

Downers Grove schools considering early start in fall

By ANNEMARIE MANNION
Chicago Tribune

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A committee will help Downers Grove Community High School District 99 decide if it wants to start school earlier for the 2016-17 year.

Superintendent Mark McDonald has formed a committee of teachers, administrators and support staff to study the issues that would affect the change from a "traditional" to an "early-start" calendar.

The committee will review and consider input from more than 1,500 people who recently responded to a survey on the issue. The Board of Education wants to finalize the calendar by Feb. 1.

"It's so important to bring in all the various entities and players to the discussions because it's much more complex than you'd think," board member Julia Beckman said.

Classes at the district,

which includes Downers Grove North and Downers Grove South high schools, could start about Aug. 17 for the 2016-17 school year if the district adopts what it calls an early-start calendar. Or, it could stick with the more traditional calendar that would bring students back to school Aug. 29.

Under the traditional calendar, the first semester would end three days after winter break, while the early-start calendar would end before winter break.

Under the early-start calendar, the winter break would take place from Dec. 22 to Jan. 4 and classes would end May 24, not including emergency dates for weather-related closures.

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

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

McDonald said a major reason to start school earlier would be to allow students to complete finals before they go on break in December.

"The positive is allowing students to take a true break at the semester," he said.

The larger issues in adopting an early-start schedule include the summer heat and how or whether to align the calendar with the district's feeder school districts. Not all

of District 99's classrooms are air conditioned, but the district has plans to extend air conditioning throughout its buildings.

McDonald said smaller issues include how an early-start calendar would affect fall sports or families who have plans for mid-August vacations.

McDonald said many parents noted in the survey that they want to keep Columbus Day as a vacation day. He said that consideration would push the start of school a day earlier than Aug. 17 under the early-start calendar.

"There are trade-offs, but that can be changed," he said.

McDonald said 167 teachers responded to the survey and most favored the traditional calendar, mainly because of concerns about the potential for summer heat.

Changing the calendar is not as easy as one might think, officials said.

Another issue for study is transportation and whether there would be higher costs for starting earlier. The district shares buses with some feeder districts.

"There are a lot of layers to it. I confess it's a lot more layered than I anticipated," board member Mike Davenport said.

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Students could return to school at Downers Grove in mid-August if officials approve an early-start calendar.