



Shrewsbury Public Schools

School Calendar & Start Time Committee

January 15, 2016

To: Shrewsbury School Committee
From: School Calendar & Start Time Committee Representatives
Re: Recommendations for the School Calendar

I. Introduction

The School Calendar & Start Time Committee (see last page), composed of 24 members, including School Committee members, high school students, parents, educators, and administrators met four times from November to January. They divided into two subcommittees 1) School Calendar and 2) School Start Times.

The School Calendar Subcommittee examined the current school calendar for the Shrewsbury Public Schools and researched 18 other school districts' practices and developed surveys to solicit feedback from stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, staff) in order to make recommendations included in this report. These online surveys were conducted in December 2015, and responses were received from 1,364 parents, 390 staff, and 652 high school students.

The recommendations made by the School Calendar Subcommittee were vetted by the entire Calendar & Start Time Committee and represent the consensus of the full committee.

II. Purpose, Goals & Background

Purpose

This committee was convened by the Superintendent of Schools to advise on whether the district would benefit from changes to the school year calendar or the scheduled start times of schools.

Calendar Goals

To examine the current school calendar for the Shrewsbury Public Schools, solicit feedback from stakeholders, research other school districts' practices, consider potential alternatives, and, given

constraints, make a recommendation for the most effective school calendar that meets a) the educational needs of students, b) the professional development needs of educators, and c) the various needs and preferences of families and staff.

Background

A district committee reviewed the school calendar in 2005 in response to concerns regarding interruptions in the flow of the school calendar, especially in the fall, as well as the school year going deep into June when there were several snow cancellations. Based on this committee's recommendations, the School Committee adjusted the school calendar beginning with the 2006-2007 school year so that three previous days of no school due to some families' religious observations (the Jewish observances of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah and the Christian observance of Good Friday) became days when school was in session. Other changes made by the School Committee (and where necessary negotiated with the teachers association), that were unrelated to the Calendar Committee's work included eliminating one of two parent conference days and shifting the types of professional development time.

Last year, based on the number of snow days Massachusetts school districts experienced, the topic of school calendars came up often in the media regarding how districts might avoid going late into June (although Shrewsbury's last day was June 17, many districts went to the very end of June). Some Shrewsbury parents contacted the School Committee asking that the calendar be reviewed, particularly regarding the inclusion of vacations in both February and April vs. a single vacation in March, as is the tradition in many private schools and in public schools elsewhere in the country. Additionally, some parents have inquired about not having school on various religious holidays, including the previous no school days of Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, and Good Friday but also including others such as the Hindu holiday of Diwali and the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr. As a result, the School Committee asked the Superintendent to convene a committee to examine this issue in advance of setting the 2016-2017 school calendar.

Factors that affect the construction of the calendar include:

- Massachusetts law requires public schools with grades 1-12 to be in session for 180 days. "Instructional time" must be at least 990 hours for secondary schools (high and middle) and at least 900 hours for elementary schools.
- The current contract between the School Committee and the Shrewsbury Education Association includes the following:
 - The first day for staff cannot be scheduled until the Monday prior to Labor Day, and the first day for students cannot be scheduled until the Tuesday prior to Labor Day
 - Non-student time in the teacher work year includes an opening day prior to the first day for students, one parent conference day PreK-8 that is also a professional development day for high school and special subject teachers; two full professional development days; and up to five early release days for professional development.

III. Findings & Recommendations

School Start Date

Three survey questions asked respondents to provide their preference for when to start the school year in order to be in session for the 180 required school days. An average of 69% of survey respondents across the three groups, regardless of when Labor Day falls in the calendar (e.g., early

or late), prefer to start the school year one week prior to Labor Day in order to have the school year end earlier in June.

<i>Public schools in Massachusetts must be in session for a minimum of 180 days. The earlier the school year starts, the less likely it is that the school year will run late into June (especially if there are multiple snow days), and vice versa. Please indicate your preference regarding the start and end of the school year.</i>	Students	Staff	Parents
I prefer to start the school year prior to Labor Day in order to have the school year end earlier in June	69%	80%	58%
I prefer to start after Labor Day and have the school year end later in June	17%	13%	30%
No preference	13%	7%	12%

Based on this data the Committee recommends to continue the current practice of the school district beginning the school year the week prior to Labor Day.

Religious Holidays, Wednesday before Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve Day

This survey question asked respondents to weigh how important it is to *not have school in session* on specific religious holidays and the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve day. The vast majority of responses rated the religious holidays, with the exception of Good Friday, as either neutral or not important to have included as “no school” days in the School Calendar. There were several comments regarding additional days that should be considered, such as the Chinese New Year and December 23rd.

<i>The State of Massachusetts requires public school districts observe the following legal holidays: Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, New Year’s Day, M.L. King Day, Presidents Day, and Memorial Day. Outside of these days, please rate the importance of students having the days listed below as no-school days.</i>			
% of respondents rating each religious holiday as <u>Very Important or Important</u>	Students	Staff	Parents
Yom Kippur	26%	7%	7%
Rosh Hashanah	27%	7%	6%

Diwali	29%	5%	17%
Eid al-Fitr	27%	4%	6%
Eid al-Adha	27%	4%	5%
Good Friday	64%	26%	28%

Based on this data the recommendation is to continue the current practice of having school in session on religious holidays. Based on comments, particularly from Shrewsbury High School students, it is recommended that the school district should take steps to increase the awareness of students, parents and staff about the various religious holidays celebrated by members of our school community, as well as the School Committee's policy for students who miss school for a religious observance.

The same survey question asked respondents to weigh how important it is to have not have school in session on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and on Christmas Eve day. The majority of respondents (upwards of 90%) rated both the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve day as either very important or important.

% of respondents rating each holiday as <u>Very Important</u> or <u>Important</u>	Students	Staff	Parents
Wednesday before Thanksgiving	90%	87%	58%
Christmas Eve	96%	94%	85%

Based on this data the Committee recommends to continue the current practice of not having school in session on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve day.

School Vacations

This survey question asked respondents to provide input in regard to modifying the traditional December, February, and April school vacation weeks. An average of 93% of respondents do not endorse modifying the December vacation. The significant majority of staff and students (70-80%+) do not want to modify February and April vacation breaks while parent respondents were more open to either shortening, eliminating, or combining these two weeks into one week in March, with approximately 50-60% indicating such.

<i>Which of the following traditional school vacation weeks would you be interested in modifying, if any?</i>			
% of respondents preference of not modifying vacations	Students	Staff	Parents
December vacation break	94%	98%	88%
February vacation break	79%	69%	41%
April vacation break	84%	77%	52%

The majority of comments in favor of eliminating the February and April vacations and adding a March vacation were related to an earlier last day of school in June, planning for childcare, and cost savings for families traveling.

The majority of comments opposed to eliminating the February and April vacations and adding a March vacation were related to logistical challenges of being an educator in Shrewsbury with children in another school district, or being an educator in another school district and residing in Shrewsbury, where child care and the ability for families to vacation together would be compromised if Shrewsbury followed a different vacation schedule than virtually all other Massachusetts public school districts. The subcommittee's research of 18 neighboring school districts did not find another community among the 18 that had a March break.

Modifying the calendar to have one weeklong March vacation instead of the February and April vacations would have a limited impact on how far the calendar would stretch into June. A total of eight days would be saved by eliminating the February and April vacation weeks (a state holiday occurs in each of the vacation weeks, Presidents' Day and *Patriots' Day, respectively). Adding five days back for a March vacation would ultimately yield a net reduction of three days at the end of the year in June.

Based on the overall survey data and comments, the number of days actually saved by combining the April and February vacations into a single vacation in March, and research of other nearby communities, the committee recommends to continue the current practice of having three school vacations in December, February and April. In sum, the Committee does not find that there is a compelling rationale to change the traditional vacation schedule.

**Patriots' Day is a legal holiday in Massachusetts*

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Two survey questions asked respondents of PK-8 students how important it is for parent-teacher conferences to be scheduled at a time when school is not in session and for their preference for when

parent-teacher conferences should be scheduled. Responses to both questions were relatively widespread across all groups.

<i>How important is it for there to be scheduled parent/teacher conferences at a time when school is not in session?</i>	Staff	Parents
Very Important	32%	19%
Important	16%	21%
Not Important	27%	30%
No Preference	25%	30%

<i>What is your preference for when parent/teacher conferences should be scheduled?</i>		
% of respondents rating as <u>Highly Preferred</u> or <u>Preferred</u>	Staff	Parents
During school hours by appointment when teachers are available	35%	44%
On a day when there is no school scheduled for students	49%	34%
On an early release day	38%	33%
Maintain the current practice of having PreK-8 parent conferences on a no school day for students on Election Day in November	63%	50%

The majority of comments from parents were related to scheduling parent-teacher conferences in the evening and/or during times that are more convenient for working parents. Other themes from the comments indicated that parents would like more than one parent-teacher conference during the school year and that November is too early to hold the only parent-teacher conference.

Based on data from these survey questions and comments the Committee recommends that Election Day remain a day when school is not in session and dedicated to PreK-8 parent-teacher conferences, and that the district further explore alternative options for parent-teacher conferences. The district may want to consider an additional, future survey seeking input from parents and staff regarding parent-teacher conferences.

Professional Development

The Committee was charged with gathering data to make a recommendation for the School Calendar relative to professional development for educators. The 2015-2016 school year calendar includes two full days of professional development, the Fridays before Labor Day and Columbus Day, and five early release days on Tuesday afternoons, which are aligned with days that educators stay an additional hour beyond the normal workday. School is not in session for students during professional development.

<i>Shrewsbury educators are currently required to participate in two full days of professional development. What is your preference for when these days should be scheduled?</i>			
% of respondents rating as <u>Highly Preferred or Preferred</u>	Students	Staff	Parents
One or more prior to the first student day of school	17%	36%	43%
On the Friday prior to Labor Day weekend after the school year has begun (same as this year)	60%	63%	56%
On the Friday prior to Columbus Day weekend (same as this year)	65%	68%	64%
On the Friday prior to Martin Luther King Day weekend	56%	46%	45%
One or more attached to a full school vacation week	48%	16%	39%

Based on this data, regarding the current allotment of two *full* professional development days, the Committee recommends that the district maintain the practice of holding the full professional development days on the Fridays before Labor Day and Columbus Day.

Shrewsbury educators are currently required to participate in five early release days for professional development. What is your preference for when these early release days should be scheduled? (Note: The current practice of early release days on Tuesdays aligns with days that educators stay an additional hour beyond the normal end of a workday, which allows for longer professional development sessions to help meet state mandates for continuing education required to maintain educators' licenses.)

% of respondents rating as <u>Highly Preferred or Preferred</u>	Students	Staff	Parents
Monday afternoons, no more than once per month	31%	8%	13%
Tuesday afternoons, no more than once per month (current practice)	36%	69%	37%
Wednesday afternoons, no more than once per month	30%	9%	10%
Thursday afternoons, no more than once per month	23%	9%	8%
Friday afternoons, no more than once per month	70%	21%	49%

The Committee carefully considered and discussed the strong preference of students and parents for holding professional development for educators on Friday afternoons. While the Committee understands that this might be the most convenient time for students and parents it does not endorse holding professional development on Friday afternoons because, like other industries with traditional Monday-Friday workweeks, the efficacy of holding training on Friday afternoons is poor. The goal of professional development is to engage educators in high-quality training that will have a positive impact on student learning.

Based on survey data and comments and efficacy of scheduling professional training, the Committee recommends that the district continue with the current practice of scheduling early release days for professional development on Tuesday afternoons, aligned with the Tuesday afternoons educators work an additional hour beyond the normal workday in order to provide sufficient time for this work.

IV. Conclusion

Although there are not significant changes recommended relative to the school district calendar, the Committee would like to emphasize that the recommendations to maintain current practices reaffirm the significant changes made to the school year calendar in 2005, particularly reaffirming the change in practice made at that time to have school in session on religious holidays. This recommendation is what the Committee believes is, given the constraints involved, the most effective calendar for meeting the needs of students, professional development needs of educators, and the various needs and preferences of families and staff.

The School Start Time Subcommittee will continue its work to examine the current configuration of school start times of the Shrewsbury Public Schools and research other school districts' practices and recent research from the medical field.

The Committee would like to thank all of the stakeholders for providing input for consideration.

This report was authored by Committee members Mike Albertson (Parent) and Lisa Robinson (Director of Preschool Programs).



Shrewsbury Public Schools

School Calendar & Start Time Committee Membership

Joe Sawyer	Superintendent	District
Sandy Fryc	School Committee	District
Dale Magee	School Committee	District
Lisa Robinson	Administrator	Preschool/Elementary
Jane Lizotte	Administrator	Lower Middle School
Anne Koertge	Administrator	Upper Middle School
Todd Bazydlo	Administrator	High School
Colleen Kalagher	Teacher	Elementary School
Melissa McCann	Teacher/Curriculum	Middle School
Jenn DiFrancesca	Teacher/Dept. Director	High School
Mindy Moynihan	Teacher	High School
Amy Firlings	Paraprofessional	Preschool
Lisa Montigny	Paraprofessional	Elementary School
Jared Godek	Student	High School
Daniel Green	Student	High School
Sophia Marshall	Student	High School
Vikram Pathalam	Student	High School
AnnMarie DeAngelis	Parent	Elementary & Middle School
Lynsey Heffernan	Parent	Preschool & Elementary
Joe Burdo	Parent	Elementary
Denise Wall	Parent	High School
Sumathi Narayanan	Parent	Middle & High School
Mike Albertson	Parent	Elementary, Middle & High School
AnneMarie Bird	Parent	Middle School
Hatem Tolba	Parent	High School