January 15, 2015

Board Member:

RE: PROPOSED SCHOOL CALENDAR FOR 2016-2017

In order to maximize the value of each instructional day, the District has been investigating the impact of its traditional school calendar. Specifically, the District has been considering the merits of a school calendar under which the first semester ends prior to the start of winter break and the school year ends prior to Memorial Day. This calendar model, henceforth referred to as a collegiate calendar, would represent a departure from the traditional school calendar under which the first semester ends in January, about two weeks after students return to school from winter break. If a collegiate calendar were adopted, it would not begin until the 2016-2017 school year.

Background Information

According to the school code, each public school district in the State of Illinois must annually prepare a school calendar consisting of a minimum of 185 days to ensure a minimum of 176 days of attendance. Districts have the discretion to schedule proposed attendance days in the event of emergencies, such as a snow day. Some districts do not exceed the requirement of 176 days of student attendance through the practice of not requiring students or staff members to attend school during the scheduled emergency days. If the available emergency days are not needed, then students do not attend school. As a result of this allowance, the actual number of days of attendance can vary across districts. District 211 has always scheduled the maximum number of 181 days of student attendance, and while certain days are designated as available emergency days, if no emergencies arise, students and staff members are in attendance and all possible days are used for instruction. Through this practice, the District has been able to provide the maximum number of days of instruction allowable throughout its history.

The District’s current school calendar model is documented in archives that date back at least to 1959. According to longstanding community members, the traditional school calendar currently in place today has been in use even longer than those documented 56 years. Throughout the calendar’s existence, the District has taken direct steps to schedule key components of the school year in close alignment with the elementary school districts that share boundaries with District 211. The scheduling of both winter and spring breaks have been coordinated with District 15 and District 54, however, the start and end dates to the school year have not always been identical. Examples of the differences are provided as follows for the current school year as well as the coming school year.
As the District 211 leaders investigated the viability of a collegiate school calendar, we maintained regular and close communication with the leaders of District 15 and District 54. Leaders from all three districts recognize the importance of continuing communication about the school calendar and its potential impact on families.

**Consultation with Districts Who Have Adopted a Collegiate Calendar**

In order to consider the impact of making a change to a collegiate calendar, District leaders contacted multiple other school districts within the suburban area that have adopted a collegiate calendar to learn about the other districts’ experiences with the model. The districts that were polled have been using the collegiate model between one and 15 years. Collectively, the districts expressed common reasons for and benefits from the adoption of a collegiate calendar:

- Creates greater efficiency of the instructional days prior to final exams for first semester
- Increases the amount of instruction prior to yearly high stakes state testing and Advanced Placement tests
- Mirrors a college-like experience for students within the schedule
- Provides a true “break” for students and staff during the two weeks of winter break

Each district that has previously adopted the collegiate calendar shared positive feedback about the impact of the collegiate calendar model saying that students have overwhelmingly embraced the change. One student was quoted as saying that the collegiate model “makes me take the two weeks before winter break seriously.”

**Survey of District 211 Parents, Students and Staff Members**

In order to fully understand the interests of our primary constituents, the District surveyed our parents, students, and staff members to gather input from each group about factors that should be considered when planning the school calendar. In addition to parents of current District 211 students, the parent group surveyed also included those parents of students who will be incoming freshmen in the class of 2019 during the upcoming school year. The surveys were available online from December 12, 2014 until January 5, 2015. The rate of response to the survey was excellent and 5,225 individuals responded. Approximately one third of the families that responded to the survey will have children in both the high school and elementary school districts in the 2016-2017 school year, which would be the initial year of adoption.

Across all three groups taking the survey, the responses were strongly and consistently in favor of adopting the collegiate calendar in Township High School District 211. The chart below indicates the percentages of individuals who prefer the collegiate calendar over the traditional calendar.
In addition to the single question of which calendar model they prefer, survey items also asked respondents to rate the importance of certain other issues of potential impact. The percentages of those who found particular issues to be important or very important in our consideration are summarized in the following chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Important or Very Important</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complete first semester (including finals) before winter break</td>
<td>66% 72% 71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce re-teaching of prior course content after winter break</td>
<td>60% 48% 70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide additional instruction prior to Advanced Placement exams</td>
<td>73% 85% 62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow students to rejuvenate over winter break</td>
<td>69% 87% 69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Align school calendars between D15, D54, and D211</td>
<td>50% 47% 67%</td>
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The survey also sought written comments to learn more about the concerns that our constituents might have surrounding the shift to a collegiate calendar. Most of the concerns fall into one of the following four categories:

- Alignment of school calendars of District 15, District 54, and District 211
- Scheduling of family vacations
- Impact of a collegiate calendar on athletics
- Impact of a collegiate calendar on current or traditional, familiar teaching practices

Aligning the school calendars between districts was noted by multiple respondents as a high priority. All three District leaders acknowledge that differences in the start and end dates of the school calendar may have ramifications among the families we serve. Additional concerns included how the districts would arrange and accommodate the participation of a number of eighth grade students who participate in the high school math courses. District 211’s ongoing articulation with District 15 and District 54 will be used to resolve these concerns. The communication with other high school districts who have adopted the collegiate calendar have provided assurance that continuing communication and consultation among the districts will help resolve questions that arise in the year of adoption.

Some respondents expressed opinions that the shift of the summer vacation to encompass more of June and less of August would have an impact in as much as the weather in June is not as summer-like as the weather in August. Some parents wondered about conflicts between the collegiate school calendar and other community activities that are aligned to a traditional
summer schedule, such as various athletic clubs and private educational experiences. These concerns were also reported by the other high school districts using the collegiate calendar and the districts reported that within a short period, families adjusted to the calendars and this issue is not problematic.

Several statements expressed that the adoption of a collegiate calendar would impact student athletics. Student athletes are governed by the Illinois High School Athletic Association (IHSA). The IHSA rules will continue to dictate the seasonal practice guidelines imposed on sports teams, regardless of the school calendar model. For example, the spring sports schedule will not begin earlier than it has in the past if the District were to adopt a collegiate calendar. The dates of each athletic season are determined by the IHSA. Districts already using a collegiate calendar report that teams with fall practices made adjustments to accommodate less practice time prior to the start of the school year in relation to the start of the fall sports season. Some spring sports already extend their tournament time beyond the end of the traditional school calendar and this adjustment would continue under a collegiate calendar. Other high schools using a collegiate calendar do not report any negative outcomes for their athletic teams due to the adoption of the collegiate school calendar.

Teacher routines and practices would require adjustment under a collegiate calendar. Some teachers have become accustomed to using winter break as a time to grade student work. Such timelines would no longer exist. Other teachers have typically assigned student work to be completed during winter break. This practice would be eliminated given that the first semester, including final exams, would be completed before students are dismissed for break. Some Advanced Placement teachers have used the weeks after the Advanced Placement exams to assign capstone projects. This time would largely be eliminated in favor of more direct instructional time prior to the exams. Districts currently employing the collegiate calendar report that teachers have made a smooth transition to the collegiate model and that they now make greater efficiency of the instructional days within a semester.

Overall, the survey respondents indicated a strong preference for the collegiate calendar over the traditional school calendar. The sampling of written responses below captures the ideas and expressions in favor of adopting the collegiate calendar.

Written statements from students included the following comments:

- “You should have done this before I graduated. I think it makes perfect sense.”
- “This is the best idea…Students are stressed over winter break with homework so it truly isn’t a break.”

Written statements from staff members included the following comments:

- “This type of calendar is long overdue. There is no good reason, not a single one, to have 1st semester finals ending after winter break. The days reviewing and re-teaching are not spent for any good purpose.”
- “This is long overdue. Time to move forward with the collegiate calendar.”
- “I have two students in (another district) that currently participate in the collegiate model. It’s outstanding.”
- “We have to prioritize academics. This move is the best idea possible for our kids.”
“Although I would like to keep the calendar the same so I can enjoy the warmer weather during the summer, the truth is, I feel that a collegiate calendar is more beneficial to the students.”

Written statements from parents included the following comments:

- “Start this fall rather than wait another year.”
- “It is important for students to enjoy the winter break without the pressure of exams in January. The new collegiate calendar would help them enjoy their time off while maximizing the results on the exams.”
- "Wish you had done this sooner so my kids could have benefitted."
- “Sooner the better.”
- “My past (now in college) and current high school students both think the collegiate calendar makes sense.”

Recommended School Calendar for 2016-2017

The proposed school calendar which adopts the collegiate calendar model for 2016-2017 is included for your consideration and is labeled as Item A. The proposed calendar has a start date of August 11, 2016 for the teacher institute day. A second teacher institute day will be held on August 12, 2016 and the first day of student attendance will be Monday, August 15, 2016.

Within the proposed 2016-2017 calendar, both semesters are of equal length. In order to accomplish this, the start of the school year has been moved earlier in August compared to the start of school within the traditional calendar. This design provides the opportunity to schedule the entire first semester prior to the start of winter break, which begins at the end of the last day of the first semester on December 23. Final examinations will occur on the last three days of the first semester, December 21-23. The second semester will begin on January 9, 2017 with a teacher institute day. Students will return from winter break on January 10. Final examinations for the second semester will take place May 24-26. The school year will end at the end of the day on May 26, which leads directly into the Memorial Day holiday weekend.

A proposed 2017-2018 school calendar is provided as Item B. This calendar may be useful to envision the longer term application of the collegiate calendar model.

The proposed calendars have been shared with the superintendents of District 15, District 54, District 214, District 220, and NSSEO and with the President of Harper College. Upon adoption of the proposed calendar during the 2016-2017 school year, the school calendars among these neighboring districts will differ. Leaders of all these organizations will remain in contact and open dialogue about matters of the school calendar and will review information during the joint district articulation meetings.

Suggested Motion:
That the school calendar for 2016-2017 be approved as presented.

Daniel E. Cates
Superintendent