



ANALYSIS OF THE 2024-2025 PROPOSED HCPS CALENDAR SURVEY RESULTS

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FINAL RESEARCH REPORT

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Table of Contents

- Acknowledgement 2
- Table of Contents..... 3
- Introduction..... 4
- Methodology..... 4
- Key Findings..... 5
 - Professional Development and Planning..... 5
 - School Start and End..... 6
 - Holidays and Time Off..... 7
 - Consistency and Transparency 8
 - Virtual Options..... 9
- Limitations and Considerations 10
 - Enhancing Data Integrity: Authentication Measures for Valid and Confidential Parental Feedback 10

Introduction

Harford County Public Schools (HCPS), as a part of its ongoing effort to include parent, teacher, and community feedback to inform its decisions, has developed and launched a survey to seek input and guidance in establishing its school calendar for the 2024-2025 school year.

The HCPS Department of Research and Program Evaluation created a [Data Dashboard](#) to analyze the responses to the survey's closed-ended questions and partnered with an external research group, Hanover Research, to analyze the responses to the survey's open-ended question at specific intervals throughout its administration. These comments sought notes or feedback regarding perceptions of the potential calendar options. To address the district's needs, a qualitative analysis was performed on a randomized sample of the open-ended responses and provided a set of key findings. The generated key findings can assist district leaders and the Board of Education (BOE) in making informed decisions regarding the development of the 2024-2025 school year calendar.

This report primarily centers on the examination of open-ended questions or comments provided by survey respondents. To access the analysis of closed-ended questions from the survey, click [here](#) to view it on the Data Dashboard.

Methodology

This report provides a digestible summary of responses to the survey's open-ended question. Each survey respondent was asked the following open-ended prompt:

- **If you have additional notes or feedback, please utilize this space. Your comments may be shared publicly. Please refrain from personal attacks or inappropriate language.**

Due to the accelerated timeline and the volume of data in Phase 1, a sample (10%) of responses was taken to analyze and distill key findings for the open-ended question. Phase 1 of the analysis covers survey responses up through October 15, 2023, while Phase 2 includes responses from October 16, 2023, through November 18, 2023. Due to a low number of responses during Phase 2, a random sample was not taken. **Before analyzing the open-ended responses, blank, irrelevant, or repeated entries were removed during data cleaning. Inappropriate or redundant answers, submitted multiple times by an individual (e.g., based on survey start/completion time, Artificial Intelligence (AI)/chatbot-generated responses), were also eliminated.** This was done to focus on responses that provide meaningful data and appropriately address the survey question. "Chatbot-generated responses" are messages or answers created by a computer program called a chatbot. This program simulates conversation with humans using predefined algorithms or AI. In surveys or data analysis, it means responses that are automated and not from human participants but generated by a chatbot or similar automated system.

Utilizing a random sample of 10% of responses provides a substantial sample for delivering the Phase 1 information requested. It's important to highlight that the analysis aimed to deepen the understanding of the specific question rather than establish statistical significance or generalizable conclusions. The top key themes were identified by **extracting relevant content from cleaned responses. Both human and AI tools were employed to develop themes and key findings.** The figure below illustrates the total survey responses, the total cleaned survey responses, and the total coding sample for both phases of the analysis.

Figure 1: Total Number of Survey Responses, Cleaned Responses, and Coding Sample (Phase 1 and Phase 2)

PHASE	QUESTION	TOTAL SURVEY RESPONSES	TOTAL CLEANED OPEN-ENDED COMMENTS	TOTAL CLEANED RESPONSES IN SAMPLE (10%*)
1	If you have additional notes or feedback, please utilize this space.	20,637	1,678	168*
2	If you have additional notes or feedback, please utilize this space.	552	98	98

Note: The Total Survey Responses was 21,189. The total number of **comments** received was 2,826. The Total Survey Responses is the number of raw survey entries. Cleaned Survey Responses is the number of cleaned, open-ended responses only. For example, in Phase 2, the 552 number includes blank open-ended responses, while the "Cleaned Survey Responses" reflects the data cleaning process of removing blanks, N/A open-ended comments/responses, etc...

Key Themes - Phase 1 Analysis with Phase 2 Updates

Responses from both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the analysis reveal themes and findings concerning perceptions and suggestions for the 2024-2025 school calendar. Updates and additions were made to the initially identified themes from Phase 1, incorporating insights from Phase 2 responses.

Key Findings

Below are some of the key findings and themes that emerged from the analysis of the open-ended comments:

1. Respondents **emphasize the need for more preparation time before the school year begins**, with a preference for a minimum of five days. (Phase 1 and 2)
2. **Mixed opinions exist regarding the preference for starting the school calendar before or after Labor Day**, influenced by family needs, priorities, and support.
3. **Concerns are raised about the inclusion of diverse holidays in the calendar**, with several respondents (Phase 2) strongly advocating for retaining Jewish holidays.
4. **Consistency in the school calendar from year to year** is advocated by respondents. (Phase 1 and 2)
5. Some respondents recommend **utilizing virtual learning options or asynchronous time to minimize disruptions** to the school calendar and provide mental health breaks for staff and students

The ensuing section presents key findings organized under themes such *Professional Development and Planning, School Start and End Dates*. Excerpts of comments, presented verbatim, are included as sample quotes to illustrate the feedback received.

Professional Development and Planning

- Respondents **in both Phase 1 and 2 express a need for more preparation time before the start of the school year**, with a preference for at least five days. Survey respondents raise concerns that teachers do not have enough time to prepare classrooms and materials before the start of the school year. These respondents assert that three days is not sufficient time to include professional development, classroom preparation, lesson planning, and clerical work. Similarly, the current calendar omits critical work and preparation days for teachers, which some feel minimizes support for mental health/well-being and a balanced workload.
- Survey responses include various suggestions for **scheduling professional development days to prioritize and improve teacher workload, well-being, and retention**. Specifically, some participants argue for additional early dismissal days during the school year to allow for teacher planning rather than additional professional development time. Responses identify alternative options to schedule professional development days, including during the summer and longer breaks (i.e., Easter break).

Figure 2: Professional Development and Planning Sample Quotes (Phase 1 and Phase 2)

SAMPLE QUOTES	
Phase 1	<i>“Teachers need at least five days before the school year to prepare. Three days is not enough time to complete all tasks to be ready for students. More half days would improve teacher workload and morale.” – Teacher</i>
Phase 2	<i>“As a teacher, I would appreciate having the full 5 days of planning and PD (paid) prior to start of the first day of school. As a veteran teacher, I still use ALL of that time to get ready to help my students be successful.” – Teacher</i>
	<i>“Provide teachers with a week of teacher prep days at the start of the school year.” – Parent or Guardian</i>
Phase 2	<i>“Move the two PD days at the end of Winter break to before school opens; staff need 5 days to get ready for the year. Plus after 10 days off, it is nice to have 2 days to get back into the swing of things. Add more early dismissals. Elementary staff needs this time, especially at the end of each quarter.” – School-Based Staff Member</i>
	<i>“Professional development days are often placed just before a long weekend, prohibiting teachers from taking mid-year trips to see family, go on vacation, etc....While I understand that you wish to provide a lot of time to meet with colleagues and commence grading in preparation for the start of a new semester, teachers are humans too.” – Teacher</i>

School Start and End

- There are mixed opinions regarding whether the school calendar should start before or after Labor Day. Opinions vary based on family needs, priorities, and support.
- Respondents who argue for a pre-Labor Day start to the school year cite the difficulty for working parents to find childcare in the week before Labor Day. Across both Phase 1 and Phase 2, respondents also feel that a pre-Labor Day start benefits students' academic outcomes (i.e., continuity of learning) and assessment preparation (e.g., MCAP, AP). Some respondents in Phase 2 also mention that a pre-Labor Day aligns with students' athletic schedules and other nearby schools' schedules.
- Conversely, other respondents prefer a post-Labor Day start, citing reasons such as additional time for summer vacation that aligns better with traditional holiday schedules, parents' working schedules, and the schedules of other school locations. In Phase 2, some respondents also highlight the need for teachers, bus drivers, and other staff to have a full summer break as well as noting the discomfort of teaching and learning in hot August temperatures.

Figure 3: School Start and End Sample Quotes (Phase 1 and Phase 2)

	PRE-LABOR DAY SAMPLE QUOTES	POST-LABOR DAY SAMPLE QUOTES
Phase 1	<p><i>"I strongly support a pre-Labor Day start to school. There are barely any camps open the week before Labor Day, which makes finding childcare almost an impossible feat. We must consider working parents and not just those who prefer the extra week of vacation."</i> – Parent or Guardian</p>	<p><i>"Starting after Labor Day sets a better routine for the kids, especially the children in kindergarten and first grade. Starting school then having time off shortly after can disrupt routine and behavior."</i> – Parent or Guardian</p>
Phase 2	<p><i>"12 weeks of summer vacation is just too much. With summer slide and some kids still struggling with recovering academically from Covid I can't support a longer vacation."</i> – Parent or Guardian</p> <p><i>"I prefer a calendar that aligns with HCC and that gives as much instruction as possible before AP tests."</i> – Parent or Guardian</p> <p><i>"Please start before Labor Day. Most MCAP and AP exams are in May. The early start this year has helped tremendously."</i> – Teacher</p>	<p><i>"We should always start back after Labor Day...teachers and bus drivers need the summer break."</i> – School-Based Staff Member</p> <p><i>"The weather is hotter in late August than it is in June. Families take vacations in August and should not have to cut their summers short. Starting after Labor Day has worked for years."</i> – Community Member</p> <p><i>"It was too hot to go back in August."</i> – Student</p>

Holidays and Time Off

- **Many respondents express concerns related to the inclusion of diverse holidays in the calendar.** Many respondents advocate for the inclusion of Jewish and Muslim (e.g., Diwali) holidays and Juneteenth in the school calendar, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and respect for diverse cultures. Although a significant portion of respondents argue for the inclusion of Jewish holidays due to the presence of Jewish families in the community, some suggest their removal. Specifically, a few respondents propose removing all religious holidays and instead making them excused absences. This allows families to celebrate the holidays that are important to them rather than the typical Christian-centered calendar.

In Phase 2, several respondents strongly advocated for retaining Jewish holidays in the school calendar, emphasizing that their specific removal (and not the removal of all religious holidays) could send a negative message, particularly in the current climate of rising anti-Semitism.

- **Respondents feel the school should provide longer breaks or additional days off during the school year.** For example, comments advocate for a week-long fall break, a longer Christmas break, and a week-long spring break. Respondents believe these breaks help students and teachers feel recharged. Some suggest taking less time off during the summer or Christmas break to provide more frequent breaks throughout the year.

In Phase 2, respondents give further support for extending the spring break and shortening the winter break. This will alleviate some of the childcare challenges working parents experience during the lengthy winter break and will provide a necessary break in the spring school year. A longer spring break can also provide opportunities for students to visit colleges or to recharge during high-stakes testing periods.

- **Comments in both Phase 1 and Phase 2 indicate mixed opinions regarding early dismissal days.** Some argue for retaining these half days or adding more, as they are necessary for teacher planning, while others feel they are not helpful and can make it difficult for parents to find childcare.

Figure 4: Holidays and Time Off Sample Quotes (Phase 1 and Phase 2)

DIVERSE HOLIDAY SAMPLE QUOTES	
Phase 1	<i>“Currently we are off for Christian and Jewish holidays but no Islamic holidays or Hindu holidays. If HCPS gives time off for a religious holiday, then it should equal other religions. For the past two years Muslims had to miss out on Eid celebrations because they had to come to school for MCAP.” – Student</i>
Phase 2	<i>“Removing Jewish holidays is disrespectful. The only Christian holiday that was offered to be cut is a non-holiday. That speaks volumes of how the Board feels about those who are not Christian.” – School-Based Staff Member</i>
	<i>“Schools in the south are able to have a full week off during spring break for teachers and students. They also have two full weeks off during Christmas for teachers and students. They do not have the Jewish holidays included in their days off and therefore get out at a decent time at the end of 180 days. I think we can do the same.” – Teacher</i>
	<i>“With the rise of anti-Semitism, we need to keep the Jewish holidays.” – Community Member</i>
	<i>“Please have off on Federal Holidays and not religious holidays.” – Parent or Guardian</i>

WINTER BREAK SAMPLE QUOTES	
Phase 2	<p>"I would prefer to move the professional days after Christmas break to the Spring break (Easter) time. Students and teachers need some time to refresh in the spring, and students do not need to be away from school for so long at Christmas break." – Teacher</p>
	<p>"There is very little time off between Winter Break and the end of the year. A long weekend in April just isn't enough for rest and relaxation for teachers, students, or families. I would like to see less time off at winter and more time off in spring." – Parent or Guardian</p> <p>"The two-week winter break places a significant burden on caregivers and parents in that we must either arrange for quite a bit of childcare or we must take a rather large amount of time off of work all at once. It is much easier to spread that around a bit, and having those days off divided more evenly between Winter and Spring breaks is something that we already know how to do." – Parent or Guardian</p>

HALF-DAY SAMPLE QUOTES	
Phase 2	<p>"I feel that it's detrimental to have more early dismissal days, 5 full days prior to the start of the school year for planning and PD. The meetings should be at the beginning of the week; that way teachers will have uninterrupted planning time at the end of the week." – Teacher</p>
	<p>"Educators need half days, as planning time is cut short as is." – School-Based Staff Member</p> <p>"Elementary school needs half days for planning and to celebrate their school family with "House day" events that only take place on half days." – Parent and Guardian</p>

Consistency and Transparency

- Respondents in both Phase 1 and Phase 2 advocate for more consistency in the school calendar from year to year. Respondents suggest maintaining decisions for a pre-or post-Labor Day start for at least a few years at a time to help families make childcare and vacation plans accordingly. A few responses call for more transparency and communication from the school board around calendar decision-making.
- Some respondents suggest aligning the school calendar with common days off for working parents and daycare centers to facilitate easier childcare options.

Figure 5: Consistency and Transparency Sample Quotes (Phase 1 and Phase 2)

SAMPLE QUOTES	
Phase 1	<p>"Once we decide on the calendar, we should solidify a pre- or post-Labor Day start and lock that in for at least a few years at a time. The inconsistency is going to make some summers shorter followed by longer and that makes it hard for planning." – Teacher</p>
Phase 2	<p>"Please consider being consistent (as much as possible) with the calendar from year to year. It's hard to plan when you don't know if spring break is going to be 2 days or a full week. Or if you're going to have to take off from work the week before Labor Day because there's no school but also no camps for the kids." – Parent or Guardian</p> <p>"Keep the start date the same year after year so that families can plan accordingly." – Student</p>

Virtual Options

- Some respondents suggest leveraging virtual learning options or asynchronous time to reduce disruptions to the school calendar and provide mental health breaks for staff and students. Specifically, several comments raise the idea of utilizing virtual learning resources during inclement weather days (e.g., snow days) rather than taking the day off, which adds additional days to the school calendar. Virtual professional development days could also allow for flexibility and mental health breaks for staff. Notably, only one respondent from Phase 2 of the analysis mentioned virtual options.

Figure 6: Virtual Options Sample Quotes (Phase 1 and Phase 2)

SAMPLE QUOTES	
Phase 1	<p>“<i>[Provide] asynchronous days so teachers can have more uninterrupted time for planning and data entry.</i>” - Teacher</p> <p>“<i>[Provide] virtual learning for inclement weather days.</i>” - Parent or Guardian</p>
Phase 2	<p>“<i>It would be great to have virtual meetings/PDs (for some of them) and ALL virtual snow days, whether it's synchronous or asynchronous days.</i>” - Teacher</p>

Limitations and Considerations

Enhancing Data Integrity: Authentication Measures for Valid and Confidential Parental Feedback

In the **2024-2025 Proposed HCPS Calendar** Survey and in previous survey initiatives, HCPS, along with many school districts in Maryland and across the nation, chose **not to require authentication** from parents to allow for anonymous feedback. While this approach preserves respondent anonymity, it introduces the possibility of non-HCPS parents or unauthorized individuals completing the survey, potentially compromising its results.

For all future surveys and data collection efforts aimed at obtaining parental feedback, the HCPS Department of Research and Program Evaluation will implement a requirement for authentication, such as Student Identifications (IDs), from participating parents and community members. Survey results and reports will exclusively include responses from participants who provide these verifiable details. This measure is intended to **prevent duplicate submissions** and **ensure the validity and accuracy of survey results**. It's crucial to note that Student IDs will solely be used for **validation purposes**. Responses provided by parents are **confidential** and **reported anonymously**.