

## More Balanced Calendar Discussion

By David Shaffer

The Board of School Trustees is continuing its bi-weekly discussions with the public on the concept of a Balanced School Calendar in 2012-2013. We have solicited input in the form of a survey which is ongoing and can be entered at the District's Website ([www.brownco.k12.in.us](http://www.brownco.k12.in.us)). We have also been seeking input in the Discussion phase of each of our meetings over the past 4 months. We have asked for opinions at the County Fair and at the School Open Houses last week. There has been a lot of participation in this topic through the survey and actually very little in our Board Meetings. The purpose of today's column is to solicit again input if you have an opinion. Thus far, the points of view are divided fairly evenly with the edge leaning in favor of the concept.

Let's look at the issues involved one more time. First, Board Members have encountered a point of view that the discussion process is merely being staged and some members of our Community have suggested that the Board has already made up its mind. I do not believe this to be true. I observe Board Members who are listening to opinions and really thinking about what is the best course of action for the greatest number of our students. We try to place our students in the forefront of all of our decisions. Determining the calendar is certainly one of those determinations and it is difficult because both points of view have some degrees of merit. To be sure this is a decision that should be made by every school board locally. In the last three General Assembly sessions, bills have been introduced to require school to start after Labor Day. Balanced Calendars have been included as an exemption to the legislative mandate for the start of school. That certainly is a consideration for our Board as well as others. This is a decision that should be made here in Brown County rather than in Indianapolis.

Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation has approved a form of a Balanced Calendar starting in 2012. We send approximately 75 high school students to Columbus for vocational education courses. Coordinating our school schedule with BCSC has importance to this group of students. However, this is far from the only parameter we use in recommending and developing the school calendar for each year. An absolute requirement is to have our first semester completed by Christmas vacation. We believe this is educationally the best practice, especially for our high school students who are required to take a number of semester comprehensive final examinations. With a 180 day minimum student calendar for each year, that leaves around 90 days for first semester. The simple mathematics of working backwards from some date to start Christmas break (usually around the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> of December), one can easily see why a fairly early August starting date has been necessary. Thus, the potential legislative mandate of a start after Labor Day can be quickly determined to have no validity in terms of the academic interests of our students. The post-Labor Day start proposal has included exemptions for Balanced Calendars. It is interesting that the General Assembly seems to "pick and choose" what is important and what is not important in terms of meeting the needs of our students. It is my strong opinion that the State Senator from Carmel has no business dictating when Brown County Schools are in session, period!! (and the General Assembly with the Senator from Carmel's lead has no business directing when we hold School Board Elections as well, which was passed in the last session.)

Another issue is really the definition of a Balanced Calendar. I think many of the persons who have registered a negative point of view on the Balanced Calendar believe that we are moving toward a significant reduction or an elimination of summer vacation. This summer we had 1 day short of 9 full weeks of summer vacation. The plans which the Board is considering include a proposal of 8 weeks of summer and a proposal of 7 weeks. This is such a minimal change that it nullifies the argument of reducing the summer break because many of our students lose knowledge learned the previous year. Loss of knowledge over the long break has been used as a justification for balanced calendar proposals in other districts.

Another consideration is inclement weather conditions. During the past three winters we have used between 7 and 10 full snow days. It seems a requirement to me that we build snow make-up days into any form of calendar which we use. Attendance has been reduced during snow make-up days at the end of the calendar here. The short conclusion of that fact is that families are ready for a break as the school year comes to a close and they are ready to return after some period of weeks of summer break, whatever the period of that vacation.

As the Board continues to seek opinions, we have heard most of the arguments pro and con. Still, we want to hear from as many as possible. In determining the direction we go, ultimately the Board will consider what they think will serve the greatest number of children for the best. It is most certainly an issue where there is honest and valid disagreement, no matter what the final determination will be.