
Education Lab
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Year-round schooling, other programs get a bipartisan push in Washington state

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By [Hannah Furfaro](#) 

Seattle Times staff reporter

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When Curt Guaglianone last considered [year-round schooling](#), it was the 1990s, he was a principal at a school in Central California, and his district didn't have a choice.

Schools were “bursting at the seams” as families flocked inland from the Bay Area, said Guaglianone, now superintendent at Mount Adams School District in Yakima County. His California district was forced to stretch the school year past nine months: To ease crowding, students and staff rotated through school buildings in shifts.

Guaglianone is now considering the concept as a way to help students whose education was disrupted during the pandemic. Instead of sending kids to school in shifts, districts could sprinkle weekslong breaks across all 12 months of the school year.

Mount Adams is one of several Washington school districts eyeing the idea as a bipartisan group of lawmakers work to make it a reality. Legislation that's moving through the state Senate would offer 20 school districts a modest budget boost if they voluntarily balanced their school days across a calendar year. Mount Adams, where about 95% of the district's 900 students are from low-income homes, would qualify: [Senate Bill 5147](#) would prioritize lower-income districts with no more than 10,000

students. The pilot program is limited to smaller districts, for now, because it would be easier for them to make the switch.

The nine-month school calendar is thought to have roots in the planting seasons that defined the country's largely agrarian culture in the 1900s. Its true origins are more complicated. Over the decades since, a summer break has become common for a variety of reasons: Families want vacation time, students need a break or time to work, school budgets are tight, some schools aren't air-conditioned.

But it's outdated, some say.

"If the school districts could design the school calendar today, I don't know that they'd ever design it the way it is," said Sen. Brad Hawkins, R-East Wenatchee, ranking Republican on the Senate Education Committee and a lead sponsor of the bill. "If school districts aren't prepared to consider doing things differently as a result of this pandemic, when will we ever do it?"

Washington school districts can change their school calendar under current Washington law, and a small number already have. Students in districts such as Waterville and Pe Ell, for instance, have longer school days but go to class only four days a week. The new legislation, if approved, would encourage more districts to experiment.

The measure is gaining steam as policy makers recognize the exhaustive list of ways that time away from school buildings is affecting children. National tests show [students are slipping in math](#) and reading, for instance, and more students are facing mental-health crises. Some students still lack access to hot meals or school counselors.

With about 70% of the state's students still learning from home, lawmakers are adding provisions to help all Washington children adapt to an eventual return to school buildings. In addition to the calendar pilot program, the bill also includes funding for all districts statewide to add up to three additional school days; the state currently provides funding for 180 days.

Districts where a majority of students are low-income could apply for funding for an additional five days. Through a proposed amendment, the bill's sponsors also want to require that state education officials create grants to expand dual language learning and enrichment activities and provide funding for student assessments to help identify students who are falling behind. And all districts could apply for funds to cover a week

of on-campus orientation activities, like outdoor games or time to socialize with friends, before the start of the 2021-22 school year.

“We hope schools will be open next fall, but it would be lovely to have schools be able to open even a couple of weeks ahead,” said Senate Education Committee chair Lisa Wellman, D-Mercer Island, who is co-sponsoring the bill with Hawkins. When students return, those first few days, “will be spent adjusting to getting back to school.”

In all, the legislation is expected to cost more than \$337 million, and could be funded through a mix of state and federal dollars.

Guaglianone would like to see even more funded days — 20 or 25 perhaps — but said the legislation zeros in on an important point: Simply stretching 180 days across a calendar year isn’t enough.

“One of the ways we will catch students up is if we give them more learning time. More complete, direct, intensified and intentional learning time,” he said. “If we do it just for the sake of extending the calendar, it’s not going to be as effective.”

Stretching school

The state’s top education official, Chris Reykdal, says he agrees. Reykdal has advocated for a longer school year since at least 2017. He hoped to add 20 or 30 days to the calendar as a way to close equity gaps, improve student achievement and add time for language instruction.

Reykdal supports the legislation but says he wished it also allowed more districts to pilot a yearlong calendar. Although pandemic school closures have amplified the costs of time away from school, he said, arguments in favor of a yearlong calendar remain the same. “More services for kids year-round, less crushing pace, more sustainability for educators, time to reflect and evaluate student learning along the way,” he said.

Year-round schooling comes with added costs, such as year-round maintenance and air conditioning in the summer, even when districts don’t tack on additional school days. And changing the calendar poses logistical challenges, especially for districts that go it alone. Sports schedules become more difficult when neighboring districts stick to a traditional calendar. And teachers who live in one district but work in another face the headache of juggling differing schedules.

But the tradition of long summer breaks has its own consequences. Many families struggle to pay for child care or camps to keep their children occupied during long summer days. Children who rely on school for hot meals don't have access to their school cafeteria. And although data is limited — less than 5% of American schools operate year-round — a handful of studies suggest that year-round schooling could prevent the fade of knowledge that happens over summer break, especially for students from low-income homes, whose families may not be able to afford summer enrichment programs.

At Mount Adams schools, where about 56% of students are learning in person, the rural district has a hard time keeping students attending and engaged even in the best of times, Guaglianone said. A majority of the district's students live in poverty and some face other challenges, like an expectation that they work in agriculture to help support their families.

Guaglianone sees more time in school as one solution and floated the idea of a balanced calendar a couple years ago. The school board responded favorably. Any change to the school calendar would also require buy-in from teachers and families, he said. And it would be nice, he said, if other neighboring districts tried something similar.

“You keep that [schooling] consistent throughout the school year,” he said, and children are “less likely to go through not just summer slide, but slumps in social-emotional aspects of their lives.”

Hannah Furfaro: hfurfaro@seattletimes.com; on Twitter: [@HannahFurfaro](https://twitter.com/HannahFurfaro).

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