

It's About Time

New state law removes outdated 180-day requirement, adds summer school flexibility options

Shelby Anderson

IT WAS A LONG WINTER, just ask Mike Richie, superintendent of the Northland Pines School District in Eagle River. “We had seven inclement weather days this year,” Richie said. With so many snow days this year, the district was looking at the possibility of extending the school year two days — from June 10 to June 12. **But then, in April 2013, Act 257 was signed into law...**

The new law removes the mandate that required districts to schedule 180 school days per year and establishes the existing minimum instructional hours requirements, which vary by grade level, as the exclusive time-based standard that school districts must meet. As was the case prior to Act 257, schools are required to provide at least 1,137 hours of direct instruction to students in grades 7-12, 1,050 hours for grades 1-6, and 437 hours for kindergarten students who do not attend a full-day program.

While schools will likely calculate and document the number of school days that are held for other purposes, the repeal of the 180-day requirement provides school leaders with greater latitude to create and adjust school calendars to meet local needs. In some situations, provided that the minimum hours requirements are being met, this might mean scheduling fewer total days on

which school is held for all or a portion of the day. In the case of making up instructional time lost due to inclement weather, school officials have the freedom to consider lengthening the remaining school days without adding additional days. (*Note:* School districts that have authorized virtual charter schools should be aware that Act 257 did not alter the days and hours requirements applicable to virtual schools.)

Jerry Fiene, executive director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance, testified in favor of the bill to remove the 180-day requirement. Fiene said moving from days to hours could provide some benefit to rural schools.

“Transportation costs are a major expense for rural districts that drain resources from the classroom,” Jerry Fiene said. “Reducing district-wide transportation for just a single day would save thousands of dollars.”

Some school board members and

superintendents in school districts with year-round schools are also supportive of the bill because it creates “interim” sessions. Districts that offer year-round school can hold an interim session, which, under the new law, can count toward summer school membership as long as all current law requirements and prohibitions pertaining for summer school are met. As a result, districts with year-round schools can receive state aid (including transportation aid) for those interim sessions. In the past, year-round schools generally missed out on summer school revenue.

Randy Nelson, superintendent of the La Crosse School District, said this is good news for his district, which has one elementary school operating on a year-round schedule.

“This statute will allow us to recoup revenue that we lost because we started school in July, and the students in the year-round school



Photo courtesy of the Kettle Moraine School District

Moving from days to hours could provide some benefit to rural schools.

were no longer summer-school-aid eligible,” Nelson said.

Additionally, all school districts will be able to offer aidable online courses during their summer and interim sessions for students in grades 7-12. Districts will be able to count, for summer school membership and state aid purposes, the minutes that pupils receive instruction for certain online summer school or interim session courses. Districts will be permitted to include open enrolled, non-resident pupils in their summer school counts for qualifying online courses. One of several limitations that school officials should be aware of is that state aid can be claimed for these online courses (even for seventh and eighth

grade students) only if the class fulfills a requirement for high school graduation. These changes are effective this summer.

■ More Flexibility

Like a lot of districts, the Brown Deer School District uses a school calendar that exceeds the state’s requirement for number of hours, minutes and days of instruction. However, Deb Kerr, superintendent of the Brown Deer School District, said removing the 180-day requirement provides more flexibility in how districts schedule their school calendar.

“Eliminating the 180-day requirement allowed us to add professional development days, build in snow

make-up days and add daily collaboration time for teachers,” Kerr said.

Randy Guttenburg, superintendent of the Waunakee Community School District, agrees that the bill gives districts more local control.

“As a result of the law passing, we were able to add an additional day of professional development for our staff,” he said. “If the state had stuck with the 180-days requirement, we would have had to add a day on to the calendar.”

Peggy Hill-Breunig, school board president of the Waunakee Community School District, said, from a school board perspective, the bill returns some local control to the district.

“The bill now gives us some



flexibility to develop a school calendar that more effectively addresses our local educational needs,” she said.

In Action

For the upcoming 2014-15 school year, the School District of Brown Deer used the new law to add professional development days for teachers (one per month). Additionally, the new scheduling flexibility will save the district about \$100,000 because the district will be able to end on June 12 instead of June 19, which would have been the district’s end date if the 180-day requirement was still in effect.

In the Northland Pines School District, Richie says his district will schedule 180-days as it has in previous years but says he can see how the new law will benefit other rural districts.

“I would envision some districts would extend the school day 10 minutes or start minutes early because that would save them about

four to five school days,” Richie said.

Nelson voiced a concern for his teachers, noting that longer school days and an increase in professional development days would mean more time for his staff.

“We may have further discussions about making the days longer; however, I am resistant do so if we are not able to compensate our staff appropriately for the additional time,” Nelson said.

Out-Dated Law

Kerr, who was one of many superintendents who spoke in support of 2013 Act 257, said, that to move forward and continue to improve public education in Wisconsin, the state had to move away from the traditional 180-day school calendar.

“To eliminate the achievement gap, we need to have a calendar that provides ample and varied learning times to personalize learning for all students,” Kerr said. “Additionally, our teachers need job-embedded staff development to best support their learning to implement new

college- and career-ready standards, progress monitor students, and plan for assessments.”

State Superintendent Tony Evers has weighed in on the issue as well, noting that the interim session option might attract more interest in a year-round schedule

“It helps us modernize our calendars in that it’s going to provide opportunities to customize learning a lot easier than we have in the past,” Evers said. “It’s going to allow for schools to actually consider going year round.”

More importantly, Kerr said the law change can allow districts to shift the focus of the school calendar from seat time to what actually works to improve student achievement.

“In terms of flexibility, our schools needed this to truly transform public education into a learner-centered environment,” Kerr said. “Changes in structure and policy should be made to support teaching and learning where learning is the constant not the variable.” ■

Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.

School Leaders Target Another Mandate for Repeal

SCHOOL START DATE

Every school leader interviewed for this article said that they are in favor of removing the mandatory Sept. 1 school start date that has been in effect since the 2002-03 school year (the Sept. 1 start date was unchanged by Act 257). Bills to remove the school start date have been proposed by Democrats and Republicans, but have been blocked successfully by the tourism industry.

Randy Guttenburg, superintendent of the Waunakee Community School District made his district’s case for removing the start date in the August 2013 Legislative Update.

“Given when school ends, trying to fit in a six-week summer school pushes us into early August,” Guttenburg said. “So for teachers who both teach summer school and coach fall sports, it can be a challenge to fit in a vacation. Eliminating the start date...would give our school board greater ability to work with teachers and administrative staff [to better attract and retain quality people]. The more flexibility we have, the more creative we can be.”

This past session, Rep. Jim Ott (R-Mequon) proposed an unsuccessful bill to remove the school start date.

“To this day,” Ott says, “I have yet to hear from anyone associated with schools, whether administrators or board members, say that giving control over the start date back to local boards is not a good thing.” □