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Critics question proposed Howard school calendar

By Sara Toth, stoth@tribune.com

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A proposed change in next year's Howard County academic calendar has some teachers and parents riled, and they came to the Board of Education Thursday, Jan. 9 to criticize the plan. advertisement

Last month, Howard County Public School System central office staff put forth Superintendent Renee Foose's proposed 2014-15 calendar. For the first time in years, the proposal eliminates two half-days before Thanksgiving break and moves fall parent-teacher conferences to earlier that month. As a result, there would be only 13 instructional days in November, and only one full, five-day week.

That's not what the committee of more than three dozen administrators, teachers and a community members had recommended, said teacher and calendar committee member Bernadette Bechta.

In Foose's proposal, students would have the Monday and Tuesday of the first two weeks of November off — the first two for professional development and Election Day, and the second week for full-day parent-teacher conferences. They would have the Wednesday before Thanksgiving off, as has historically been the case, but instead of two half-days on that Monday and Tuesday before Thanksgiving, they would be in school the entire day.

The committee's proposal has students off school the first Monday and Tuesday in November as well, but keeps parent-teacher conferences on two half-days before Thanksgiving break.

Bechta tried to deliver an independent committee report during the appointment slot in the agenda for the Howard County Education Association, but was shut down by Board Chairwoman Ellen Giles because a public hearing was scheduled for the same evening on the same topic.

Four teachers yielded their three-minute allotment to Bechta so she could deliver her report, outlining the importance of half-days to teachers and the flexibility those conference days offer parents.

Bechta said she found it "bothersome" that Foose and her cabinet did not include the committee's recommendations in the proposal. Foose said the priorities in her proposal and those of the committee were "of course" the same, and deferred further questions to Caryn Lasser, the system's coordinator of strategic planning and chair of the committee.

"Everyone was looking at what was best for the students," Lasser said. "Our priorities were to meet the instructional needs of our students. That is at the center of the academic calendar."

Lasser said the committee was an advisory one, and she had made it clear to committee members that there was "no guarantee" that there would not be differences between their recommendations and Foose's.

A full or half day off of school can make it "miserably difficult" for parents to find child care for their

students, said Judy George, and if a full day of conferences means those meetings can't take place at night, that's another problem.

"I want you to understand we really need that later time," she said. "I can't afford to take time off in the middle of the day. ... I want you to know how difficult some of these proposals are on normal people."

Giles said that even with conferences during the day, parents could still meet with teachers during the evening, but teachers in the audience said that would be unlikely. Besides, Bechta said, half-days are crucial to teachers, who use the time to grade midterms.

A key factor in deciding to eliminate as many half-days from the schedule as possible, Lasser said, was absenteeism.

In 2012, 3,611 students were absent from the half-day of school on the Monday before Thanksgiving. The very next day, 5,405 students were absent — about 10 percent of the entire student population, Lasser said.

"We looked at the data," she said. "From the parents on the committee, we learned they were much more likely to send their kids on a full day. They would be less inclined to pull their kids out on a full day rather than a half-day."

Another factor, Lasser said, is the availability of pre-kindergarten and RECC programs, which can't be offered on half-days. Eliminating half-days means those programs could be offered more consistently.

The board votes on the proposed academic calendar Thursday, Jan. 23.