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Research exploring reform of the school year

Executive Summary

1. The Welsh Government is currently introducing reforms to the curriculum in Wales, along with the delivery of targeted policies to improve the quality of education and increase parent and community involvement. The way the school calendar is structured is seen by Welsh Government to have the potential to support and enable these reforms. Similarly, it is a Welsh Government priority to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged learners. Every policy considered by the Welsh Government is seen through a lens of whether it helps tackle the impact of poverty on educational attainment.
2. This executive summary presents the findings from research exploring the experiences and perception of learners, their families and school practitioners of the current school calendar. The findings will support Welsh Government to make decisions about the school year and ensure the provision of a school calendar that can best help mitigate the impacts of disadvantage, narrow educational inequalities, support learner and staff wellbeing and align with contemporary patterns of family life and employment.
3. The current school (or academic) year structure in Wales:
 - begins in early September and ends in mid-July.
 - provides 190 school days, each approximately 6.5 hours long.

- is divided into three terms of varying lengths and with a one-week break roughly in the middle of each term.

Figure 1.1: Current school year structure in Wales

Term 1	1	Term 1	2	Term 2	1	Term 2	2	Term 3	1	Term 3	6
Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug

Methodology

4. The research followed a mixed-method sequential approach to gather feedback on four key areas:
 - progression and attainment
 - fatigue and wellbeing
 - learner behaviour
 - primary to secondary school transition.
5. Qualitative fieldwork with stakeholders and a desk review of existing data sets was carried out in three phases.
6. 15 scoping interviews were carried out with a representative group of key stakeholders.
7. A number of key datasets were reviewed, including pupil census data, learner and staff absence data, exclusion and attainment data.:
8. The main fieldwork phase focus groups were stratified to cover factors including learner age, learner and family socioeconomic status, rural/urban context, ALN status of learners, and language medium of learners and language medium of their school. Fieldwork included:
 - Ten class focus groups of learners across eight schools.
 - A questionnaire shared with members of the Welsh Youth Parliament.
 - 11 focus groups with parents of learners in Wales
 - 28 focus groups with school practitioners
9. Thematic analysis was carried out noting the context of each data point without compromising the anonymity of any individual participant. More

detailed information on the methodology is available in section 2 of the report.

Findings

Progression and attainment

10. In the view of practitioners, parents and learners, the 6-week break causes learning loss for all learners. There is minimal lasting effect of this loss with recovery reported to happen soon after the start of the autumn term. Parents viewed catchup time as 'lost' from a learning perspective. Similarly, the last weeks of term are viewed as a time of winding down where little meaningful learning is done.
11. Most teaching content is covered in the autumn term, on the grounds that it is consistently the longest. This is noticeable to learners themselves who said that it increased levels of fatigue. Other times learners said to be difficult for learning are the end of all terms and over the summer term as warm weather and lighter evenings affect sleep and concentration in class. From the perspective of Senior Leadership Teams (SLT) in secondary schools, the 6-week summer is crucial to allow a break for learners in exam years (year 10+) and thus maintain learners' rate of progress throughout the year.
12. Staff and parents highlighted that learners with additional learning needs (ALN) are the most affected by the current school calendar. Learning loss during breaks for learners with ALN is more noticeable to staff and parents in mainstream settings than is the case for learners who do not have ALN. Disruption to routines can be more impactful to learners with ALN, and parents noted there is more time needed for attainment to rebound compared to their peers. However, staff in all school types claimed to expect and be prepared for the higher levels of learning loss. They highlighted that the quality of support and nature of specific ALN are more important factors in addressing the learning loss than the school calendar.
13. Another specific group more affected in terms of progression and attainment are those from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Parents said their children struggled to maintain learning momentum during

the long autumn term. Similarly, parents of learners from more deprived backgrounds reported that they are less likely to access dedicated holiday clubs or other enrichment activities. This was considered the case for all holiday periods but particularly during the summer break.

14. From a staff perspective, there is a loss of language skills for all who learn in a different language to that spoken at home. This is seen as similar to the learning loss of other skills and was not highlighted as an area of specific concern.
15. Some staff and SLT in secondary schools felt the inconsistency of Spring and Summer term lengths had a particular impact on revision and the feeling of preparedness for exams. Most learners reported that they prefer to revise and prepare for exams in school.
16. Parents in the lower socioeconomic group with children in Welsh-medium primary schools stressed the importance of the extended break as it allowed “kids to be kids” and have time away from the classroom.

Wellbeing and fatigue

17. There was an obvious connection for learners, staff, and parents between the school calendar and fatigue. Learner fatigue is widely reported at the end of every term. Teachers in secondary schools and special schools reported fatigue having a significant effect around six weeks into the school term. At this point in the Autumn term, fatigue is compounded by the intensity of new material, and the onset of winter viruses. This was considered particularly notable for neurodiverse learners and those who travel longer distances to school.
18. There was widespread concern amongst staff and parents for disadvantaged learners. For SLT staff in secondary and primary schools, there is no case that a six-week summer break supports learner wellbeing for these learners. Sleep routines can also be affected over the summer due to a lack of structure, with a connection being made between sleep and wellbeing. The wellbeing of learners with ALN can be affected due to disruption in routines.
19. All staff reported that the current structure of the school year is a reason for fatigue amongst practitioners with a link to the level of fatigue in learners.

The summer break was reported by some teachers to be the only real chance staff have to stop working, given that half terms and parts of the two-week breaks at Christmas and Easter are commonly taken up by marking and other admin.

20. Boredom amongst learners was a concern amongst parents who stated they cannot afford to provide meaningful activities for their children over holidays. For parents with children with ALN it was felt that there are too few opportunities outside of school for their children to access. For parents who speak Welsh, or have children in Welsh medium schools, there is a disparity between the fewer number of activities available in Welsh medium compared to those offered in English. Parents highlighted that there is reduced social interaction for all learners during the summer break. The start of autumn term was seen as a positive, increasing socialisation with peers.
21. Parents reported that the wellbeing of their children was affected by their own feelings of stress and a common cause of stress is the difficulty of arranging parental leave from work during school breaks.
22. Although not attributed to the school calendar itself, all parents noted more illnesses in learners in the lead up to the Christmas break. There was widespread acceptance amongst all staff that the beginning of any holiday period will see them suffer with an illness. During longer half terms there is increased instances of staff illness during term time.
23. The school calendar can affect the pay of some staff. Due to differences in contracts, some teaching assistants and other support staff do not get paid during long breaks. Teachers stated that they would be in favour of consistent term dates across Wales so that breaks align between school staff and any school-aged children they may have in different schools. However, it can be difficult for staff when training days or school holidays do not align across Wales or with England.
24. Attendance issues not related to illness were noted by all parents to be highest just before Christmas and during the latter end of the summer term. Factors causing this are said to be the cost of holidays, and perceived lower

value of learning during these weeks. Higher levels of fatigue visible in learners also influences parents to keep their children off school.

25. The summer break is widely seen by SLT and teachers as a vital benefit to drive recruitment into the education sector. SLT and teachers expressed that in practice the frequent breaks are not in practice holidays and are used by teachers for catching up with admin. The impact of this on the wellbeing of NQTs was not seen by existing staff to be different from the impact it has on the wellbeing of other staff members. However, according to members of SLT it is a factor in the number of staff who leave the profession early and can play a negative role in the retention of NQTs.

Learner behaviour

26. As fatigue increases, incidences of disruptive behaviour also increase, (regardless of the time of year) according to staff in all schools. In most instances teachers reported that learner behaviour is said to be poor in September and improved after every other break. Teaching staff reported that some learners struggle with behaviour in the lead up to breaks, particularly noticeable in, but not exclusive to, learners from more economically disadvantaged groups. There do not appear to be any noticeable behaviour issues over the summer break; though this can also be attributed to a decrease in opportunities to record incidents or flag safeguarding issues. Youth workers reported that behaviour issues tend to spike in October and March.
27. Factors contributing to behaviour issues include disruption to routines according to staff and parents, fatigue according to parents and learners, boredom according to parents, quality of homelife according to staff and weather and seasons according to staff and learners.

Primary to secondary school transitions

28. Teaching staff have reported there is little observed effect of school calendar on the transition from primary to secondary school. The summer break is viewed by staff as a well-defined break between major stages of education for learners. Some links were made between the long summer break and learner anxiety about the transition to secondary school. Learners with ALN

were seen as particularly at risk due to the combination of anxiety and challenges around transition, in addition to the other challenges the summer break poses for learners with ALN.

Conclusion

29. The research has highlighted that in the experiences and perceptions of learners, parents, and school practitioners the school calendar does have an important role in learner and staff wellbeing. Behaviour, and learner attainment and progression are felt to be negatively impacted. Inconsistent term lengths increase levels of fatigue at specific points of the year and affect the engagement with learning at key points such as the end of the autumn and summer terms. It was felt that all learners benefit, in terms of wellbeing, attainment and progression, from the support offered by school in general, with the most benefit seen in learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, and learners with ALN. The 6-week summer break highlights the inequitable access to activities and support during holiday times, with those in lower income families or with ALN typically disadvantaged. Short term learning loss is linked to the long summer break more than any other break. 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. These findings suggest that alterations to the school calendar could improve levels of wellbeing and fatigue in learners and staff, help tackle disadvantage, and support learner attainment and progression.

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Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/reform-school-year-perceptions-and-experiences-current-school-calendar>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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