



## 'School Calendar 101'

January 2016



School system calendars are very different from the 365-day a year calendars the rest of the world uses, in many not-so-obvious ways. One could spend hours in "School Calendar 101" before mastering the complexity of the always changing school calendar laws! Not to worry, here is a quick guide to help put the pieces of the school calendar puzzle together.



### A Puzzle with Many Pieces

As the dozen+ members of the Rockingham County Schools Calendar Committee know all too well, working out the school calendar each year is a real puzzle. Of necessity, much time and effort is spent trying to "color within the lines," accommodating the numerous constraints of changing State law before moving on to try and meet the preferences of parents, administrators, teachers and students who all have varying needs and opinions. When preferences are possible, decisions are made with the best interest of students, and in some cases the dwindling school budget, in mind.



### 2011 Legislation

In June 2011 the NC General Assembly voted to add 5 student instructional days to the previously 180-day school calendar, requiring all North Carolina school systems provide 185 days of instruction (also increasing the minimum number of instructional hours from 1000 to 1025). Simultaneously, the General Assembly eliminated the 5 "protected" teacher workdays that have been in the calendar since 2005. Shortly thereafter, the State Board of Education received permission from the General Assembly to grant waivers from some or all of these additional instructional days to school systems to conduct important teacher training in the new core curriculum standards that will go into effect in the 2012-13 school year. Rockingham County Schools applied for and received a waiver for the 5 additional days for the 2012-13 school year.



### 2012 Legislation

The school calendar statutes were changed in substantive manners beginning in the 2013-14 school year. The new statutes beginning with the 2013-14 school year are as follows:

- 185 days **OR** 1025 hours of instruction covering at least nine calendar months
- Educational waivers granted by the State Board will be eliminated
- Schools will 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) the State Board may allow the LEA to set an opening day no earlier than the Monday closest to August 19.
- Partial days of delayed starts or early closings due to inclement weather no longer count toward good cause waivers.



### Does RCS Qualify for Any Waivers?

PRIOR to the June 2012 Legislation: State law allowed school systems to apply for a waiver ("good cause" waiver) from the mandatory calendar start and end dates of August 25 - June 10 if they met the following condition: the system as a whole must have missed a minimum of 8 days of school due to inclement weather (including early releases & delayed openings caused by inclement weather) in each of four of the previous ten years. RCS received this waiver for the 2011-12 and 2012-13 school years.

Beginning with the 2013-14 school year, there are no longer waivers for exemption of the opening and/or closing dates, therefore RCS must not start prior to the Monday closest to August 26 and must complete school by the Friday closest to June 11.



### State Parameters = Little Flexibility

All in all, school systems have very little scheduling flexibility, given State parameters such as mandated testing periods, the number of days/hours that students are to attend school (185 days or 1025 hours), the number of teacher workdays and holidays. The State also sets the exact number of days teachers are to be employed (215).



### **Fewer Days Available for Makeup**

The number of possible makeup days within the calendar was drastically cut in 2005 when the State Calendar Law reduced the number of allowed teacher workdays from 20 to 15 in addition to the specific start/end dates. For these reasons, options such as Spring Break days and/or Saturdays must be designated as potential makeup days each year.



### **Choosing Days for Breaks**

So what flexibility does the Calendar Committee have? The Committee identifies where teacher workdays will fall, which days will become early release days, and decides how many and which days will be used for the two major "breaks" in the calendar, at Christmas and in the spring. This can be challenging as well.



### **What Makes a Holiday a Holiday?**

According to State law, teachers and other school system employees, like other government employees, are required to receive 10-11 paid "holidays," plus a varying amount of paid vacation time (called "annual leave") which they accrue each year and must use within the time period that they are employed. But most school employees don't work a full year. Many, like teachers and assistants only work 10 months. Other employees, including assistant principals and coaches, may work 11 months. School may be in session on typical government holidays like Columbus Day while many employees are not on the payroll when July 4th rolls around. Consequently, many of the required paid "holidays" must be accounted for rather arbitrarily on the school calendar. That's why on the complete version of the calendar some days are called "holidays" and others "annual leave days" (such as days falling around Christmas and over Spring Break) - this is done to make employees aware of days that they either have off scot-free, can take off only if they give up a day of vacation, or have to work if they don't have vacation days available (especially true for people new to the system). All students and their parents need to know is that there is no school on holidays or annual leave days! Interestingly enough, the only holiday actually mandated by law is Veterans Day, November 11.



### **When there are 11 Holidays: Another Piece of the Puzzle**

When does a calendar have 11 holidays and what does that mean? The number of holidays in the calendar (10 or 11) depends on the equivalent number of legal holidays occurring within the school calendar as those designated by the State Personnel Commission for State Employees. For the 2016-17 calendar, this is 11 holidays. To balance the calendar equation, the extra holiday is then reflected in the reduction of 1 required teacher workday (total of 14 required teacher workdays).



### **One Last Piece: Testing**

Another element of "School Calendar 101" is the testing process. Elementary, Middle and High School students are tested at different times and in different ways, complicating the impact on the calendar. There are mandated AP Exam test dates, end of grade and end of course testing periods, and other evaluations that go on at state-prescribed times through the year. Maneuvering the school calendar to accommodate pre-test practice, the various test periods themselves, and in some cases mandatory re-testing or make-up testing afterward, is very challenging.