

AUHSD Calendar: Time to Get Involved

By Sophie Braccini

On October 17th, the Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) unanimously voted to maintain the same academic calendar for the 2008-2009 school year and to appoint a committee to study the impact of alternative calendars for subsequent school years. The vote followed the Staff's recommendation, a 180 degree turn from the August meeting when Superintendent Jim Negri had asked for the adoption of a calendar that would have seen students start a week earlier in August and finish a week earlier in June. After years of negotiations and a period of public outrage, how did it happen that so much time and energy was spent, only to end up back at square one?

Most of the public debate started in August, when parent after parent protested the proposed changes to the calendar, which many felt were being imposed on them and their children. Richard Whitmore, President of the AUHSD Governing Board, offers an explanation: "To change the calendar requires a lot of collaboration, and that collaboration is made more complex by the bargaining aspect." The calendar is part of the bargaining that takes place between the teachers' union and the District and these negotiations are not public. As a result, "For many parents, the issue was raised and then went away about two years ago, so people were surprised to see it on our agenda again," adds Whitmore.

Parents felt estranged from the process and unsure of its consequences. "Changing the school calendar affects families and other school districts. We are your customers, you need to conduct surveys and hear our concerns," said an outraged father of children registered in both the Acalanes and the Lafayette school districts. Flaws in the communication process were acknowledged across the board. Whitmore agrees: "I think the process we went through between

June and August and this final vote have impressed on the Board and district staff the importance of constant communication as difficult issues evolve."

The proposed new calendar has not been permanently shelved. Parents will have an opportunity to get involved, in a dual process featuring informational forums in February and the formation of a Study Committee. The forums will include discussion of the rationale behind the recommendation and the consequences of its enactment. "Our objective is the best interest of the students," affirms the Superintendent, "and stress is high on our list of subjects to tackle."

Negri acknowledges that changing the calendar will not magically reduce student academic stress, but argues "this is one factor that can help, it creates more continuous blocks of education and, with the first semester ending at winter break, a vacation that's a real respite." This recommendation came from the research of Dr. Denise Clark Pope, Director of the Stressed Out Student project and lecturer at Stanford University School of Education.

The Study Committee will be formed in November. "It will be composed of 25 to 30 members, with representatives of students, parents, teachers and administrative staff," promises Negri. The committee will not recommend a calendar, but will study the issues that have been raised.

Both the Board and staff are hoping for a high level of parent participation. "If you have a strong opinion or a strong interest in the underlying issues, volunteer for the committee," urges Whitmore. "I hope for an open minded review," says Negri, "this is not a black and white question, there is no one right calendar... We need to keep in mind the best interest of our first customers, the students."



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