

INTEROFFICE CORRESPONDENCE
Los Angeles Unified School District
Independent Analysis Unit

INFORMATIVE

TO: Members, Board of Education
Vivian Ekchian, Acting Superintendent

DATE: December 11, 2017

FROM: Glenn Daley, Director Independent Analysis Unit
Analyst: Andrew Thomas, Ph.D.

SUBJECT: INSTRUCTIONAL CALENDAR

On December 12, 2017, the Division of District Operations will request that the Board adopt the instructional calendars for school years 2018-2019 through 2020-2021. These calendars begin in mid-August, complete the first semester before winter break, and maintain a five-day Thanksgiving break and three-week winter break. To measure parent and employee preferences about the instructional calendar, the District conducted a parent and employee survey. In this informative, the IAU provides a review of the calendar survey questionnaire and methodology.

The questionnaire included questions about preferences for August start dates, a post-Labor Day start date, lengths of Thanksgiving and winter breaks, coordination of elementary and secondary school calendars, and an early start time of day.

The District contracted with Apperson, Inc. to conduct the survey, which cost \$249,477. Apperson, Inc. provides printing, business forms, and data collection services. Their core competency is in scannable questionnaires. Apperson's scope of work for the District included printing, scanning, data merging, and reporting. It may also have included direct mail, though this service is not listed in materials for the Board. Both English and Spanish versions of the survey were distributed. Measures were taken to protect respondent identity and safeguard against duplicate submissions.

The response rate was reported as 38.05%, with 169,273 surveys returned. No follow up to collect additional surveys is mentioned in materials to the Board and we do not know whether these respondents are representative of L.A. Unified families overall. Thirty-eight percent is considered a high return rate for surveys of this type, but because the population count (total number of families in the district surveyed) was not provided, it is not possible to calculate margin of error.

District Operations summarized the results of the surveys by stating that most employees preferred a pre-Labor Day start to the school year. Most parents preferred a post-Labor Day start. Both employees and parents preferred a full week off at Thanksgiving and a three-week winter break. Both groups were also in favor of one standard calendar for all school levels.

The IAU reviewed the questionnaire and identified several validity concerns.

- Question 1 was, “Do you think the school year should start in August?” which is a yes/no question. The first few answer choices, however, were not “yes” or “no.” Instead, they were preferred date ranges in August. The difference between the question form and the answer choices could have been confusing to respondents.
- Further, one of the response choices to Question 1 was Option D, which allowed respondents to indicate whether they disagreed with starting the school year in August. The questionnaire then continued with Question 2, which asked if respondents thought the school year should start after Labor Day. Respondents who answered Option D in Question 1 would be expected to agree in Question 2 that school should start after Labor Day, but the results show an inconsistency.

Though only 18% of families and 27% of employees marked that they disagreed with starting the school year in August, many more respondents (36% of families and 38% of employees) indicated that the school year should start after Labor Day. Therefore, some of the respondents who marked August start dates in Question 1 went on to report that they agreed that school should start after Labor Day. Perhaps respondents read the first question as a rating of the best August start date and the second question as voting on whether to start school in September. This inconsistency makes interpreting these results difficult. The IAU recommends discarding the responses that indicated a preference for one of the August start dates *and* agreeing that school should start after Labor Day in Question 2, while treating the other responses to these questions with greater skepticism.

A preferable way to word Questions 1 and 2 would have been to combine them into a single question that provides date ranges for possible calendars. For example, choices could be: August 9 through through June 2, or September 4 through June 21. A question worded this way would provide all of the tradeoff information respondents needed to make a choice and provide valid data for comparing respondent preference of calendars.

- The IAU identified no major validity concerns for Questions 3-5.
- Question 6 is a leading question; it encourages an answer by suggesting that current research supports a later start time for secondary schools. However, this question is not salient to the main issue of fall semester start date.

To ensure valid data for future District surveys, the IAU recommends that survey experts review questionnaires for ambiguous, leading, or emotive questions, as well as for appropriate and useful answer choices and choice scales. A second recommendation is that a reasonable amount of demographic information be collected on respondents so that results can be compared by grade level and region. Income level would also be useful, but may be obtrusive to collect.

It would also be useful to see the survey results as an aggregate (all Board district) breakdown by grade level. This would show, for example, whether elementary parents across the District responded to the questions differently than did high school parents.

The informatives provided by District Operations that support the proposed 2019-2021 calendars do not provide evidence that an early start is favored by parents. Beginning in August may be favored by employees, but problems with the wording of some of the questions in the survey threaten the validity of the survey results.

In its informative to the Board, the District also presented information on energy costs, attendance issues and achievement. The IAU conducted a preliminary review of this information and is available for questions or in-depth analysis. In addition, because the District switched to an August start date five years ago, we now have enough data to compare costs and student outcomes in depth for years when school began in August versus years when school began after Labor Day. The IAU would be able to conduct such a study if so requested by the Board.

It is also important to note that factors besides energy costs, attendance, achievement and parent and staff preferences may provide compelling reasons to adopt the proposed calendar. For instance, the need for coordination of teacher and staff labor markets and student attendance between districts provides a rationale to align—at least roughly—L.A. Unified’s calendar with the calendars of other districts. Staffing coordination within the District also benefits from starting in August.