

**Wendy K. Sinnette**  
*Superintendent*

**Michael Leininger, Ed.D.**  
*Assistant Superintendent*  
*Facilities & Operations*

**Patricia S. Hager**  
*Assistant Superintendent*  
*Human Resources*

**La Cañada Unified School District**  
**...a learning community committed to personal growth**  
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Dear LCUSD Families,

A few parents have shared concerns regarding the change in the school year calendar for 2013-14. In efforts to be completely transparent, it is also a District interest to negotiate a 2014-15 calendar that moves the school year start date one additional week earlier in August.

I understand the concerns of some parents related to the calendar decisions. In order to address the issues and to present the reasons and rationales behind altering the school year calendar, the following I crafted the following response. At the outset, I want to convey to parents that I fully recognize that our students work very hard and endure a great deal of pressure to be successful. I also understand the importance of family vacations and that there are advantages to those vacations being in August.

However, I believe that there are significant educational reasons for moving the start of the school year so that it begins in mid-August. The earlier start date allows for more meaningful instruction to take place prior to the high stakes tests which are typically administered in early and mid-May. Our students perform very well on these tests, so - one could argue - why is the District tampering with a proven formula? The answer is readily apparent for the high school level, and increasingly apparent at the elementary level. For the high school we offer a wide range of AP courses. The rapid-fire curriculum pacing of these courses is due, in part, to our students having several fewer weeks to learn the same material as their counterparts from other states, and increasingly from California, who start school early to mid-August. This can be especially challenging for our middle achieving students. Giving all students more instructional time prior to the tests will allow the pacing guides to become slightly more reasonable. With the advent of the Common Core State Standards, testing in 2014-15 will have significant components of performance-based task assessments. The rigor of the State Testing will increase, necessitating more time to learn the curriculum and well as to practice performance activities in preparation for the tests. I believe the calendar changes will allow us to remain competitive and high-achieving on these critical measures of student achievement.

Also, with regard to extra-curricular activities, more and more of our local districts, with whom our students compete and perform, have moved to the August - May school year. By running an out-of-sync calendar, we create difficulties for our student athletes and competitors who are missing opportunities early in the summer because they are still in school, or late in the summer because that is when family vacations have been slotted after summer school.

In the spirit of compromise, my thoughts go to the still to be negotiated 2014-15 calendar and I question whether we should pursue our plan to move the calendar back one more week into August? And, honestly, upon reflection, I still think this is the right direction for the District and in the best interest of students. The goal with this calendar negotiation would be to end the first semester prior to winter break. I think if we surveyed parents on this, we would get resounding support. The reduced stress and enjoyable family time provided by students being freed up from preparing for finals will be, in my opinion, hugely advantageous to students and families. And, I think it will more than compensate for an early return in August. Given the concerns voiced on this issue, perhaps soliciting parent feedback on this issue will be what is needed to bear out my current assumptions regarding our proposed calendar direction?

The research on the issue of moving the calendar start day into mid or early August is mixed. Clearly cited in most of the literature is that few issues in a community generate the fractiousness that changes in school calendars can. An article in the ERIC Digest references that many districts nationwide are scheduling earlier start times for school. The article *School Calendars*, by Bill Metzker, published as early as 2003, sites the statistics that in 1988, just over 1/2 the nation's schools opened before September 1; in 2000, three quarters did - a 50 percent increase (Market Data Retrieval, 2001), and those

**4490 Cornishon Avenue, La Cañada Flintridge, California 91011 Phone: (818) 952-8300 Fax: (818) 952-8309**

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trends are only escalating. Research suggests that the key reasons supporting the calendar move on the part of the school reform initiative are similar to those I have stated: socio-economic conditions, demands for higher school standards, more testing preparation time and accountability; and the rearranging of calendar time to make better educational use of it.

But, as you dig into the research, the opponents of the calendar move cite the following: the importance of family vacations; hardships for single parent and working families; summer jobs for high school students being important; and the limitations this places on teachers' time to access continuing education. With the pros and cons cited by the research, I have to circle back to what I see as the focused needs of our school district, namely: to maximize instructional time and student preparation leading up to high stakes testing; syncing with our local area school districts; and creating calendars that provide for more than one vacation period of completely "stressless" enjoyment for families by aligning the end of quarter and semester marking periods with the beginning of vacations (i.e. summer vacation, winter holiday, and spring break).

Finally, I have to say that the arguments we have received from concerned parents on this issue clearly have merit. August is hot; vacation expenses are frequently lower in hot weather; our students work hard and are due as much time to relax with and enjoy their families as possible. I value families and family time immensely and know that the balance in the lives of many District families is often askew. But, the benefits related to a calendar shift that provides for more instructional quality, better and more effective pacing, better alignment of extra-curricular calendars with local districts, and - eventually - a burden free winter holiday were the cornerstones of the initiative to change the school year calendar. As the educational leader of the District, I take my responsibilities to students' and families' well-being incredibly seriously and would do nothing that I thought compromised them. I appreciate the concerns which have been shared and hope my explanation resonates in a way which makes the decision slightly less disappointing and/or grievous in nature to those who oppose it.

Sincerely yours,

Wendy Sinnette  
Superintendent