

Schools: No agreement on when, how, where

Sept. 4, 2010

OK, kiddings, now we're rolling. This is the third column in a series about "the schools." Remember, my premise is that it's very complicated to fix "the schools" because there is no such thing as "the schools."

In the first column I dispelled the myth that the school year (and summer vacation) is based on an agrarian calendar. Last week I presented facts to illustrate that there's not even consensus on how many days children should attend school in this country.

Let's finish the discussion of calendars with a simple multiple choice question. Who should set the school calendar for your local school district? Choose one: a) the federal government, b) the state government, c) a locally elected school board.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that having the politicians in Washington or Lansing set the calendar is not palatable to most readers of this column. I think most of us would choose "c." Ah, but therein lies the problem. There are more than 15,000 school districts in the United States, which means 15,000 chances that school calendars across the country will not be exactly the same. This makes it very tough to mandate any one-size-fits-all reform.

Do not think this will get any better soon. For years, conservatives argued for more days in school so we could demand more of students and more efficiently use our buildings. Now President Obama is saying the same thing so, naturally, conservatives are against this.

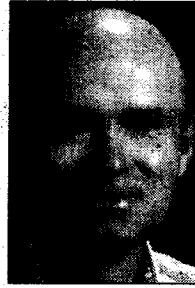
According to Media Matters, last September Glen Beck said: "We have the new

indoctrination happening at school. Then, the president has come out and said that parents need to have their kids spending less time at home with the family and more time at school. He wants now to have longer school days. ... Longer school days, more indoctrination? I don't think so."

At the same time Rush Limbaugh was saying: "Obama is among those making a case that American kids aren't spending enough time in school; wants to get rid of the summer vacation and have kids in school year-round. We all know why he wants this done. This is just more indoctrination time."

All this flip-flopping by both sides kind of turns students into shuttlecocks in a ridiculous game of political badminton.

So now we have a mish-mash of calendars. Does it surprise you that we can't agree how to divide the school year either? Some school districts divide the year into two semesters. Others opt for three trimesters. Then throw in various year-round schemes. Locally, for example, within the Wexford-Missaukee ISD six school districts are on a semester schedule and one is on a trimester schedule. Thus, students taking the same class at the Career Technical Center are on different time sequences. This is not an insurmountable problem, but in this one instance it's not very efficient either.



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OK, calendars are all over the place and so are the ways to divide them. Certainly, we can agree on where students should go to school. Not so fast.

For decades school districts have built middle schools for grades 6-7-8. There are now 11,000 middle schools in the U.S. The theory here is that students in this age group are at a difficult time in their development and need a separate

school that uses specialized strategies for instruction. However, it costs a lot to build separate middle school buildings and the model requires more teachers (than a typical junior high, for example). According to USA Today, costs are causing many school districts to go back to the K-8 configuration (and a 9-12 high school).

In an Education World article, Colorado Education Commissioner William Moloney suggests revisiting the concept of elementary schools that teach kindergarten through eighth grade. "Historically the K-8 school is what America was. It really comes down to the things that parents value most — intimacy, the basics, control. If your child is known by every single teacher in the building, if you have a relationship of nine years' duration, if you have that kind of focus and intensity is that not better than when your children are sent to a more distant school with larger numbers?"

Two different models with

completely opposite theories; one says you need to separate grades 6-7-8 for the good of the child and the other says you need to keep grades 6-7-8 in the same school for the good of the child.

It should be noted that school districts in cities like Cincinnati and Boston are returning to K-8, as well as districts from Alaska to Colorado and elsewhere. Is one model better than the other? Beats me, but it's obvious that when each side references "the schools," they are talking about two different things.

The discussion will continue next week, but in the meantime the world has gone bonkers and I can prove it. In the midst of a \$640 million shortfall and 3,000 teacher layoffs, the Los Angeles School District has opened the costliest school in the nation. Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools cost \$578 million to build, which included \$33 million for methane gas mitigation, \$15 million for a historical preservation of a wall from the demolished Coconut Grove nightclub, and a Paul Williams-designed coffee shop (Yahoo News).

If that's not bonkers enough for you, Allen High School in Texas just opened its new \$59.6 million football stadium. The school has 5,049 students but the stadium will seat 18,000. Get this, though. It's only the fifth largest high school football stadium in Texas. The largest is in San Antonio and seats 23,000 (USA Today). Is that bonkers or what?

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