

School calendars: the consensus is there's no consensus

August 28, 2010

Last week I kicked off a series of columns about what's commonly referred to as "the schools." I said: "The main point I hope to make is that there is no one magic "fix" for "the schools" because there is no such thing as "the schools."

That said, I'd like to thank the people who contacted me this past week with their magic bullet fixes, even though that's not the focus of the discussion here. I want you all to know, I do get it.

My friends on the left assure me that if we just spend enough money on the schools at some point everything will be dandy and we can all gather around the organic garden and sing "Kumbaya."

My friends on the right assure me that everything will be dandy as soon as we cut teacher pay by half, make the kids responsible just like in the good old days, and somehow throw in a tax cut.

I get both sides. However, before anyone can play "fix it" we have to kind of know what it is we're fixin' to "fix." This is my point. Things are complicated.

Let's start out by considering the school calendar. We have a little thing here in the USA called "local control." Because of this, school calendars are set on a local level, unlike in some foreign countries in which the school calendar is mandated by the state or national government.

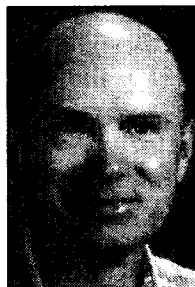
Due to local control, we can't even agree on how

many days students should go to school. Thirty states (30) set the minimum at 180, two mandate 181 days and above, three range from 179 to 176 days, five set it at 175 days, two from 174 to 171 days. Eight states (Michigan included) require a minimum number of instructional hours, not days. Minnesota has no minimum of either, leaving the decision up to individual school districts:

So, right out of the gate, a stumbling block in the "fix" discussion is derailed by the fact that all of this country's students don't go to school the same amount of time.

Anne Foster, executive director of Parents for Public Schools, says she gets more calls about school calendars than any other issue. "Parents and community people have strong opinions driven by different things," she observes.

You can see how things "get driven" by just looking at Michigan where the starting date for school has been set by the tourism industry, not parents, educators or students. As first a sports magazine publisher for many years and then later as a ski and golf writer, I attended many meetings with representatives from the tourism industry. If you boiled down



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the perfect school calendar for tourism interests here's what it would be. School would start after Labor Day and end before Memorial Day; there would be two weeks off at Christmas, a one-week mid-winter break, one week off at Easter, and several four-day weekends. Now you do the math and try to put a 180-day school calendar into that scenario.

There's nothing wrong with the

tourism industry wanting to generate as much business as possible. However, this illustrates how an entity focused on one objective can influence the objectives for a completely different entity. Similar scenarios are played out in every state and then in school districts all over the country. The result is a mish-mash of calendars.

OK, so if you want to set up a universal calendar for a state or even the entire country, how many school days should there be? The Obama administration says the number of school days should be increased. The theory is that if our students went to class for (let's say) 243 days per year like Japan, then they would learn more. Sounds logical, right?

Well, in Japan students get 4 instructional hours per day, while in the U.S. the aver-

age instructional time is 5.6 hours. Even though Japanese students attend more days of school, students in the U.S. receive more than 100 hours more instruction time. See, the argument all of a sudden becomes less logical.

Scratching your head yet? OK, let's stop here for now. Next week we'll continue with how the school year is divided and how schools are configured, with perhaps a sashay into what I call the "bandwagon effect."

Sources include: The National Center for Education Statistics, Edu In Review, and the Education commission of the States.

Finally, the world has gone bonkers and I can prove it. According to a new book — Higher Education: How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids by Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus — at public universities only 28 percent of spending goes for instruction and at private colleges only 33 percent is spent on instruction. All the rest of that tuition and taxpayer money is spent on things like research by staff professors, seven-figure pay for college presidents, non-education related campus amenities, and costly sports programs. That's a bit out-of-whack bonkers, wouldn't you say?

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