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How the newly structured Lamorinda school calendar came about

By Nick Marnell

A combination of factors including anxious students, concerned parents and financial considerations brought about the earliest ever start to the 2019-20 school year at Lamorinda K-8 and high schools, with the new calendar featuring a one-week Thanksgiving break, a one-week spring break and the conclusion of the high school first semester prior to a two-week winter break.

To grapple with the realities of the timing of final exams and the rise in the number of advanced placement exams, a longer Thanksgiving break, and earlier starts by neighboring, regional and national school districts, the Acalanes Union High School District convened a task force in 2017 to come up with a school year calendar that would mesh with the challenges of contemporary life for students and the community. District Superintendent John Nickerson led the task force that included 48 representatives from the high schools and 41 representatives from partner K-8 districts. Lamorinda includes three AUHSD high schools - Acalanes, Campolindo and Miramonte - and three elementary school districts: Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda Union, which largely follow the lead of AUHSD on scheduling.

Until 1998-99, the school year began the Tuesday after Labor Day in Lamorinda, with two days off for Thanksgiving. That year, the full Thanksgiving week break began, and school started Aug 31. Due to additional calendar changes, the first day of school has gradually crept earlier since then, to the Aug. 13 opening of 2019-20.

An early impetus for change arose from the findings of Challenge Success, a Palo Alto think tank that promotes programs that emphasize student well-being. The firm partnered with AUHSD to help the district work through the above mentioned challenges. "Our research of schools across the country showed that changing the school year calendar to have students complete final exams before taking their winter break made a big difference," said company co-founder Denise Pope, whose firm also championed the earlier daily school starting times in 2016. "We are thrilled with the changes the district is making," Pope said. Nickerson's task force met regularly from fall 2017 into early 2018. It held town halls and community forums throughout Lamorinda. The task force surveyed over 7,700 students, teachers, parents and school staff, with more than 79% of students and 78% of parents favoring the earlier August start to the year, and more than 76% of teachers and staff agreeing to start the year in mid-August with "finals before winter break."

Financial considerations played a role in the calendar change, as California school districts lose state money for each student absence, and when parents pulled students out of school for the entire Thanksgiving week, schools were penalized for the three-day truancy. Much of the disconnect resulted from the misalignment of school calendars, with parents having children in different district schools.

"I know from my experience that it is vitally important for us to have our calendar as closely aligned with the Acalanes calendar as possible," Lafayette School District Superintendent Richard Whitmore said. "Each day that we are not aligned triggers an unusually high number of absences, and we lose critical state funding for each student absence. If we have hundreds of absences due to the calendars not matching up, that becomes a real financial concern for us."

The task force presented its data to the AUHSD board, and to the three Lamorinda school district boards, and after districts conferred with the teachers unions, the revised calendar with a mid-August start was approved in 2018 for this school year and next.

"I'm pleased to report that we have had relatively few absences this week despite the early start," Whitmore said during the first week of school. "A few complaints, to be expected, but it has been a smooth transition to the new calendar."

One week into the change, Nickerson said that a teacher expressed a bit of buyer's remorse, telling the superintendent he would trade a shorter Thanksgiving week for a later start date. Residents grumbled on social media about the early 2019 start date and though not a likely prospect, advocated for pushing it back in future years. But many appeared to take the change in stride. "Summer is summer, and we'll enjoy the weather whether the kids are in school or not," Lafayette parent Kathleen Reidenbach said.

"We expect some very happy students and teachers when we hit the month of June 2020," Whitmore said, as the last day of school is scheduled for May 29.

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