

Withdraw plans to change the structure of the school year

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 8 Gorffennaf 2024
Petitions Committee | 8 July 2024

Reference: SR24/8622-4

Petition Number: [P-06-1436](#)

Petition title: Withdraw plans to change the structure of the school year

Text of petition: The Welsh Government's evidence base is not sufficiently robust to justify the changes, which will cause significant disruption in our schools, and across the agricultural and tourism sectors in Wales.

We believe that now is not the time to change the structure of the school year, and remove time from the summer holidays. The education sector in Wales has seen significant changes, which have caused substantial impacts in terms of workload and wellbeing for our workforce.

We already have amongst the shortest summer holidays in Europe. Primary and secondary school students in Italy, Portugal, and Spain benefit from lengthy summer holidays of 12 to 13 weeks. In Sweden, it's 10 weeks, France and Norway 8 weeks, Germany 7 weeks. All these countries performed better than Wales in the latest PISA results.

Further still, the plans do not replace sufficient support for disadvantaged children and their families, such as opportunities to access free school meals during the holidays, and funded sporting and creative activities.

<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9149c2f5-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/9149c2f5-en>



1. Background

In December 2017, the Welsh Government commissioned an independent review of school teachers' terms and conditions. The review panel's report, [Teaching: A valued profession](#) (September 2018), recommended that a Commission should be established to 're-imagine schooling in Wales'. This would include considering whether the rhythm of the school year, the pattern of terms and holidays and the shape of the school day should be rethought.

An Expert Panel was appointed in 2019 to undertake the first phase of the work. It was due to submit its report to the Welsh Government by September 2019.. However, in January 2021, Kirsty Williams, then Minister for Education said that this work had been 'partly derailed' by COVID 19.

The Welsh Government's [Programme for Government 2021-2026](#) included a commitment to consider reforming the structure of the school day and the school year. Building on that, the [Co-operation Agreement](#) between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru stated that:

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

[On 4 June 2024, Lynne Neagle, the Cabinet Secretary for Education](#) said any changes to the pattern of the school year **would not be implemented within this Senedd term.**

2. Welsh Government Action

In January 2022, the Welsh Government published '[Effects of changes to the school year and alternative school calendars: review of evidence a summary of the main findings and recommendations of a Rapid Evidence Assessment](#)'. The review looked at literature including studies from Wales, the wider UK, and the USA. It found that evidence in relation to changing the school year was "mixed and inconclusive". The review recommended ensuring high quality, focussed evidence gathering and evaluation be built in to any proposed programme of school calendar change from the outset.

Included in the findings from further research, [Reform of the school year: perceptions and experiences of the current school calendar](#) (3 October 2023) were:

- The 6-week break causes learning loss for all learners but there is minimal lasting effect with recovery soon after the start of the autumn term.
- Learners with additional learning needs (ALN) are the most affected by the current school calendar. Those from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are also more affected in terms of progression and attainment.
- Inconsistent term lengths increase levels of fatigue at specific points of the year and affect engagement with learning at key points such as the end of the autumn and summer terms. The shortest breaks are seen to have little effect in addressing levels of fatigue and wellbeing with two weeks being seen as more beneficial than one. There are rises in disruptive behaviour as fatigue increases.

2.1. Consultation

A Welsh Government [consultation](#) on proposals ran between November 2023 and February 2024. The Welsh Government stated that changes to the school year would support learners and the education workforce in terms of addressing disadvantage, supporting learning and well-being, and reflecting how people live and work now. The proposals include:

- Terms of more equal length;
- The redistribution of break periods; and
- A reduction in the length of the summer break.

There would be no change to the overall number of teaching days or to the overall number of school breaks, and the summer break will not be reduced to fewer than four weeks. The consultation [received over 16,000 responses](#).

2.2. The proposals

The consultation set out three core proposals:

- Option 1: To maintain the status quo;
- Option 2: A five-week summer break, a two-week break in the autumn, and the flexibility to decouple the Easter end-of-term break from the Easter festival;

- Option 3: Building on from Option 2 , a four-week summer; a two-week break in May, and arrange for AS, A-level and GCSE results to issue on the same day.

In announcing that the reforms would not be implemented in this Senedd term, the Cabinet Secretary for Education said:

Over the remainder of this Senedd term, I intend to continue exploring the proposals set out in our second option in the consultation: a five-week summer, a two-week break in the autumn, and the flexibility to decouple the Easter end-of-term break from the Easter festival. However, getting reform right means ensuring it is properly planned out and has the time and space to succeed. I want to take this time to discuss with children and young people, parents, the workforce and other partners both what these changes might mean and when would be the right time for them. No final decisions will be taken in this Senedd term, as I feel strongly that we need to remain focused on our existing and ambitious programme of reform over this period, and I am acutely aware we are already asking a lot of teachers and schools.

3. Response from tourism and agriculture and education unions

In a [joint open letter](#) (January 2024) to Jeremy Miles, then Minister for Education and Welsh Language, teaching and school staff unions, farming unions and tourism bodies called upon the Welsh Government to withdraw its proposals to reform the school year. They argued:

- The educational reasons that the Welsh Government give for the reforms are not substantiated by research.
- The proposed change to the summer break will lead to some visitor attractions closing and jobs being lost. Many attractions take over 45% of their entire annual income in the current summer holidays.
- The tourism industry employs many school- aged young people during the summer break period.
- Many farming businesses that have diversified into the tourism sector benefit from a six-week peak season where the weather is more favourable.

The proposal that the summer break could be reduced by one week, means that schools would be open during the Royal Welsh Show. The Royal Welsh Agricultural Society said that it is 'strongly opposed' to the proposals which would mean that schools would be open during the Royal Welsh Show. They estimate this would cost them at least £1m in lost income.

4. Other countries

The European Education and Culture Executive Agency report, the [Organisation of School Time in Europe 2023/24](#), provides information on the the timing and length of school holidays. Across Europe, there are five main periods of school holidays: autumn; Christmas and New Year; winter/carnival; spring/Easter; and summer. The school year generally finishes between the end of May and the second half of July. The length of the summer holidays varies significantly between countries: from 6 weeks in some areas of Germany to between 11 and 14 weeks in Italy and Portugal.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.