



Local Government Association

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guide to the standard school year spring 2002



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- A large, stylized pink graphic in the top left corner, resembling a thick, hand-drawn letter 'A' or a series of overlapping curved lines.
- The Independent Commission set up by the LGA is proposing a standard school year. This involves treating each of the existing six half terms in the school year as standardised, separate units; each of these terms would be of the same consistent length (seven weeks plus in the autumn and six weeks in the spring and summer) from year-to-year. From 2004, the first term of the year would start in late August with the October holiday extended from one week to two.
 - In the very few years when Easter falls particularly early or late, Good Friday and Easter Monday – still taken as holidays – would fall within term time. Individual schools and LEAs would be free to depart from the proposed pattern by up to five days, especially if they wanted to make special arrangements for important religious days.

Why was the Commission set up?

A number of LEAs had gone out to consultation on changes to the school year in their area and received strong advice from parents, teachers and others that, because so many pupils now cross LEA boundaries to go to school, only a national scheme would command general assent.

Why are changes needed?

Pupils complain that the syllabus is often not fully covered when very short terms occur, especially in the spring and early summer. Pupils deserve a consistent and predictable framework within which the national curriculum can be delivered and assessed. A number of experiments have

been running for over 10 years now involving school years, of either five or six terms, of standardised and consistent lengths. All these schemes, which involve shorter, 'bite-sized' terms have raised standards and gained local support.

Any other advantages for teachers and pupils?

The Commission identified the period running up to Christmas as one of particular stress in which there is significantly greater sickness and absence by pupils and teachers. The two-week holiday in October is designed to relieve this stress.

Any longer-term advantages?

There are currently discussions in progress which could allow pupils to apply to college and university after their examination results are known. This would mean moving the exams some weeks earlier, incidentally, avoiding the English hay fever season which currently affects up to 2 million pupils. The Commission's proposals make provision for this.

Will the summer holiday be shorter?

There are currently no nationwide statistics on its precise length in different schools and LEAs. The Commission's advice was that the summer holiday currently varies between just over six weeks and just over five weeks – except in five-term year schools, where it is four weeks. So in some schools, the summer holiday will be cut by a few days. The Commission found neither parents nor teachers

to be unanimous on the length of the summer holiday. It believes its recommendation of at least five weeks and one day fairly represents the results of consultation.

Why can't each term be of exactly the same length?

They can, in a five-term year. But the Commission felt this option would be too disruptive to the traditional pattern in the country as a whole. The six-term year creates terms of more consistent and equal lengths from one year to the next.

Won't term six be wasted?

The Commission recommended that term six (in June and July) could be used, amongst other things, for facilitating better transition and maintaining motivation and progress between different phases of education, especially in the transition between primary and secondary schools. It could also be used for improved careers advice on vocational options at age 14 and after GCSE for improved transfer to colleges and sixth forms. A number of secondary schools are already successful in using this period after assessment or public examinations, as the beginning of a new school year.

How do the flexibility days work?

The Commission recommended that particular schools or whole LEAs should feel free to vary the pattern of teaching days by up to five days – whether this variation involved five

days allocated for teaching taken as holidays, or five days allocated for holidays used as teaching days. But, the flexibility it now recommends, should be constrained by certain principles:

- the over-riding criterion for departing from the recommended pattern should be the need to celebrate days important to particular faiths; a lesser, though permissible criterion could be the need to make arrangements for professional development (see below); or to adjust the length of the summer holiday;
- if 'teaching days' are allocated for any other purpose – whether as a holiday day, a professional development day, or for some other reason – the school governors or the LEA, in considering the matter, should weigh the need for re-allocation against the disruption to curriculum flow;
- when teaching days are re-allocated as holiday days, extra teaching days should be designated in the autumn and the spring to preserve teaching time, and not added on to the end of the summer term;
- when holiday days are re-allocated as teaching days, designation of new holiday days should seek, as far as possible, to preserve the pattern of standardised term lengths.

What consultation has taken place?

The Commission received oral and written evidence for its first report in September 2000 from representatives of all

stakeholders – teachers, employers, schools, parents and tourism bodies. It also conducted a MORI poll and took evidence from young people in the 'Youth Parliament'. During 2001, further consultations took place with parents, schools and teachers during which some 2,700 responses were received; over 60 per cent of the responses supported the Commission's proposals.

Won't legislation be needed for the school year to begin in August?

Ministers say not. LEAs and self-governing schools can decide for themselves whether the school year begins in August or September.

Why is the government not putting forward these proposals?

For the past century, school terms and holidays have been set by LEAs for their own schools and by school governors for 'voluntary' (usually religious) and, more recently, for 'foundation' (formerly 'grant maintained') schools. The government does not wish to change these arrangements. The government will, however, make an announcement in early May which could modify current arrangements for the professional development days in the teacher's contract. For this reason the LGA is now asking for details of terms and holidays for 2003–4 by 30 June 2002 and not 30 April 2002 as previously requested, so that LEAs and schools can have regard to government advice on this issue.

What happens next?

The Commission has published detailed proposals for the school year 2003–4 and draft proposals for 2004–5 and 2005–6. **The LGA is asking LEAs and school governors to discuss them and set terms and holidays for 2003–4 by 30 June 2002.** Commission members have spoken to one LEA select committee. They would be happy to respond to other invitations. In some areas, LEAs and schools co-operate regionally to set terms and holidays; in others they co-operate within the LEA area. In most areas, voluntary and foundation schools follow the same pattern as LEAs. The LGA hopes this co-operation will continue.

A summary of the Commission's first report *The rhythms of schooling*, along with the response to consultations and the detailed recommendations published in December 2001, can be found by accessing the hot-links menu on our website homepage at www.lga.gov.uk