

Downers Grove schools could start earlier in 2016

District 99 board considers starting year as early as Aug. 17

BY ANNEMARIE MANNION
Chicago Tribune

Students in Downers Grove Community High School District 99 might start school a couple of weeks earlier in the 2016-17 school year, but wouldn't have finals looming over them during winter break.

The school board is studying the idea of starting classes for the 2016-17 school year as early as Aug. 17, if the district adopts an early start calendar for Downers Grove North and Downers Grove South high schools. The board also could stick with the traditional calendar, where classes begin on Aug. 29.

Under the early start calendar, winter break would take place from Dec. 22 to Jan. 4, and classes would end on May 24. That



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does not include emergency dates that could be scheduled if there are snow days to make up.

Under the traditional calendar, winter break would start on Dec. 19 and

conclude on Jan. 2. The last day of school would be June 8, not including emergency days.

Superintendent Mark McDonald said a major reason to start school earli-

er in August would be to allow students to complete finals before they go on the winter break.

If the district adopts an

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early start calendar, other items — such as the dates of parent-teacher conferences that currently take place in November — would need to be shifted, McDonald said. The December holiday break would be 10 days rather than 11 days.

"There are clearly issues to be dealt with," McDonald said. "None is insurmountable. None is a show stopper."

Board member Julie Beckman said the district also must study how an early start calendar would affect elementary feeder districts that share busing costs with the high school district.

"It's going to affect busing if they don't go along with us," she said.

McDonald said he has given the proposed calen-

dars to the feeder districts, the teachers and support staff unions, and is waiting for their feedback. He had not yet shared the proposed calendars with parents or students, he said.

At a recent board meeting, parent Nihal Isaac supported the early start calendar. She said under the current calendar, her daughter, who is a junior at Downers Grove North, spends three-quarters of the winter break doing group projects and studying for finals.

"I can't tell you enough how much this two-week break would benefit (the students) to just be able to shut off, decompress, de-stress," she said.

Although the district's two high schools are not completely air conditioned, Board President Nancy Kupka said stu-

dents told her they could better deal with heat than with cramming for finals over winter break.

"Every student I've talked to would rather sustain the heat than have finals after holiday break, no question," she said.

Board member Mike Davenport agreed that the idea of starting the school year earlier is worth considering.

"I think this is an idea whose time has come," he said. "It needs to be further vetted. The devil is in the details."

Staff is expected to report back to the board with feedback from teachers, other staff, students and parents before a calendar is finalized.

McDonald said the deadline to finalize the calendar is in 2016.

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