

Toronto Star Article – The following article appeared in the Toronto Star (front page) on Sat. Feb 7 09 .... also note the reference at the bottom of this Article "Labour Day falls in the second week of September for the 2010-11 school year. "

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Calendar blip means earlier start to school

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EDUCATION REPORTER

School boards are labouring over a blip in the calendar that could see students cut their summer vacation short to return to class.

With just 192 instructional days available from this year's late Labour Day to June 30 – but 194 days required – boards have put on their thinking caps to figure out how to squeeze in those two extra days, along with the new Family Day holiday.

Some want to begin the school year the week before Labour Day – traditionally the last gasp of summer for students before they hit the books – while others are asking teachers only to start early for a few days of professional development. One board might even shorten the Christmas holiday break.

"Oh, no one's happy – myself included," laughs Jean Hanson, director of education for the Rainbow District School Board, covering Sudbury, Espanola and Manitoulin, of its plan to have teachers in schools on Monday, Aug. 31, for a professional development day and students in class Sept. 1.

"But everyone recognizes that the alternative is to go further at the end of the school year," into the summer vacation, she added.

"We also could have submitted something that altered the Christmas Break, and there were other possibilities that we explored, but all of them were equally distasteful.

"This is the least distasteful."

Her board worked with the local Catholic, French and French-Catholic boards for a common solution as all four share busing. Teacher unions, principals, parents and the aboriginal

community also had a say in the plan, which requires approval from the education ministry.

"This impacts daycare, we know that it will impact summer camps, but no matter how we organize it, there will be an impact on other community groups – but that's just the way it is in terms of achieving the 194 days," said Hanson, a veteran educator who began teaching elementary school in 1976.

According to Ontario regulations, boards must plan for the 194 days, which includes a maximum of six professional activity days, as well as two weeks at Christmas and one for March Break.

The Toronto public and Catholic boards are still in the consultation process, as is Halton's public board.

In York Region, public school teachers are facing a shorter summer, with their school year beginning Sept. 2 and 3 with professional development days, followed by a board-designated holiday Friday the 4th.

Kids return the Tuesday following Labour Day.

"Typically, staff are in school the first week before classes start anyway," said Lucia Cascioli, spokesperson for the York Region District School Board. "We've decided to actually have our P.A. (professional activity) days there."

The board will approve the plan later this month, and it will then be submitted to the ministry.

"This happens in a cycle, so every time Labour Day ends up being in the second week in September, we try to balance out the mandatory Christmas and March breaks, those big chunks of time. There's not much wiggle room there," Cascioli said. "It doesn't happen often but when it does it takes a little more creative thinking."

Arlette Check, a mother of two elementary schoolchildren, said she hopes boards opt for professional development days before Labour Day rather than forcing students to return early. "A lot of parents will be upset because, historically, kids always start after Labour Day" and families plan vacation time and summer camp based on that.

"This happened back in 1998-99, but we didn't have Family Day back then so it does make it more challenging for boards," she added.

Check also wondered if the education ministry could shorten the school year.

But that only happens in unforeseen circumstances, such as last year when the Liberal government introduced Family Day after school calendars had been finalized. The school year was shortened by one day, to 193.

In 1998, when Labour Day was Sept. 7, most boards scheduled a professional activity day beforehand. And two additional professional activity days were added, for a total of six, in 2006.

If boards want to modify the school year – opening schools before Sept. 1 or after June 30 – they must submit their plans to the ministry by March 1. Otherwise, calendars must be filed in May.

"We are considering what's best for kids," said Joy Badder, superintendent of education for the Lambton Kent District School Board in the Sarnia/Chatham-Kent area.

"Without a doubt, if school begins on (Sept. 1), we have to consider what ramifications that has for the school community. I've taken the calendar to our board in a public meeting. It's all very preliminary we need to get our heads around this."

She said piling up professional development days at the start of September is an option, but questions how effective that is for teachers' professional growth.

"Having two front-loaded, so to speak, we would be very limited to when the others could be."

The idea is to find the least disruptive solution for students, said Mark Joel of the Durham District School Board.

"There are negative consequences in each scenario," added Graham Shantz, executive officer of the Waterloo Region District School Board. "Every board is struggling with this challenge."

And just as they solve this problem, they'll discover that Labour Day falls in the second week of September for the 2010-11 school year.

"We're just worrying about this year," said Shantz.