
Re: Feb 6th Agenda item - 2023-24 Calendar

1 message

Nolin, Anna <annolin@natickps.org>

Wed, Feb 1, 2023 at 11:26 AM

Reply-To: anolin@natickps.org

To: "Gorseth, Elise" <egorseth@natickps.org>, Donna McKenzie <dmckenzie@natickps.org>, "Rose McDermott (Google Drive)" <rmcdermott@natickps.org>, Tim Luff <tluff@natickps.org>

Cc: Cathi Collins <cacollins@natickps.org>

Thanks Elise, for this thoughtful analysis and set of requests.

I am adding Donna a policy chair as they will meet to discuss this matter tomorrow at 1pm.

I am adding Rose so she can print this email for me to hand out to the full policy committee.

Tim, I believe if we want the full committee to see this (and I think I should have done this for Julie as well??) I will print the emails and have Rose upload them into Novus for our next meeting to discuss the calendar should the policy committee need me to?

Anna

Sincerely,



Anna P. Nolin, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

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On Wed, Feb 1, 2023 at 9:38 AM Gorseth, Elise <egorseth@natickps.org> wrote:

Hi Anna,

As requested, I'm sending my outstanding questions to you regarding the proposed calendar changes for 2023-24 for distribution to the committee. Thank you for your leadership in this area, and for challenging the School Committee to take action now to address inequalities in the school holiday calendar. I fully support your goal of furthering inclusion and belonging. However, I'm not yet convinced that the proposal from the policy sub-committee is the best way forward, and fear that making the change now will compromise the work of the start time working group.

At the meeting Monday, I expressed a need to hear from our families about their values and preferences for acknowledgement of the religious and cultural holidays observed across our diverse community. Specifically, I would like all families to have the opportunity to answer specific questions similar to those in the Hopkinton survey shared by Julie. I don't think we need to set thresholds for responses, but I would like to give every family the opportunity to share their perspective and not base our decision on the handful of students and families who were selected to participate in the focus groups.

The Start Time survey results that were shared this week suggest to me that we have not yet had enough community input. I saw support for including Diwali and both Eids, but also several responses that identified Lunar New Year and other major days of celebration. There were a number of responses that asked us to consider the calendar as a whole when considering adding days off for additional religious observances, and some suggestions to consider moving to having no days off. I was also struck by the theme of respondents asking for accommodations (eg flex days) for individual days off rather than mandated days that school would be closed. And I can't ignore the responses that shared how difficult it is to have so many days of school closure, and that we need to consider how families can manage if we add days of school closure during the academic year.

In reviewing the survey results from the listening sessions done with the families and students as well as the notes of the policy sub-committee, they both suggest that additional iterations of discussion and community input were expected by participants. Notes and survey results capture the sentiment that participants were very aware of the need to account for multiple factors in the calendar (eg continuity of schedule) and that while observation of Diwali was welcomed, those same respondents clearly communicated that an additional day of school closure was not welcome.

I will share that I have experienced both Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha in both Bosnia & Herzegovina and the suburbs of Chicago with my extended family. I appreciate the experiences shared by families and religious leaders in the focus groups, but I feel that we should be cautious generalizing those experiences with respect to Eid as I have learned first-hand that observance and celebration varies widely. I would like to hear more voices from the community in support of making one of the Eids a day off school before taking that decision, and which Eid is in greater need of an observed day off. For example, Eid al-Fitr is a fun holiday. The way it's celebrated in Bosnia is that the men spend the day going around visiting family (women stay home and host), children are given gifts of money etc. Eid al-Adha is more somber holiday, there is a ritual slaughter of a lamb that is televised, and it's expected that you donate food to those less fortunate than yourself. The men also do a round of visits to family on this day, but the emphasis is on service and care of the less fortunate. Both days are typically observed in Bosnia, and by our Chicago relatives though our Chicago relatives do not take a day off work, they celebrate in the evenings.

The questions that I feel need more community input before making a change to the holiday calendar:

Survey the community asking about a comprehensive list of holidays, including those already on the calendar.

- Ask if a day off is desired, if this would extend the school year.
- Ask if a guaranteed excused absence with accommodations for homework and test make-up would allow observation of the holiday.
- Ask if they would prefer days of school closure to be for professional development or religious holiday observance.

Second, in presenting the work of the Policy Subcommittee, Dr. McKenzie shared that the sub-committee had considered going to a government mandated holidays only calendar model as several of towns in MetroWest have done in recent years. She stated that this was ultimately decided against because "Natick is not ready". Some additional details/color on this topic would be appreciated so I can understand why the sub-committee believes this is not a viable option for Natick.

- I would like to know what "Natick is not ready" means, and what specific information leads to this conclusion.
- Were discussions had with districts who changed their calendars to see what their experiences were? If so, which districts and with who (roles, I don't need specific names).

Finally, I am not comfortable making a "permanent, ie will revisit in 5 years" change to the calendar before we have completed the start time change work. These are both very important workstreams, and I believe that adding days of closure to the calendar now will compromise the work of the start time group. I understand the need to take action now and would like to suggest an alternative of offering a guaranteed excused absence for Eid and Diwali for 23-24, with the understanding that both the calendar and the homework policy are under revision and will be completed on the same timeline as the start time committee work. In the absence of a strong homework policy, I would even consider a day of school closure for 23-34 only, with the same caveat that a long-term calendar change is forthcoming.

Thank you again for your leadership in this area,

Elise

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