

## Adopting the 2020-2021 academic calendar

Last month the K-8 leadership team was asked to propose the academic calendar for 2020-2021 in preparation for a vote by the board in December, following the same practice and timeline in place at ANCS for the past several years. The team used the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) calendar as a baseline to plot out the required 180 days of instruction during the course of the academic year.

The process was informed by data from before and after the shortened October break earlier this year, the 2018 survey on the 2019-2020 academic calendar, and over a decade worth of observations on student performance and behavior over the years.

The proposal arrived at is very similar to the calendars at most other charter organizations in the APS system. It includes week-long breaks in October and February, along with the same winter (December) and spring (April) breaks featured in the APS calendar. Although the fall (October) and mid-winter (February) breaks are longer, they coincide with days in both months when APS students do not report. The calendar also starts the academic year in the middle of the week - a deliberate strategy to help new students ease into their new grade or, for kindergartners and sixth graders, an entirely new environment and schedule.

The consensus of the schoolwide leadership team is that this calendar is the best option for ANCS. The intermittent breaks help alleviate student “burn-out” that is often associated with a decline in academic achievement and an increase in disruptive behavior. The breaks are considered advantageous to the mental health and social/emotional well-being of our students. Both breaks also include faculty work-days, allowing an opportunity for teachers to plan, collaborate and adjust lesson plans as necessary.

Once the 2020-2021 calendar proposal was complete, it was presented to the board at an open meeting with advanced notice. The following day, the proposal was sent to all parents/caregivers via the Courier (and once more since) and posted in the ANCS Facebook group. The calendar has been posted on the front page of the ANCS website, and hard copies were distributed at both campuses. It was also discussed publicly with advanced notice at a meeting of the Educational Excellence Committee. Throughout the process, parents were asked to provide feedback by phone, via email or in person.

## Feedback from parents

Most feedback received focused on whether the calendar should include the extended fall and mid-winter breaks or follow the APS calendar more closely. Parents in support of the proposed calendar noticed that their kids seem to “perform better and feel less burned out” with the extended breaks. They spoke of the benefit to their mental health and overall learning, and improvements in attitude and behavior. This group included some parents who either now have or will soon have children at other APS institutions, including Maynard Jackson High School.

Parents who preferred a calendar more closely aligned with APS pointed out the difficulty and expense associated with finding childcare options during the breaks, as well as the complications associated with managing students in the same family with varying school schedules. We also heard complaints about the fact that we do not plan ahead for multiple academic years.

The impact on economically disadvantaged families was raised as well. Some parents wondered if the extended breaks might put us at a disadvantage as we look to increase our socioeconomic diversity.

## Responding to Feedback: Equity & Access

We listened closely to parents' open and honest feedback, and we take our commitment to being a welcoming and supportive school for all families very seriously. We 1) researched other schools in the APS district, 2) set a plan in place to address this very critical concern.

With respect to our ability to increase our socioeconomic diversity, we found that **all** APS charters who follow a balanced calendar featuring extended breaks are serving populations with a comparatively high percentage of economically disadvantaged students (35% - 100%). The data does not show that the extended breaks have had a negative impact on these schools' ability to attract and retain students from lower income families.

To accommodate current and future ANCS families, work has begun to reach out to community partners to schedule enrichment activities and programming options for ANCS students during the proposed fall and mid-winter breaks. If the draft calendar is adopted, all charter school students in the Jackson cluster will be on break at the same times (about 2,400 children), creating a significant demand for such options. As we cultivate these opportunities, we will assess the need to support and coordinate the enrollment process to make it easier on parents. We will also plan to provide financial support for those families that need it - similar to the assistance we provide in other areas. The target list of organizations will include many of the same that offer camps during the summer.

Lastly, we will work with the board to shift to a process by which we propose and adopt the calendar for multiple academic years, thereby improving parents' ability to plan further ahead. Thank you for your engagement throughout this process.