

Reimagining schooling in Wales: Reforming the school year and day

The Welsh Government is considering making changes to the school day and year. This came out of the Labour Party manifesto and the Labour/Plaid Co-operation Agreement, which states that:

'to narrow educational inequalities and support learner and staff wellbeing, we will look to radically reform school term dates to bring them more in line with contemporary patterns of family life and employment.'

In December 2017, the Welsh Government commissioned a review of school teachers' terms and conditions, Teaching: A valued profession (September 2018). In the report the review panel said: 'it is time to think afresh about how schooling works for pupils, for their families and for teachers'.

An Expert Panel was appointed by the Welsh Government in 2019 to undertake the first phase of the work.

The Welsh Government has circulated a number of questionnaires, created by Beaufort Research, for teachers, pupils and parents, as well as childcare, health services and tourism and transport representatives, to gather views on the structure of the school year. It also takes the form of a pilot in a small number of schools over changes to the school day.

In January 2022, the Welsh Government published a Rapid Evidence Assessment entitled, Effects of changes to the school year and alternative school calendars: review of evidence. The assessment examined the effects of changes to the school year, including:

- impacts on learning;
- children's health and wellbeing;
- the provision of wraparound care;
- family life; and
- other societal impacts.

It found that evidence in relation to changing the school year was found to be 'mixed and inconclusive'.

NASUWT VIEW

The issues of changes to the school day and year are extremely complex. The NASUWT is concerned that there is no evidence that any change would improve the quality of educational provision.

Discussions on changing the pattern of terms are not new. They have surfaced from time to time at national and local level. This periodic debate invariably rehashes tried, tested and rejected arguments.

In the early 1980s, a national working party, comprising employers, trade unions and representatives from independent schools, was convened to give detailed consideration to various options to change the three-term year. In January 2000, the Local Government Association (LGA) established a Commission on the organisation of the school year. Both of these concluded with no significant changes being made to the school year.

However, the Minister for Education, Jeremy Miles, in Plenary at the Assembly, stated that: *"We have gone too long without having a proper discussion on this issue."*

Many prospective entrants and current teachers cite the long summer break as an important factor in teachers' working patterns. Altering this may exacerbate the problems of recruitment and retention.

The NASUWT has raised concerns with the Welsh Government over the progression of this issue if it does not involve consultation with the education unions.

The NASUWT has also raised concerns with the Minister that the Beaufort survey contained no clear rationale, together with blatantly leading questions, which did not give the opportunity for those taking part to settle with the status quo. This will lead to bias and scientifically insecure outcomes.

The NASUWT is now engaged in talks with the Welsh Government. The Union is assured that we are some way from a formal consultation and that no change is an option.

Teachers' workload has long been a concern and the surveys carried out by the Education Workforce Council have demonstrated that teachers already work unacceptably long hours and are under severe stress.

The pilots underway to extend the school day, therefore, give cause for concern and, although the Welsh Government has given assurances that these are not about changing teachers' conditions, in actual fact it has little control over what happens in schools. The NASUWT is particularly concerned regarding the pressure that can be applied to young or recently qualified teachers and those on temporary contracts. The NASUWT has also raised with the Minister the view that whilst Local Management of Schools exists in its present form he will have little control over how the reforms impact on teachers' working conditions.

The Union maintains that the Welsh Government should focus on the issue of affordable child care, particularly for socioeconomically disadvantaged families.

The NASUWT also believes that this is the wrong time to be considering such enormous reforms. Teachers are already faced with recovery following the Coronavirus pandemic, preparations for the New Curriculum and the implications of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunals Act.

DISPELLING MYTHS AND MISINFORMATION

Advocates of change to the established pattern of term times deploy a range of arguments to justify their proposals. Many of these are based simply on myths and misinformation.

One argument is that three terms, with a long summer break, is educationally detrimental. Children, they claim, forget what they have been taught in such a long break. There is, however, no evidence to support this assertion.

A National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) review noted, in particular, that many of the studies used to justify reductions in the duration of the summer vacation on this basis were framed within the context of practices in the United States where schools close for three months in the summer.

Schools in Northern Ireland, widely regarded as having high standards, have an eight-week break starting in July. Independent and public schools have traditionally longer blocks of holiday than state schools.

The most common range in the number of school days is between 170 and 190 across Europe. The length of the summer holidays varies significantly between countries, from six weeks in the German Länder, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Liechtenstein, up to 13 weeks in Latvia, between 12 and 14 weeks in Italy and Portugal, and even 15 weeks in Albania and Bulgaria. Typical summer holiday lengths in Wales are among the shortest in Europe.

Many of the countries with longer summer holidays are among those often held up as models for Wales to follow. The clear conclusion is that there is no justification for shortening the length of the summer holiday as a means of improving educational outcomes.

The Minister for Education also made this assertion in Plenary:

'Programmes such as these trials, which provide stimulating additional sessions and support learners to re-engage with learning, can have a greater impact on attainment than those that are solely academic in focus.'

The Welsh Government's Rapid Evidence Assessment found no evidence to support changes to the school year or extending the school day. It found that:

- 'extended school years did not produce positive effects upon achievement
- summer school programmes did not produce positive impacts upon social-emotional outcomes for children
- neither year-round education nor summer holiday provision significantly narrowed the attainment gap

- extended school years produced negative impacts upon student behaviours
- year-round education produced small (but significant) negative economic impacts; and
- difficulty finding qualified staff who would work over the summer period as the most common barrier to providing extended school year'.

Much emphasis has been placed on the assertion that change to the pattern of the school year will alleviate teacher stress. There is no evidence to support this view.

Change may present the opportunity for teachers to take holidays outside the traditional peak periods. Evidence from Scotland and Northern Ireland shows that holiday companies simply change what is considered as 'peak periods' to fit the prevailing pattern.

A common starting point for advocates of change to the current academic year is that the current system has no educational basis and originates from the pattern of the agricultural year, to facilitate children helping with the harvest. This assertion is demonstrably untrue. The National Farmers' Union confirms that the main harvest period is in September/October, becoming progressively later further north. This pattern has not significantly changed for hundreds of years.

The current pattern of terms is actually based on a historical combination of religious, academic, political and legal issues. Church festivals, university terms and parliamentary sessions have all been influential factors.

CONCLUSION

There is no sustainable educational argument for change. The NASUWT believes that the real agenda for those promulgating change is to alter teachers' conditions of service and ultimately extend the working year.

There are far more pressing and important issues on which the Welsh Government, local education authorities (LEAs) and schools need to be focusing. In particular, the need to tackle the recruitment and retention crisis brought about by excessive workload and pupil indiscipline must be the key concern of employers, the Welsh Government and teacher unions. The recovery from COVID, the New Curriculum (which the NASUWT has repeatedly called to be delayed) and the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (ALNET) Act need to be the focus. A change to the pattern of school terms which has no proven educational merit and has the potential to worsen rather than improve teachers' working conditions is an unnecessary distraction and should be rejected.

ADVICE TO MEMBERS

Teachers must recognise that a proposal to change the pattern of the school year is a national conditions of service issue. If there is to be change, then a national process should be implemented which focuses on negotiation with the recognised trade unions, in a national forum.

Members are advised not to complete the surveys circulated by Beaufort on behalf of the Welsh Government.

Members in the pilot schools for changes to the school day should not be forced into 'volunteering' for extra activities before or after the school day. They should report any issues to the NASUWT Wales Office at: rc-wales-cymru@mail.nasuwt.org.uk



**talk
to us**

rc-wales-cymru@mail.nasuwt.org.uk
www.nasuwt.org.uk