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# SCHOOL CALENDAR

## KEY ISSUES

In North Carolina, there are strong advocates on both sides of the debate regarding the length the school calendar and when the school year should start.

Advocates for lengthening the school calendar suggest more instructional time will lead to improved student performance. Nationally, the United States mandates less instructional time for students than many other industrialized countries. Opponents of a longer calendar typically point to employers' reliance on low-cost student labor during the summer months, economic benefits of increased tourism (more time out of school arguably translates to more and/or longer vacations), and costs of keeping schools open longer.

The date when LEAs can begin their school year also produces strong advocates. In current legislation, traditional public schools can open no earlier than the Monday closest to August 26 and close no later than the Friday closest to June 11. This lack of calendar flexibility continues to be an issue for LEAs across the state.

While traditional public schools operate on an August to June school calendar, alternative schedules are becoming a growing trend, both in North Carolina and throughout the country.

## HISTORICAL LOOK AT THE NORTH CAROLINA SCHOOL CALENDAR

Prior to 2012, North Carolina had maintained a 180-day school year for decades. North Carolina's 180-day school year reflected the state's agrarian roots: young people were needed to harvest crops in the summer. Therefore, schools were closed during the peak-growing season. While the economy has shifted away from traditional agriculture, the tradition of summer vacation has remained.

## CURRENT SCHOOL CALENDAR POLICY

In 2012, the North Carolina legislature increased the state's minimum to 185 instructional days, up from 180.<sup>1</sup> This is higher than all but one other state: Kansas (186). Over half of all states mandate 180 days. Adjustments to the School Calendar in G.S. 115C-84.2, beginning in the 2013-14 school year, include:

- 185 days or 1025 hours of instruction covering at least nine calendar months. This applies to traditional public schools and charter schools.
- Requirement that traditional public schools open no earlier than the Monday closest to August 26 and close no later than the Friday closest to June 11.
- On a showing of "good cause," (schools in an LEA closed for eight days per year during any four of the past 10 years due to severe weather conditions) the State Board may allow the LEA to set an opening day no earlier than the Monday closest to August 19. Partial days due to inclement weather, such as delayed starts or early closings no longer count toward good cause waivers.
- Elimination of educational waivers that had previously allowed counties to avoid providing the additional 5 days of instruction.
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools participating in the public-private partnership Project LIFT and their feeder schools will be exempt from the mandated start and end dates.

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<sup>1</sup> Session Law 2012, Senate Bill 187. Available at <https://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2011/Bills/Senate/PDF/S187v7.pdf>.

- Have a minimum of ten (10) annual vacation leave days.
- Must have at least nine (9) teacher workdays. Local Boards shall designate two (2) workdays on which teachers may take accumulated vacation leave. Local Boards may designate the remaining workdays as days teachers may take accumulated vacation leave.<sup>2</sup>

## COMPARISON OF U.S. STATES

Since education policy is largely left to state discretion, each state determines the number of school days for each calendar year. While the majority of states require 180 days of student instruction, variance exists between states. Many states also specify a minimum number of hours that constitutes a full instructional day. In North Carolina, 5.5 hours of instructional time must be completed in order to be counted as a full school day. North Carolina schools must have 185 days or 1025 instructional hours in a school year.

### MINIMUM INSTRUCTIONAL DAYS PER YEAR IN EACH STATE

State	Minimum Instructional Days/Year	State	Minimum Instructional Days/Year
Alabama	180	Montana	N/A
Alaska	180	Nebraska	N/A
Arizona	180	Nevada	180
Arkansas	178	New Hampshire	180
California	180/175 for Charters	New Jersey	180
Colorado	160	New Mexico	N/A
Connecticut	180	New York	180
Delaware	N/A	North Carolina	185
District of Columbia	180	North Dakota	175
Florida	180	Ohio	District option
Georgia	180	Oklahoma	180
Hawaii	180	Oregon	N/A
Idaho	District option	Pennsylvania	180
Illinois	180	Rhode Island	180
Indiana	180	South Carolina	180
Iowa	180	South Dakota	District option
Kansas	186	Tennessee	180
Kentucky	170	Texas	N/A
Louisiana	177	Utah	180
Maine	175	Vermont	175
Maryland	180	Virginia	180
Massachusetts	180	Washington	180
Michigan	180	West Virginia	180
Minnesota	165	Wisconsin	N/A
Mississippi	180	Wyoming	175
Missouri	174		

Source: "50-State Comparison: Instructional Time Policies, Minimum number of days or hours per school year." Education Commission of the States. April 2018. Available at <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquest2ci?rep=IT1801-2>.

<sup>2</sup> NC DPI. Legislation Summary for LEAs. Available at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/accounting/calendar/>.

## COMPARING THE UNITED STATES TO OTHER NATIONS

Research suggests that the amount of time spent in schools can dramatically impact the learning process. While young people in the United States attend school an average of 180 days per year, their counterparts in other industrialized nations routinely attend schools for an average of 185 days a year.<sup>3</sup> Research finds that young people, especially young people from low-income homes, make learning gains when given more instruction.<sup>4</sup>

These findings have led many school systems to experiment with extended school days and expanded learning for young people. Some schools are engaging students in community-led afterschool activities; others are using traditional faculty to work with small numbers of students in after-school tutorial programs.

Country	Days Spent in School Per Year
Australia	200
Denmark	200
Canada	183
Finland	187
France	162
Germany	188
Israel	219
Japan	201
Luxembourg	180
Mexico	200
New Zealand	194
Norway	190
Spain	175
South Korea	190
Switzerland	188
United States	180

## THE NATION AT RISK REPORT OF 1983

Historically, the need, and thus the debate, for additional time in school has been around for over thirty years. The *A Nation at Risk* report, issued under President Ronald Reagan's administration in 1983 recommended additional time as one of its main recommendations for school improvement.

*"We recommend that significantly more time be devoted to learning the New Basics. This will require more effective use of the existing school day, a longer school day, or a lengthened school year."<sup>5</sup>*

### RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE REPORT

1. Longer and more learning intensive homework assignments for high school students.
2. Instruction in effective study and work skills starting in the early grades and continued throughout the student's schooling.
3. Lengthening the school day to 7-hours and the school year to 200-220 days.
4. Improved classroom time management, allowing additional time for special needs of slow learners.
5. Firm and fair codes of student conduct should be enforced consistently with alternative classrooms and programs developed to meet the needs of continually disruptive students.
6. Attendance policies with clear sanctions to reduce the amount of time lost through student absenteeism and tardiness.

<sup>3</sup> OECD, Education at a Glance 2017 (See Table "Instruction time in compulsory general education" p349). Available at [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2017\\_eag-2017-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2017_eag-2017-en).

<sup>4</sup> The Wallace Foundation, Summer and Expanded Learning Time. Available at <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/summer-and-expanded-learning-time/pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> A Nation at Risk. Available at <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html>.

7. Reduction of administrative burdens on the teacher to allocate additional time for teaching and learning.
8. Academic progress and instructional needs, rather than age level, should guide placement and grouping of students.

## ALTERNATIVE SCHEDULES

Alternative scheduling has become a popular form of education reform in recent years. As issues over school crowding, student performance, and other concerns rise, many school systems in North Carolina and around the nation are implementing scheduling alternatives, such as year-round schools and block scheduling, as solutions.

### YEAR-ROUND SCHOOLS

According to a report from the Center for American Progress<sup>6</sup>, young children can lose more than two months of reading and math skills during the summer months, with the greatest learning loss occurring among low-income children. Year-round school schedules attempt to combat this learning loss. Varying models exist for year-round schools, but typically, the year-round calendar divides the school year into sections so that students attend school for 45 days and then have 15 consecutive days off. The students, therefore, attend school throughout the entire year, but are not actually in school for more days than they would be on a traditional schedule.

In year-round schools, students are often assigned to one of the "tracks" in the school with each track having a slightly different schedule. If a school has four tracks, for example, students in three of them would be in session while students in the fourth would be on break.

A year-round school can have significant advantages, including:

- A more continuous learning process without a long summer break lessens the need for extensive review at the beginning of the school year.
- Three-week break periods allow schools to offer remedial and enrichment activities.
- More students can be served in a single building using "tracks," which can ease the burden of serving large student populations, particularly in high growth areas.

Currently, year-round models are in place at the elementary and middle school level across North Carolina. Year-round high schools are limited for several reasons including the fact that many high school programs must coordinate scheduling with other schools (for such activities as competitions in athletics, music, etc.). This coordination could be quite difficult if all schools were not following similar schedules.

Current research is inconclusive about whether year-round schools impact student achievement. The results vary from classroom to classroom, and school to school. Whether or not the year-round school model increases student performance, more school districts dealing with declining tax revenues, overcrowding, and low capital funds are considering moving to year-round schedules.

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<sup>6</sup> Center for American Progress, Expanded Learning Time in Action. Available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2008/07/pdf/elt1.pdf>.

## BLOCK-SCHEDULING

Block scheduling has been adopted at an increasing rate by schools across the nation. A block schedule allocates 90-minute periods of time for basic course work, rather than the traditional 45-minute class period. Therefore, a block schedule has fewer, but longer classes, per instruction day. One of the more popular forms of block scheduling is the 4x4 schedule where students take four 90-minute courses each semester and then enroll in four different 90-minute courses the following semester. This allows students to take eight courses each year, rather than six under the traditional schedule. A 1997 Department of Public Instruction survey of high school principals cited several reasons for changing from the traditional schedule to the block schedule, including:

- Greater variety of academic courses
- Increased time for teachers and students to focus on a more limited number of courses
- Teachers have more planning time to prepare lessons plans and concentrate their teaching methods<sup>7</sup>

While principals, teachers, and students have reported being pleased with many of the aspects of block scheduling, research is inconclusive on whether the new schedule structure increases student performance on state tests.

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<sup>7</sup> NC DPI, Block Scheduling in NC. Available at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/researchandeval/survey>.