



Report of the Calendar Working Group

Concord Public Schools and
Concord-Carlisle Regional School District
School Committees

November 13, 2017

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Objective of the Working Group

The Calendar Working Group (CWG) was formed by the Concord and Concord-Carlisle Regional School Committees. The Calendar Working Group consists of the following members of the Concord and CCRSD School Committees:

- Johanna Boynton
- Wally Johnston
- Mary Storrs
- Laurie Hunter (Superintendent)

The CWG was responsible for researching and reporting back to the School Committees on potential approaches to acknowledging the communities' cultural and religious needs and practices, both with respect to the possible closing of school on days of religious observance and with respect to accommodations for students who, for religious reasons, are absent on days when school is in session. The goal of the School Committees is to proactively develop an approach to the increasingly diverse needs within the student population at our K-12 schools, within the requirements set by applicable law.

Abstract

The Calendar Working Group met four times to discuss and examine issues regarding the current as well as previous years' academic calendars and the observance of religious holidays. The Group focused on four areas of concern and discussion for deeper and better understanding.

The four areas the Group researched:

1. *Accommodations*: What were other districts doing to acknowledge and respect the needs of their student and staff populations with respect to days of religious observance? What policies do other districts have to address absences for religious and cultural reasons?
2. *Legal Reading*: How does the law read with respect to days of religious observance and public school acknowledgment of those days (i.e., closing school)?
3. *Absentee Rates*: What days show the highest rates of absenteeism of both students and educators – and at what point does the rate impact the overall operational and educational experience for ALL students or faculty (and therefore suggest closing school for all students)?
4. *Community Input*: How can the School Committees gain additional community input on the overall issues that arise from the discussion of increasing diversity and respect for cultural and religious practices and priorities of the student body and educators?

The following pages summarize our research into the four areas described above with the intention of allowing for discussion and reflection prior to a vote on the 2018-2019 school calendars.

Accommodations

The Calendar Working Group reviewed policies from several communities to understand how they handled student absences for religious reasons. After discussing these and reviewing options with Legal Counsel, the CWG put forth a draft policy. As is the case with any policy, this one has been reviewed by the Administrative team, and then will be reviewed by the School Committees' Policy Subcommittee, and then brought forth to the full School Committees for approval.

The first School Committee reading of the draft "Accommodations for Religious and Cultural Holidays" policy is scheduled for November 14, 2017.

Legal Reading Regarding Religious and Cultural Holidays

The Calendar Working Group sought input from Counsel related to the allowable bases for closing school and accommodating absences for religious reasons. Below is a summary of the discussion.

Can public schools be closed for religious reasons and/or practice?

- The basis for closing school under the law is the operational impact on the education of students.
- Under the law, non-secular issues are not an appropriate basis for determining whether or not school is closed on a given day.
- There are many VERY important issues of religious and cultural sensitivity, need for respect, and need for more unity etc. that exist today in our community, and should be addressed, but are not, under the law, an appropriate basis for closing school.
- It is important to get community feedback, but also important to convey to the community that while their preferences are important issues for our community, they are not necessarily a legal basis for closing school.
- The only basis allowed under the law for closing school in connection with a religious holiday is the operational impact on the Districts. For example, if a school happened to schedule a winter break, or even a long weekend, that only coincidentally encompassed a religious holiday, but with no purpose to recognize that holiday as such, this might also be permissible.
- Operational impacts are typically high absenteeism among students or teachers, such that remaining open would result in a non-efficient use of school resources, increased costs through the hiring of substitute teachers, or create other logistical or fiscal issues

What if a student wishes to be absent from school for religious and/or cultural reasons? How does the law read regarding the acknowledgment of one's religion and/or culture that results in being absent from school?

The constitutional and statutory tests for providing accommodations to students who miss school for religious reasons, on days when school is in session, can be summarized as follows:

- A student who is unable, because of religious beliefs, to attend classes or to participate in any examination, study, or work requirement on a particular day must be excused from the examination or study or work requirement.
- An absent student must be provided with an opportunity to make up the missed examination, study, or work requirement, so long as the makeup examination or work does not create an unreasonable burden on the school.
- No fees may be charged by the school for providing a make-up opportunity.
- No adverse or prejudicial effects may be imposed on a student because of the student's exercise of the above rights.
- In practice, the amount of time that should be afforded to a student to make up missed tests, work, etc., should not be less than the amount of time provided to students who miss school because of illness or other excused absences.

Absentee Data

The Calendar Working Group reviewed absentee data from April 2015 through April 2017, as provided by the Superintendent's office and compiled by the Committees' 2015 Calendar Advisory Committee. Absentee data for students and educators at all Concord and CCRSD schools was analyzed.

Students

Student absentee rates range from 1.4% to 17% with an average of 4% (approx. 137 of 3380 total students). The CWG opted to review specific dates where the total students absent was >10%. There were 12 such days as indicated below.

Date	% of Students Absent	Notes
11/25/2015	17%	Wednesday before Thanksgiving
11/23/2016	17%	Wednesday before Thanksgiving
06/20/2016	15%	Monday, last day of school
12/23/2016	15%	Friday before break
04/14/2017	13%	Friday before break (Good Friday)
06/26/2015	13%	Friday, last day of school
04/15/2016	12%	Friday before break
02/07/2017	12%	Tuesday
02/17/2017	12%	Friday before break
12/23/2015	12%	Wednesday before break
04/03/2015	11%	Good Friday (was a holiday, but changed to snow make-up day)
02/12/2016	11%	Friday before break

Educators

Educator absentee rates range from 1% to 21% with an average of 5% (approx. 18 of 340 total educators). The CWG opted to review specific dates where the total educators absent was >10%. There were 11 such days as indicated below.

Date	% of Educators Absent	Notes
04/03/2015	21%	Good Friday (was a holiday, but changed to snow make-up day)
04/14/2017	19%	Friday before break (Good Friday)
05/29/2015	13%	Friday (Memorial Day 5/25)
06/05/2015	13%	Friday (day before graduation)
12/19/2016	12%	Monday
06/12/2015	11%	Friday
10/03/2016	11%	Rosh Hashanah Holiday (school in session)
03/13/2015	11%	Friday
03/20/2015	11%	Friday
03/27/2015	11%	Friday
06/19/2015	11%	Friday

Community Input

The CWG and School Committees have scheduled a meeting to solicit community input on these issues, as noted in the invitation below.

“School Calendars, Religious and Cultural Awareness, and Accommodations”

Please join the conversation:

Wednesday, November 15, 7:00pm, in the CCHS Learning Commons

The Community is invited to a Public Forum on issues and concerns surrounding the school calendar, religious and cultural awareness and accommodations for students whose religious and/or cultural practices may affect school work and/or school attendance. The evening will be facilitated by *Karen Thomsen* from the EDCO Collaborative IDEAS Initiative (Initiatives for Developing Equity and Achievement for Students). Hosted by the School Committee’s Calendar Working Group, this Forum is an opportunity to hear the voices of the community and for citizens, families, parents and students to express their thoughts and concerns on academic calendars and the diversity of religious and cultural practices that exist within our community.