



Standing Committee Meeting

Monday, May 13, 2024

Trustee Board Room

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board

20 Education Court, P.O. Box 2558

Hamilton, ON L8N 3L1

AGENDA: Immediately following Board Meeting

1. Call to Order
2. Meeting Roll Call
3. Approval of the Agenda
4. Declarations of Conflict of Interest

Reports from Staff:

5. [Update on the Days of Significance, Religious Accommodation, and the School Year Calendar Consultation](#)

6. Adjournment



STANDING COMMITTEE REPORT

May 13, 2024

Update on the Days of Significance, Religious Accommodation, and the School Year Calendar Consultation

Submitted By: Sheryl Robinson Petrazzini, Director of Education

Prepared By: Simon Goodacre, Superintendent of Student Achievement

Recommendation:

That the update on the Days of Significance, Religious Accommodation, and the School Year Calendar Consultation report be received.

Background:

On October 2, 2023 a [report](#) was brought forward outlining possible options regarding a consultation framework to gather feedback related to Days of Significance, Religious Accommodation, and the School Year Calendar.

In response to the report, Resolution #23-118 passed directing staff engage in the two-year process for the school year calendar holiday consultation framework (Option B presented in the October 2nd report).

The Option B consultation framework proposed a two-stage framework for consultation. The first stage involved consultation with existing HWDSB student, parent, and community advisory bodies. Feedback from this stage would be used to inform an electronic survey that would be shared with the wider HWDSB community. Feedback from both stages would be used to inform the 2025-2026 school year calendar process.

Status:

Between January and April 2024, consultation occurred with the following existing HWDSB Advisory committees:

- Elementary Student Senate
- Secondary Student Senate
- Parent Involvement Committee (PIC)
- Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC)

- Faith Advisory Committee
- School Year Calendar Advisory Committee
- Circle of Beads (Indigenous community)

Unfortunately, the Human Rights Advisory Committee did not meet quorum during this timeframe and staff were unable to gather their feedback.

The feedback was consistent between student, parent, and community advisory groups. The full report regarding the feedback gathered can be found in [Appendix A](#).

Advisory groups recognized that the current school year calendar is based on Christian holidays and that students and staff with different holidays and days of observances currently do not always feel supported in celebrating these days. The Advisory group feedback also recognized the limited options available for potential calendar changes. The feedback noted that no changes to the calendar would be able to address the diverse faith communities of all students and families. The feedback also recognized that changes to the school year calendar do not address the needs of staff.

Each Advisory group also recognized that the HWDSB community is diverse and represents many different faith groups; feedback also recognized that individuals within communities do not always celebrate holidays and observances in the same manner.

As the potential changes to the calendar would not support the diverse backgrounds of HWDSB students and staffs, the focus of the Advisory group feedback was to focus efforts on improving the implementation of the [Religious Accommodation Procedure](#). The feedback recognized that the implementation of this procedure is inconsistent across schools. Many of the Advisory groups provided specific suggestions for how the implementation of the Religious Accommodation Procedure could better meet the needs of students, staff, and families.

Financial Implications:

There are no financial implications as a direct result of this report. The School Year Calendar has potential cost implications for HWDSB when the professional activities days differ from the coterminous school board that is a part of the Hamilton-Wentworth Student Transportation Services consortium.

Strategic Directions:

Upholding Human Rights, Safety & Well-Being

We will support all students and staff to feel safe and secure in our classrooms and school communities.

Providing Equitable Quality Education

We will offer equitable quality educational opportunities to improve student engagement, learning and achievement for future-readiness.

Collaborating with Students, Families & Communities

We will build reciprocal relationships and partnerships to enhance access and engagement for students, families, and communities.

Reinforcing Indigenous Educational Wellness & Reconciliation

We will honour our commitment to Truth and Reconciliation by nurturing respectful and reciprocal relationships among Indigenous Peoples and Treaty Partners, and by cultivating intergenerational healing and wellness in a restorative education system.

Purpose of Consultation

Every year, school boards across Ontario must submit school year calendars to the Ministry of Education for approval. According to Regulation 304, school board calendars for elementary and secondary schools must include 194 school days (including seven Professional Activity Days) between September 1 and June 30, with up to 10 days designated as examination days for secondary schools.

In preparation for finalizing the school year calendar for the next school year, HWDSB invites feedback from staff and families on a draft calendar. This year, that consultation took place during December and January with 2,333 people submitting their thinking on the draft.

Increasingly, in our School Year Calendar consultations, individuals comment that the calendar should consider prominent non-Christian holidays to be inclusive of students and staff. There is a procedure in place to accommodate staff and students to practice their religions. However, some students have reported they don't feel valued around their religious beliefs and feel pressured when they miss school on significant days. To honour those voices and in recognition that the required Board Holidays reflect only Christian traditions, Trustees moved that a consultation about religious and creed observances and days of significance be conducted. We brought this issue to HWDSB advisory groups for discussion and ideas for resolving this problem.

Advisory Groups Consulted

- Elementary Student Senate
- Secondary Student Senate
- Special Education Advisory Committee
- Faith Community Advisory Committee
- Parent Involvement Committee
- Human Rights & Equity Advisory Committee
- Circle of Beads, Hamilton Regional Indian Centre

Background

Simon Goodacre, Superintendent of Student Achievement, presented to our advisory groups on what Ministry rules we must follow when drafting our yearly calendar. There was consensus among advisory groups that the School Year Calendar has far too little flexibility to be used as a tool for accommodating religious days of significance among our diverse staff and students.

These are some of the rules that govern the School Year Calendar.

1. There must be at least 194 school days between September 1st and June 30th.
2. Boards may schedule up to 7 professional activity (PA) days per year. Three of them must be for Ministry education priorities.
3. Boards can schedule up to ten instructional days for secondary school exams.
4. The holidays for the school year must include:
 - a. Labour Day
 - b. Thanksgiving
 - c. A Christmas vacation consisting of fourteen consecutive days
 - d. Family Day
 - e. A break in March consisting of 5 consecutive days
 - f. Good Friday
 - g. Easter Monday
 - h. Victoria Day
5. Transportation must be coordinated with our co-terminus board (HWCDSD)

HWDSB's living document of [Religious and Creed Observances and Days of Significance](#) identifies 11 faith communities and 77 holy days and 55 days of significance. The Ontario Human Rights Commission Policy on Creed and Accommodation of Religious Observances directs organizations to provide accommodations for days of observance based on creed, including religion. HWDSB follows this direction and has implemented a [Religious Accommodation Procedure](#).

General Reactions

With a clearer understanding of the rules and requirements that govern School Year Calendar creation, each advisory group recognized that this problem cannot be solved through the school year calendar. Initially, participants asked about the few Professional Activity (PA) days that could be moved around. However, once realizing this would not meet the Board's responsibility to accommodate staff as well as students, advisory members typically turned to the accommodations process in schools as the primary vehicle for resolving this problem.

Specific Sentiments

Members of different advisory groups sometimes had specific experiences as a student, parent, friend or colleague with our current system and offered the following sentiments. These are not themed but individual thoughts and experiences:

- Direction should come from the Ministry as inconsistencies in calendars between boards cause problems for families.
- The school year calendar is problematic with its Christian and nationalist (e.g., Victoria Day) days of observance. It is a violation of human rights to push a calendar based on someone else's religious beliefs.

- It is hard to show up at the school office and ask how religious accommodations work. It feels like asking for a day off and that is difficult.
- It is hard to call in a child's absence. It feels punitive. There needs to be an easier way that doesn't make parents feel like their child will be penalized.
- Students feel pressure over missing school.
- Pressure on students increases when there is a test scheduled on a day they will be away.
- Students may not want to identify in front of the class if they are asked about an absence.
- There are inconsistencies between schools. Some schools handle religious accommodations well and others do not. For example, saying things like, "we can't do this or that because it's X holy day" is harmful.
- Sometimes students are singled out at school for observing religious traditions. For example, Hindu students and vegetarian foods.
- It is difficult to fit Indigenous spirituality in a school year calendar because of the many nations and traditions and also because days of significance align with seasons, position of the moon. Teaching lodges happen on different days every year. The longhouse ceremony dates are often not known until two weeks prior.
- It is oppressive for students to have to verify they attended an Indigenous ceremony. Historically, they had to provide letters from their elders to verify the date or dates they requested off to honour a day of significance.
- Ceremonies are land-based learning. Indigenous students don't learn to be Fire Keepers unless they go home for ceremonies.

Specific Suggestions

Once the school year calendar rules were understood, clarifying questions answered and experiences shared, the advisory group members typically moved to making suggestions for how to improve our system. These are not themes but individual ideas that went undisputed in the group:

1. Perhaps the Student Voice survey led by Student Trustees is a vehicle that can be used to collect student voice on this subject.
2. This information could be collected on a form at the beginning of the school year so teachers know when students will be absent and can tailor their schedule to accommodate.
3. Considerations such as preparing students in advance and giving them less work would make taking holy days easier for students. There also needs to be accommodations for Indigenous students missing scheduled tests, etc., because their absences can't be scheduled in advance much of the time.
4. Our communication to parents needs to be thorough. We need to ensure they understand how religious accommodations work. Right now, they do not. We need to ensure families do not feel intimidated by our process. If it feels difficult or inaccessible, people won't engage.
5. There should be spaces in schools where students and staff can go on religious days to do what they need to do when they don't need to take a full day off.
6. An advocate at the school or a contact for students to reach out to would be helpful. Sometimes students don't feel heard when speaking to teachers at their school.

7. Teachers usually know their students and could enter their absence as a holy day if the system permitted it. Right now, that has to come from the parent.
8. We should be leveraging schools that are doing this well to model that practice for other schools.
9. We need to better understand how different faiths prioritise faith days differently. Some require time off and others do not.
10. Program in make-up tests so that students know it is fine if they miss a day because the make-up is already scheduled.
11. Is there an opportunity to lobby for change? There needs to be inclusion of Indigenous days of significance because this will help students to learn.
12. The calendar is part of a broader problem. Recognizing September 30th, for example, as the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation brings Indigenous issues to the forefront for one day. It needs to be a conversation all year round. Indigenous people are in the staff room, in the classroom, everywhere, not just on Sept. 30th. And yet they feel like they can't be away for a day. Indigenous students are bullied in our system. A focus on awareness of residential schools, awareness of leaders from a strength-based approach of the contributions to society is needed to make the environment better for Indigenous staff and students--not just an accommodation.

Summary

All the advisory groups consulted about the School Year Calendar and religious accommodations recognized that the school calendar cannot be adjusted to provide religious accommodations to meet the diverse needs of our students, families and staff. They shared their own experiences or those of colleagues, family and friends, and they brought forth critiques, ideas and suggestions for how we might improve our practice. Indigenous participants problematized the calendar itself as a colonial structure and argued that accommodations need to be part of a broader effort to raise awareness and understanding such that Indigenous students cease being victims of bullying.

There is recognition that some schools accommodate very well and others do not. Focusing on how our Religious Accommodations Procedure is implemented, improving on how it is done, and considering new ways to make this a better experience for students, families and staff is one main takeaway from this consultation. A second is that the calendar issue is indicative of broader problems related to systemic racism and colonial structures that disadvantage students and staff whose traditions are not centred on the Gregorian calendar and Christian faith.