

September 5, 2024

Honourable Nello Altomare
Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning
Room 162 Legislative Building
450 Broadway
Winnipeg, MB R3C 0V8

[by email only: mineecl@manitoba.ca; dmedu@manitoba.ca]

Dear Nello,

Among the many resolutions that were passed by our members during our March, 2024 convention, there was one that spoke uniquely to your exclusive authority as Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning.

Resolution SB-01-24 – School Year Start date, is worded as follows:

BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Manitoba School Boards Association lobby the Provincial Government to remove legislation that requires the start of the school year to occur after Labour Day.

In passing this resolution, our members took into account the following information, as submitted by the original sponsor of the resolution.

The current Public Schools Act, Regulation 101/95 currently reads:

School year

3(2) For the purpose of subsection (1), only days after Labour Day and before July 1 may be counted as days in the school year. Further, June 30 must not be counted as a day if it falls on a Monday.

As this legislative restriction was put into effect over 20 years ago, it is worth revisiting its value to both staff and students within our education system.

Looking at information from our neighboring prairie provinces demonstrates that Manitoba is alone in entirely limiting its school year to occur between Labour Day and June 30th. Please see the Appendice, Graphs 1 and 2 for the results of environmental scans of all school divisions in Alberta (AB) and Saskatchewan (SK) that have publicly accessible calendars.

With the school year structure in place in AB and SK, there is more flexibility in creating more meaningful breaks throughout the school year. In Graph 3 (please see Appendice) we see the number of week-long breaks that are incorporated into the school year in AB and SK, in addition to a 2-week Winter Break.

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The calendar structure in AB and SK yields similar quantities of operational school days, both averaging 195 days (range: 189 to 198), to Manitoba schools which are providing 196 days in this school year.

The reason why we feel it is important to re-examine the present school year structure is because we believe there are benefits to both students and teachers to incorporate larger meaningful breaks into the school year. In a study published in the Journal of Happiness Studies in 2013 looked at the Health and Wellbeing (H&W) of 54 subjects during their vacation period.¹ The study looked at a composite of six indicators (health status, fatigue, satisfaction, mood, tension and energy level) as a measure of H&W. This study specifically examined holidays at least 14 days in length to determine at what point in that period people experienced the greatest benefit and found that H&W increased quickly during vacation, peaking on the eighth vacation day and began diminishing thereafter (please see Appendice, figure 1).

If we look at evidence from educational environments, we could unfortunately find no research on the benefits of periodic breaks in the elementary or high-school year. However, if we look at the experience of universities, there is more empirical literature. In a study of engineering students in Ontario they studied 60 male first-year engineering students from two universities, one with and one without a mid-semester break.² The students had periodic evaluation of their stress hormones (cortisol and dehydroepiandrosterone - DHEA). The cortisol to DHEA ratio has been demonstrated to be a strong indicator of stress. The study found that the cortisol to DHEA ratio increased to a higher degree in the students with no mid-semester break compared to those with a break, emphasizing poorer overall mental health. Most post-secondary institutions now incorporate a one 1-week break into the middle of each of their semesters of schooling, including the University of Manitoba and University of Winnipeg.

The overall concept of allowing the school year to start before Labour Day was discussed with the Teachers Association in Prairie Rose School Division and they provided support for this motion and added that they perceive operational value in having professional development front-loaded in the school year. They also believe that additional meaningful break(s) within the school year would be beneficial for teacher and student wellbeing.

With evidence pointing to the value of meaningful breaks to both employees and students it would be prudent for Manitoba to adopt a more flexible calendar structure that would give the option to school divisions to generate these breaks into their school year calendar. As evidenced by looking at AB and SK school calendars, a very minimal change to the summer break (shortening it for teachers and/or students by a few days) can result in incorporating a second or third one-week break into the school calendar, allowing both staff and students more meaningful and restful breaks throughout the school year.

In closing, we would highlight that, given passage of the above resolution, our Association has now formally amended its formal comprehensive policy statements as follows:

Education Programming

Public schools provide all children with the opportunity to acquire the skills and knowledge that enable them to develop their personal interests, explore and master new areas of inquiry, and build stronger futures for themselves and their communities. In order to fulfill this mandate, public schools must:

... align school year start date and instructional time and human/financial resource allocation with curricular requirements and priorities.

Should you have any questions or wish to discuss this matter further please feel free to arrange a meeting. Our Executive Director, Josh Watt, can be reached at jwatt@mbschoolboards.ca at any time. We thank you in advance for your consideration of our concerns and look forward to working with you to achieve constructive outcomes for our students, staff and communities.

Sincerely,

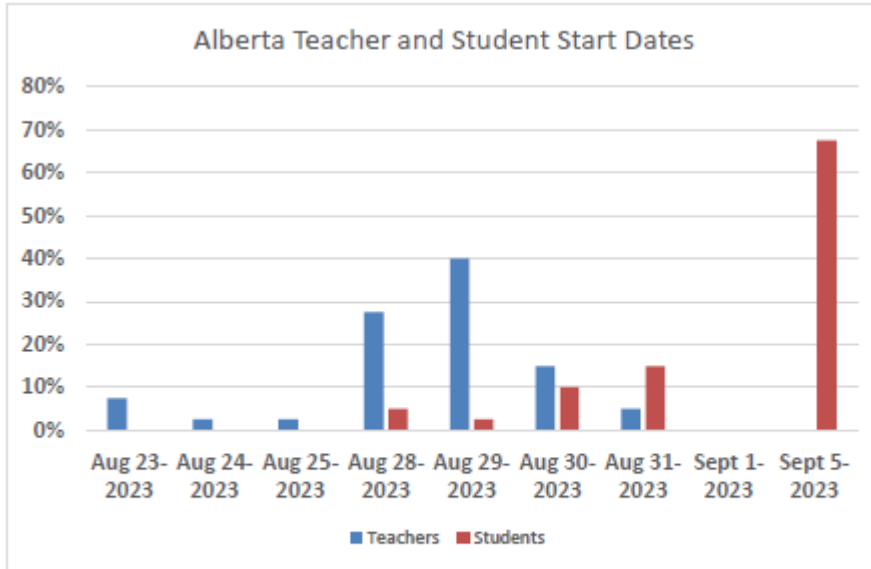
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sandy Nemeth". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sandy Nemeth, President

cc: Brian O'Leary, Deputy Minister, Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning
Josh Watt, Executive Director, Manitoba School Boards Association

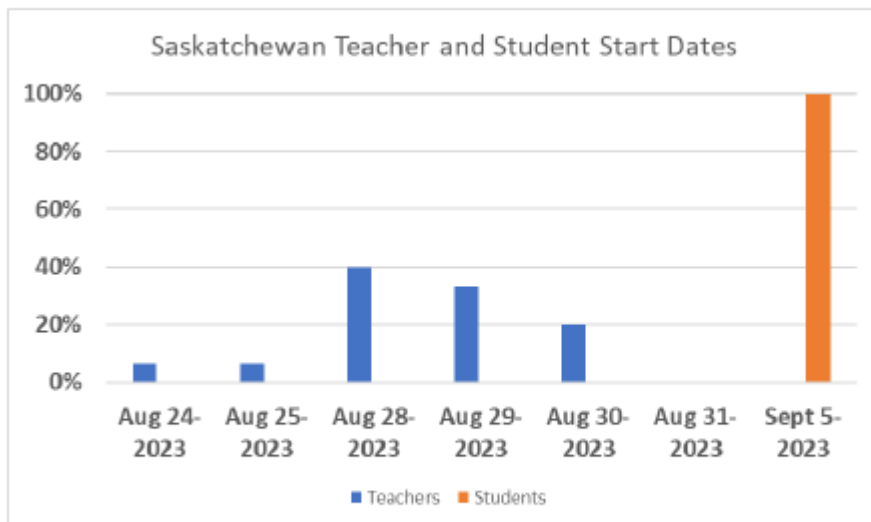
Appendice

Graph 1



Source: <https://education.alberta.ca/boundary-maps/school-jurisdiction-maps/?searchMode=3a> Education. Accessed: August 16-24, 2023.

Graph 2



Source: <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/education-and-learning/prek-12-education-early-learning-and-schools/k-12-school-divisions-in-saskatchewan#public>. Accessed: August 25-30, 2023.

Graph 3

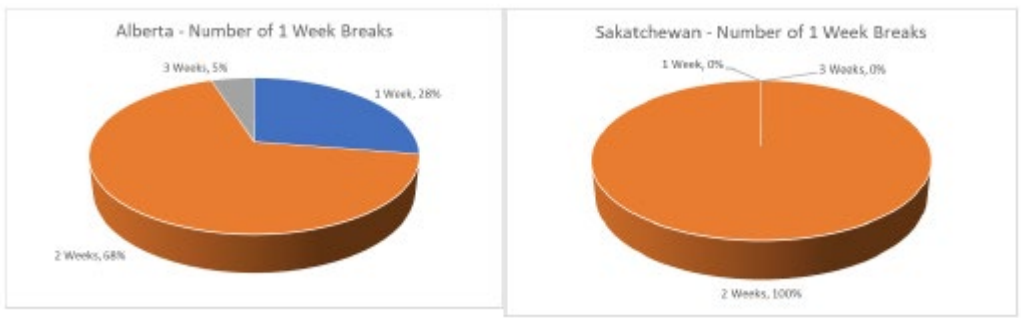


Figure 1

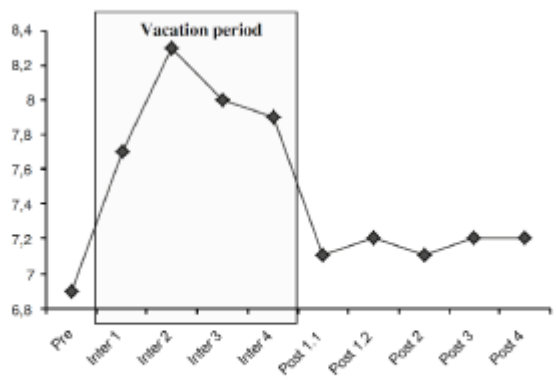


Fig. 1 Mean levels of H&W (1–10) before, during and after vacation

Inter 1 - 4th day; Inter 2 - 8th day; Inter 3 - 12th day; Inter 4 - 16th day

References

1. Bloom J, et al. (2013). "Vacation (after-) effects on employee health and well-being, and the role of vacation activities, experiences and sleep." *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 14: 613-633.
2. Khan, A., Poole, H., & Beaton, E. A. (2018). "Measuring the impact of a weeklong fall break on stress physiology in first year engineering students." *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 9(2), 9.