

Who can afford two months off in modern age?

School calendar changes make sense for B.C.'s employers, employees, and students alike

BY IAN COOK, VANCOUVER SUN JUNE 29, 2012

As our kids start their usual two-month-plus summer sabbatical from school, there's a lot of discussion this time about the relative costs and benefits of doing away with such a long gap in the school year.

Oddly, if you start looking around for background on the issue, as we have at the BC Human Resources Management Association, there really isn't that much around in the way of comparative hard evidence one way or the other. However, much of the anecdotal evidence seems to lean toward supporting a change - and that includes improvements that we'd expect to see in the B.C. workplace, and for employees around the province.

The provincial government clearly considers it a worthy idea. Several weeks ago, it introduced legislation signalling its intention to let school districts decide on how to manage their summer holiday schedules. In the interim there has been a lot of talk about whether it's a good idea, or a bad one. At least cost is not a factor in this. In a recent interview on CBC's Cross Country Checkup, Education Minister George Abbott noted teachers are paid an annual salary, and the required number of teaching hours would be maintained.

Those who support the idea of year-round schooling note students in many countries are used to having shorter summer vacations, often with more frequent breaks of a week or two throughout the year, and there are stories of schools in Canada with year-round schedules which report great success.

Benefits include a more continuous flow of the learning process, more regular breaks in the school year, a mindset to keep learning, and reducing the chance of losing what they've learned. The founding reason for the long school break was in order for kids to help with the harvest. Our working world, both here in B.C. and around the world, has changed such that this no longer makes sense and it is hard to stay competitive when you are used to taking the summer "off," while your competitors do not.

Some say kids need the long break to get away from the pressures of school, and it's hard to dispute that a summer break can be beneficial, especially given the summer season is relatively short in some parts of our country. It's just the length of the break that's at issue. Some decry the fact that eliminating an extended summer break eradicates the opportunity for longer family holiday experiences. While the exact amount of time off in the summer under a new schedule has yet to be

worked out, a summer break of four or five weeks might well be an option, balanced by longer and more frequent breaks during the school year.

Eliminating the long break of eight to 12 weeks would ease the pressure on single parents and working families. Getting extended time off is not possible for most parents, and they face the cost and stress of finding full time daycare or imposing on grand-parents, uncles and aunts to become sitters. Most of us have experience of colleagues arriving late or leaving early over the summer as the juggling of child care, created by the extended time off, gets out of hand.

From an employers' point of view, and for the HR people who have to manage the effect of the two-month school break, we foresee a scenario where a shorter summer break would encourage productivity. Right now, scheduling employees' summer holidays in a rotation over the current two-month period means "someone's always away." We've all seen the summer doldrums where calls don't get answered, or projects go on hold until everyone's back. In an increasingly competitive global market, combined with shaky economic conditions, any opportunity to increase productivity for businesses in B.C. is a benefit.

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