

Hopewell's Balanced Calendar: The Secret Ingredient

By Byron Davis

For the 2020-2021 school year, Hopewell City Public Schools will be forging a new path as the first district in Virginia to move all schools to a “balanced calendar,” otherwise often referred to as a year-round school model. This move is being completed with the support of a school board that voted to support the new calendar and with the support of the Virginia Department of Education that approved an extended school year funding grant for the district. The excitement is only building.

While there are a variety of models both of extended school year designs and balanced calendars, Hopewell is using a 45/15 model as its inspiration. In this model a school has 45 days of instruction followed by 15 days of intersession. A common misconception to “year-round schools” is a belief that students are required to attend school for more time than a traditional calendar requires. However, the minimum number of compulsory days in Virginia remains 180 regardless of the model. A balanced calendar simply makes an effort to better balance work time and break time while also offering additional learning experience opportunities. Intersessions are similar to a traditional model of summer school in that both teachers and students are invited, but not required to attend. Intersession opportunities for teaching and learning will be provided in options of one or two-week long units. For Hopewell City Schools’ 2020-2021 school year, there will be a total of six weeks of additional instructional opportunities beyond the regular school year.

The advantage of intersessions in a balanced calendar format is multifaceted: Teachers and students are never more than 4.5 weeks from a break, improving the ability to remain mentally fresh and fully engage in the work without fatigue; teachers may choose to work or vacation during intersessions, and families can make the same decision for their children. Perhaps most importantly though, is the opportunity to break from the constraints of tradition and respond to a rapidly changing society with dramatically different experiences. Year after year, the Future Jobs Report demonstrates that employers are looking for a different skill set than traditional education has been focusing on. While Hopewell has been making amazing gains in these needed areas through instructional models of deeper learning and project-based learning, intersessions have the potential to provide more latitude for student experiences.

Hopewell City Schools believes that the secret formula to success will be marrying teacher passions with student interests and innovating student experience. Intersessions will not look like traditional schooling, and Hopewell believes that will make teachers want to teach and students want to learn; it will make people want to be there. Rather than the division mandating what will happen, teachers have been invited to propose what excites them. The district has the monumental task of reviewing all proposals for approval, but fully believes that when people are passionate about what they want to do, and when teachers are able to have voice in what education should be, the result will be progressive and impactful instructional programming.

The opportunities for voice do not end with teachers. Students will be able to select the courses they are most interested in, and many experiences will be off campus and/or will involve partnerships with business and community members. Universities have also expressed an interest in partnering in this process. Many teachers are using this opportunity to propose instruction with a focus on how they can make a difference in society. Many opportunities will provide students with memorable life experiences that they would otherwise not have. Examples teachers have suggested include high school students researching and learning how to hike, camp and live outdoors and will involve camping off-site; a partnership with a ballet company in which elementary school students learn about art and expression and prepare a culminating performance; a week long focus for elementary students on learning about what it takes to sustain a business and then writing a professional business plan; PreSchool students learning which vegetables and/or fruits will grow in soil in Hopewell through work in a community garden; and middle school students learning empathy and how to work with and appreciate others by studying and then celebrating Hopewell Schools' employees.

July 27th will be the first day of school for students under the 2020-2021 Balanced Calendar, and that makes this an exciting time for changing the way schools look and work, with it all developing at a rapid pace. While Hopewell City Schools anticipates the usual growing pains that are associated with any new venture, they are excited for the future they are creating for students.

To see a copy of Hopewell City Schools' balanced calendar, visit www.hopewell.k12.va.us