Miles said he's heard more interest for more days at Christmastime than for a spring break because the district hasn't scheduled a week-long spring break in many years.

Spring sports schedules don't take a week off, so even if a break is scheduled, it was pointed out that sports activities would most likely still be held during that time.

Even those supporting less days in the calendar said they would not like to go below 175 student days for the calendar.

Asked about adding minutes to a day and reducing days, Miles said to make a difference the daily schedule would need to add 35 minutes, not just five or 10.

JR/SR High Principal Susan Ortner said the district's participation in distance learning ties their hands as class period schedules are coordinated with other districts.

Board president Jeff Tharp facilitated the board conversation and directive, noting their attempt to get to some point that Miles has a boundary or parameter for calendar building, and where they're still listening to the community.

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