

Basic Information on Alternative School Years

Recommendation 17 of Alberta's Commission on Learning report, October 2003, states, "Encourage schools and school jurisdictions to explore alternatives to the current school year". The Commission cites the school year that Australia uses and suggests Alberta school jurisdictions might adjust their school year to make better use of existing facilities.

Alberta Learning requires school calendars to meet these minimum requirements.

- ✓ Minimum Hours of access - 475 hours for ECS, local discretion for Grade One, 950 hours for Grades Two through Nine, 1000 hours for high schools.
- ✓ Vacation - December 24 through January 2
- ✓ Achievement Test dates - January, May/June
- ✓ Diploma Examinations - January, June, August
- ✓ Teachers have choice to work more than 200 days in a year

95% of school calendars begin instruction in September, have a vacation in the winter (Christmas) and in the spring (Easter) and conclude at that end of June.

Some alternative school year calendars offered in Alberta are:

Single-track Modified or Year Round

All students in the school attend on the same modified or year round school year calendar. Typically, the summer holiday is shortened and vacation days are placed in other parts of the year, resulting in periods of instruction and vacations that are more evenly spaced than in the traditional calendar. Modified school year calendars usually begin in mid-August with a week off around Thanksgiving, a three-week winter break and a two-week spring break. A year round school year would begin the first of August and run the rest of the year with repeating sections of nine weeks of instruction followed by a three week break. Sometimes this schedule is slightly modified to fit with traditional winter and spring breaks.

Dual-track Traditional/ Modified or Traditional/Year Round

There are two groups of students in the school, one on the traditional school year calendar and the other on the modified or year round school year calendar described in the single-track section above.

Multi-track Year Round

For this school year calendar the student population in the school is divided into groups, usually four. At any time, one group is on vacation. There may or may not be periods in the year in which all four groups are on vacation. All groups are on vacation typically in the summer or around Christmas. Schools use this arrangement when they have more students than spaces in a school. A school with room for 600 students can, through four-group multi-tracking, accommodate 800 students since no more than 3 of the 4 groups (600 students) are in school at any one time.

Fixed Extended School Year

In this school year calendar, students attend for more hours and days than the number mandated by the province. The extra time may be added to a traditional calendar or a modified calendar and is typically put in place to serve student populations with unique needs or seen to be at risk.

Optional Extended School Year

Certain schools are open in ways which serve their student populations; such as being open at night and/or on weekends (for example Outreach Programs), being open (in a sense) at all times (for example, virtual schools).

Four for Fives or Nine for Tens

Some schools run on a traditional or modified school year but schools are closed every Friday (four for fives) or every second Friday (nine for tens). The other school days are lengthened to ensure minimum hours of access to instruction are met. This closing of schools saves on transportation costs.

When exploring the feasibility of offering an alternative to the current school year, a Board should carefully consider benefits, challenges, parental and community support. A useful resource to assist Boards in this work is the "Alternative Programs Handbook" located on the Alberta Learning website at

<http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/educationsystem/AltProgHandbook.pdf>

Although this handbook was developed to assist Boards in the exploration of alternative programs many of the same process would be useful in exploring an alternative school year. (When the "Alternative School Year Handbook" is ready this section will reference this resource.)

The 2002-2005 Alberta Learning Business Plan directed a study of the effects year-round schooling options have on student achievement. The terms of reference for this initiative/project were to look at the updated results of year-round education on: student achievement; student attitudes; teacher attitudes; parent attitudes; enrollment trends; Alberta's experience and results; results in other parts of North America; implementation problems and how these are being resolved. An executive summary of the report prepared by System Improvement and Reporting Division of Alberta Learning in response to this initiative can be found at http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/educationsystem/Docs_AlterSchoolYearCal/InfForschoolsAndjurisdictionsAug2005.pdf

For further information on alternative school year calendars, please contact the Schools and Programs of Choice Team of Special Programs Branch at (780) 422-6326; using the Government RITE number of 310-0000 first for toll free dialing.