

# Focus *on the School Calendar*

## SREB

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Over the last several years, questions have risen across the nation regarding the public school calendar and how to make it a more effective tool for operating schools. These questions are the product of a variety of conditions occurring in states, including a renewed focus on student learning and closing achievement gaps among students, sizeable state budget reductions, and scheduling problems due to inclement weather and other disruptive events. These conditions, along with many other circumstances, are considerations lawmakers may take into account as they look at policies to modify school calendars.

The calendar currently used by local school districts dates back to the mid- to late 1800s. During that time, states assumed more authority over education policy, school districts became more formalized and localities began taxing to support schools. Some historians and analysts believe that a blend of the longer urban school calendar and the six-month rural school calendar used in those days resulted in today's nine-month calendar.

In 2010, school calendars and calendar policies in SREB states remain relatively unchanged, although a few key differences exist. In some cases, state policy changes offer school districts more calendar flexibility, while other differences reflect a desire for uniformity and consistency throughout a state.

## Origins of the 180-day calendar

Prior to the Civil War in the 1860s, students in urban areas attended school for at least 240 days a year. In rural areas, schools were open for about six months a year (three months in winter and three in summer), leaving time for children to help with seasonal agricultural work.

The trend toward a common calendar began with the enactment of compulsory attendance laws. In 1852, Massachusetts passed the first compulsory attendance law, requiring children ages eight through 14 to attend school each year for 12 weeks. During the early 20th century, other states followed suit.

With the passage of federal child labor laws and increased industrialization throughout the country, a common school calendar among states became even more important. There are several reasons why state officials may have thought adopting a common school calendar was essential, including the rising demand for an educated work force and for sparing children from hot classrooms during the summer months. In addition, a prerequisite minimum number of school days

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Other reports on this topic in the SREB *Focus* series include *Focus on the School Calendar: The Four-Day School Week* (2008) and an upcoming report on alternative calendars.

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was essential to decreasing education costs and taxpayer subsidies for the education system. The common calendar developed out of these and other necessities, forming the current nine-month school calendar with three months of summer vacation.

## Current requirements

### *Instructional days and hours*

Nationwide, public school systems customarily base their school calendars on a state-mandated, minimum number of instructional days or instructional hours that students are required to attend school during the school year. Instructional days also are defined as the number of pupil-to-teacher contact days in a school year.

In SREB states, these requirements vary. Seven SREB states define the school year by a set number of instructional days only. Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and West Virginia require 180 instructional days. The state code of Arkansas authorizes the state Board of Education to set the minimum number of instructional days per school year at 178. (See Table 1.)

Two SREB states — Maryland and North Carolina — define the school year with both a minimum number of instructional days and a minimum number of instructional hours. Both states stipulate a minimum of 180 days of instruction, although the minimum number of hours differs by state. Maryland requires 1,080 hours, and North Carolina requires 1,000 hours.

Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Virginia define their school year by either a minimum number of instructional days or a minimum number of hours. Florida's state code requires a 180-day minimum school term or an equivalent number of hours. The Georgia General Assembly passed legislation in 2009 moving away from a strict 180-day requirement. The law now defines a school year as 180 days or an equivalent number of hours for each grade level, as determined by the state Board of Education. Kentucky requires 175 days of instruction or 1,050 hours, but the General Assembly has budgeted funding to local districts for a minimum of 177 instructional days (which equates to 1,062 minimum hours of instruction). Louisiana specifies 177 days or 1,062 hours. Both Oklahoma and Virginia require 180 days, or 1,080 hours and 990 hours, respectively.

Delaware is the only SREB state that defines the school year in terms of hours alone — 440 hours for kindergarten students; 1,060 hours for students in grades one through 11; and 1,032 hours for 12th-grade students.

**Table 1**  
**K-12 Minimum Instructional Time Per School Year in SREB States, 2009**

	Instructional Time		
	Days Per Year	Hours Per Year	Code Section
Alabama	180		§16-13-231(a)(1)
Arkansas	178		§6-10-106(f); State Board Rule 10.01.1
Delaware		440 (K) 1,060 (1st-11th) 1,032 (12th)	Title 14 §1049(1)
Florida	180	OR 720 (K-3rd) OR 900 (4th-12th)	§1011.60(2); State Board Rule 6A-1.045111
Georgia	180	OR 810 (K-3rd) OR 900 (4th-5th) OR 990 (6th-12th)	§20-2-168(c)(1); State Board Rule 160-5-1-.02
Kentucky	175	OR 1,050	§158.070(1)
Louisiana	177	OR 1,062	§17:154.1(A)(1)
Maryland	180	AND 1,080	§7-103(a)(1)(i)
Mississippi	180		§37-13-63
North Carolina	180	AND 1,000	§115C-84.2(a)(1)
Oklahoma	180	OR 1,080	Title 70 §1-109(A)
South Carolina	180		§59-1-425(A)
Tennessee	180		§49-6-3004(a)(1)
Texas	180		§25.081(a)
Virginia	180	OR 990	§22.1-98(B)(1)
West Virginia	180		§18-5-45(c)(2)

Sources: Education Commission of the States, Market Retrieval Data Corporation, SREB state departments of education, SREB state legislative staffs, and state statutes.

### *Length of an instructional day*

Every state stipulates, whether in state code or state board of education rules, the minimum amount of instructional time students in each grade level must receive daily. In 10 SREB states, the average minimum length of an instructional day is six hours for kindergarten and grades one through 12. Florida, Georgia and Mississippi require no less than an average of five instructional hours each day, while North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia require an average of at least five and one-half hours. (See Table 2.)

### *Composition of an instructional day*

What constitutes an instructional day varies from state to state; however, only a few SREB states — Maryland, Oklahoma and West Virginia — write these variations into state code. Maryland requires 180 days and 1,080 hours, but an instructional day can be as little as three hours. In Oklahoma, up to five of the 180 instructional days each year may be used for professional development. West Virginia's 180-day term includes five instructional support and enhancement days, which are limited to two hours of instructional activities for students and two hours of professional development activities.

Table 2  
**K-12 Minimum Instructional Hours Per Day in SREB States, 2009**

	Average Minimum Number of Instructional Hours Per Day
Alabama	6
Arkansas	6
Delaware	6
Florida	5
Georgia	5
Kentucky	6
Louisiana	6
Maryland	6
Mississippi	5
North Carolina	5.5
Oklahoma	6
South Carolina	6
Tennessee	6.5
Texas	7
Virginia	5.5
West Virginia	5.5

Source: Council of Chief State School Officers.

Inclusions and exclusions of certain types of time within an instructional day are typically written into state board of education rules, but four states provide exceptions in state code. In general, Texas includes recess and “intermissions” in instructional time counts. Louisiana’s state code excludes recess from instructional time counts. Delaware school districts can count up to two hours for emergency dismissals in an instructional day. West Virginia includes extracurricular and co-curricular activities. Oklahoma includes six hours per semester for parent-teacher conferences. In South Carolina, lunch is excluded from instructional time for secondary school students but included for elementary students.

## School calendar flexibility

State legislatures in recent years have amended school calendar regulations to give school districts more flexibility in meeting the minimum number of instructional days or hours. School systems are able to utilize this flexibility in many ways, such as implementing energy-saving measures, increasing the length of the school day, instituting efficiency measures and focusing on integrating other reforms.

Both Georgia and Oklahoma set new calendar flexibility policies in 2009. Georgia’s House Bill 193 allows local districts to implement an alternative calendar of 180 days or an equivalent number of hours as determined by the state Board of Education. Rule 160-5-1-.02(2) of the state Board sets the equivalent number of hours by grade level. The minimum number of instructional hours ranges from 810 hours in kindergarten through grade three, to 900 hours in grades four and five, and 990 hours in grades six through 12.

Oklahoma’s House Bill 1864 changes the school year calculation, which previously was set at a minimum of 180 instructional days, to either a minimum of 1,080 hours of instruction or 180 days of instruction.

### *Four-day school week*

The first four-day school week schedules originated in the 1970s during the energy crisis as a way to save money by extending the school day while holding school for fewer days per year. Writings about the potential benefits and challenges of implementing a four-day school week have focused primarily on economic issues; however, there is little research addressing the impact on student learning. Because of the unprecedented economic times states are facing currently, discussions about the feasibility of implementing this type of schedule are on the rise. While the need to balance budgets is real, the current focus on improving student achievement and learning should remain central to state-level decisions impacting schools.

In 2008, SREB published a *Focus* report on the four-day school week. At that time, five SREB states — Arkansas, Delaware, Kentucky, Louisiana and Virginia — had provisions in state statutes providing flexibility for school districts to implement a four-day school week. But very few schools and only a small percentage of students participated. For example, in Kentucky, nine out of 1,900 public schools (with less than 0.5 percent of the Commonwealth’s students) attended school four days per week. In Louisiana, 3 percent of the state’s schools participated, impacting about 2 percent of the state’s students.

In 2009, Georgia and Oklahoma revised their statutes to permit more flexible schedules. Both Georgia’s and Oklahoma’s legislatures passed legislation allowing the minimum number of instructional days to be calculated either in days or hours. A small number of school districts are allowing schools to move to a four-day school week.

### *Year-round calendar*

Another type of alternative calendar, the year-round calendar, is receiving attention as a way to accommodate more students in overcrowded facilities, to combat summer learning loss or to provide time during the school year for enrichment activities and additional help for students. In this type of schedule, students generally attend school for the same number of days during a school year, but those days are arranged more evenly throughout the year. Summer vacation is generally shorter (four to six weeks), and the school year is arranged in segments or school terms, with short breaks of two or more weeks in between.

The year-round calendar can take two forms: a single-track or multi-track schedule. In a single-track schedule, all students attend school at the same time and have breaks at the same time. In a multi-track schedule, students are organized into groups that attend school on staggered instructional terms, with different vacations so that more students can be accommodated in a single facility. While the required number of instructional days generally does not change in a year-round calendar, a number of schools do utilize the breaks throughout the year to provide extra tutoring for students falling behind in their studies (rather than waiting for the longer, traditional summer break) and optional enrichment classes.

In 2007, an estimated 3 percent of public schools nationwide (about 2,800) participated in year-round schedules. Almost half were in California, with the remainder in 44 other states. In the SREB region, about 500 schools participated, with the largest numbers in Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina and Texas. Maryland and Mississippi were the only SREB states with no year-round schools.

## **School opening and closing dates**

Overall, these dates vary by state, as well as within the state. In most school districts in the SREB region, the school year begins in mid- to late August. It ends before June 1 in most school districts in eight SREB states. In seven SREB states, the school year ends in most districts during the first half of June. In South Carolina, schools close from late May to early June. (See Table 3.)

State code in both Mississippi and West Virginia specifically authorizes local boards of education to select school opening and closing dates, without providing any guiding parameters for when the school calendar should start or end. West Virginia authorizes county boards of education to select the dates for schools in their districts as a result of legislation adopted in 2010. Previously, West Virginia state statutes required schools to open no earlier than August 26 and close by June 8.

Seven of the 16 SREB states specify an opening date in statute, though exceptions may be granted by the state board of education. Arkansas schools begin between August 19 and 26. However, if August 18 falls on a Monday, the school year may begin on that date. Schools in Florida begin no earlier than 14 days prior to Labor Day. In South Carolina, schools do not open before the third Monday in August. Tennessee schools, beginning with the 2010-2011 school year, will be prohibited from opening earlier than August 1. Texas requires schools to open no earlier than the fourth Monday in August. Virginia schools begin no earlier than Labor Day.

**Table 3**  
**K-12 Public School Opening and Closing Dates in SREB States, 2009**

	Majority of Schools Start	Majority of Schools Close	Code Section
Alabama	August 7–11	Before June 1	None
Arkansas	August 19–26	Before June 1	§6-10-106(a)(1) Open: Between August 19 and August 26
Delaware	August 14–31	June 1–15	None
Florida	August 18–22	June 1–15	§1001.42(4)(f) Open: No earlier than 14 days before Labor Day
Georgia	July 11–August 18	Before June 1	None
Kentucky	July 29–August 21	Before June 1	None
Louisiana	August 10–14	May 20–27	None
Maryland	August 19–September 2	June 1–18	None
Mississippi	August 1–11	Before June 1	§37-13-61 Opening and closing dates selected by the local boards of education
North Carolina	August 25	June 8–10	§115C-84.2(d) Open: No earlier than August 25; Close: No later than June 10
Oklahoma	August 11–18	Before June 1	None
South Carolina	August 17–20	May 27–June 3	§59-1-425(A) Open: Not before the third Monday in August
Tennessee	1st–3rd week of August	Before June 1	§49-6-3004(f) Open: No earlier than August 1
Texas	August 24–28	Before June 15	§25.0811 Open: No earlier than the fourth Monday in August
Virginia	After Labor Day	June 1–15	§22.1-79.1 Open: Not before Labor Day
West Virginia	August 26-28	June 8	§18-5-45(e) (House Bill 4040, 2010) Opening and closing dates selected by the county boards of education

Sources: Education Commission of the States, Council of Chief State School Officers, Market Retrieval Data Corporation, SREB state departments of education, SREB state legislative staffs, and state statutes.

Currently, as a result of West Virginia's change in statute, North Carolina is the lone SREB state that specifically lists both school opening and closing dates in statute. Schools are required to open no earlier than August 25 and close no later than June 10.

Although opening and closing dates are written into the statutes of many states, state boards of education are authorized to waive these provisions in the event of unique circumstances, including severe weather conditions, energy shortages, contagious disease outbreaks, national emergencies and alternative calendars. In fact, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia have similar provisions with regard to state board waivers.

In these states, the state board may waive school open and close provisions if a local school board shows or certifies "good cause" or has an educational purpose. Good cause occurs when a school district has been closed an average of eight days per year during any four of the last 10 years (in North Carolina and South Carolina; any five of the last 10 years in Virginia) because of severe weather conditions, energy shortages, power failures or other emergency situations. An educational purpose arises when a local district establishes a need to adopt a different calendar for: a specific school to accommodate a special program offered to the entire student body, a school that primarily serves a special population of students, or a defined program within a school.

## Summary

A combination of circumstances from the 1850s to 1920s led to the creation of a today's common 180-day school calendar spread over nine months. Since that time, a majority of school districts in SREB states have not drastically modified their school calendars. However, in a few schools within a small number of school districts, local boards have provided the option of an alternative school calendar, including four-day school weeks and a year-round schedule.

Recent questions about the 180-day calendar and increasing its efficiency have led to minor changes in state policy, allowing more flexibility in scheduling the instructional year. While budget constraints and the impact of unplanned events are real concerns for school districts, improving student achievement and closing achievement gaps among students must be at the heart of scheduling decisions.

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