

# OPINION | KATE BARNES & SARAH MCKENIZE: Bold ... or risky?

## Caution on changing school calendar

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by Kate Barnes and Sarah McKenzie Special to the Democrat-Gazette

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Students in some Arkansas districts attend school only four days a week. More districts, like Mountain Pine and Lincoln, are moving to this schedule. A three-day weekend sounds appealing, but will the change benefit students?

Arkansas districts can now choose a different school calendar than the traditional nine-month one we all grew up with. Currently, 27 districts operate on a four-day school week, and six use a year-round calendar. A four-day school week condenses five days of instruction into four longer days. Year-round calendars spread school days out throughout the year. Summer break is shorter, but there are several one- to two-week breaks throughout the year.

Both calendar options result in the same number of instructional hours as the traditional nine-month calendar. Neither calendar option generates significant cost savings.

These nontraditional calendar options have supporters and critics. Supporters say these calendars are more attractive to teachers and reduce burnout of students. Critics worry that longer school days or more frequent time off may be difficult for younger students, or even harm academic progress. Researchers don't consistently find that either calendar option is better (or worse) for students' learning than the traditional calendar.

Districts noted that teachers were the main reason for the calendar change. District leaders felt that the different calendar attracts teachers to their district. As more districts switch, however, a calendar change isn't a sustainable solution to a strong teacher workforce. Systemic changes like improving school climate and culture, pairing new teachers with mentors, promoting collaboration, providing support and resources for mental health, and providing quality professional development related to specific issues teachers face may be equally effective in attracting teachers.

Increasing student academic success was also a reason districts switched to nontraditional calendars. Some district leaders said that long weekends help students and teachers be more productive during the school day. They also indicated that longer days allow more time to provide focused instruction. Changing the days students attend school will not automatically

increase student performance. Only a focus on high-quality classroom instruction all day, every day, will lead to improvements in student learning.

If a community decides to switch to a nontraditional school calendar, district leaders must plan carefully. The transition must reflect the priorities and needs of families and community members. Teachers and staff should understand how the switch will benefit student learning. Student progress must be closely monitored.

Superintendent Bobby Applegate from Mountain Pine assured his community that if student test scores decline after the change, the district will return to a traditional calendar. But it may be difficult to undo the shift. For example, consider a district that switches to four-day weeks but keeps the salaries of bus drivers the same. If the district moves back to a traditional calendar, won't the bus drivers expect increased pay since they are driving five days instead of four?

Changing to a nontraditional calendar may allow school districts an opportunity to be innovative and better fit the needs of their community. It is important, however, for everyone to consider the potential drawbacks and long-term implications of the change. District leaders should focus on less disruptive solutions for the challenges of teacher shortages and low student achievement.

It's not how many days students are in school, but what students learn each day. Districts can make improvements without making changes that will impact the community for years to come. Switching school calendars is a major undertaking that may not result in benefits to students. We won't know how well students in these nontraditional schools performed until summer. Communities should use caution until we have more information about how these nontraditional calendars benefit Arkansas students.

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