

Well, I wasn't going to get into this one. I prefer to stay above the fray on local issues, keeping my column national – even international – in scope. That's just the worldly kind of gal I am. (Did I say "worldly"? I meant "cowardly". Beaufort's a small town and I have to live here!) But so many people have urged me to address this subject, I almost feel it's my civic duty. Over the past few months, I've sparred with subversive cultural forces like poor grammar, celebrity rehab-abuse, and Britney Spears' wardrobe. Today, ladies and gentlemen, we focus the microscope closer to home to examine the much-disputed Beaufort County School Calendar issue.



First, full disclosure: I do have a dog in this fight. My daughter is a kindergartner at Lady's Island Elementary, where the currently endangered year-round calendar has been in use for several years.

I didn't expect to like this calendar. I remember feeling distinctly guilty, almost traitorous, as I walked Amelia into school that very first day, feigning cheerful enthusiasm. It was a steamy, sultry morning in mid-July – and it just didn't feel right. Poor kid. She didn't even know she was being gypped, cheated out of half her summer, that endless, meandering season of sloth that has long been the birthright of every American child. How was I supposed to enjoy the fact that my life would now improve drastically – that I could concentrate on my work again, that I could bid farewell to the Y kiddie pool, the sweltering park, and the Burger King playroom, that the phrase "Mom, I'm bored" might finally stop ringing in my ears – when my little girl was being robbed of her heritage?

I got over it fast. Amelia took to her new school immediately, came home inspired each afternoon, and still managed to force me into my bathing suit on a regular basis. Summer days are long, remember? On the year-round calendar, our children have a compelling reason to be mostly indoors during the hottest part of those long, long days – during the hottest weeks of that hot, hot season. This is just one of the many things I've grown to love about the year-round calendar.

But now that calendar, voted on and embraced by parents at 13 of Beaufort County's 28 schools, is in peril. Phillip McDaniel, our interim superintendent of schools, has curiously made it one of his top priorities to unite all the schools under one calendar before his short, temporary tenure is over.

According to McDaniel, a two-calendar system is too costly to the school district. After deciphering a bit of double-speak, we layfolk have come to understand that the district would save \$208,000 (not the \$548,000 originally reported) if all the schools embrace one calendar. While \$208,000 still sounds like a lot of money, it's relatively small potatoes – just a tiny fraction of the district's annual budget of \$147 million. About 1/10 of one percent, to be exact. Did I say small potatoes? More like small fries. I applaud fiscal responsibility, but when one considers all the waste that's occurred on the district's watch over the past few years – I'm thinking specifically of the expensive, embattled 'north area high school' project that many residents (and a few school board members) don't even support – one wonders why a beloved, successful innovation like the year-round calendar should suddenly fall victim to thrift.

Because that's exactly what's happening. Superintendent McDaniel declared last week that he supports the traditional calendar. He urged the school board to vote that way, telling them: "My suggestion is you bite the bullet and you'll be way ahead on all the issues." I'm not sure how "biting the bullet" on one issue that wasn't even an issue until McDaniel made it one

puts the school board “way ahead” on all of its other issues – the ones we all know and worry about – but perhaps I’m missing something. Is there some pressing reason – other than that 1/10 of one percent of the annual budget – that the schools must resume running on one calendar? And if so, why must it be the traditional calendar?

Ever since the one-calendar issue arose, a large number of parents and teachers have been fighting to keep the year-round calendar in place. They’ve written letters to the editor, attended school board meetings en masse, made their voices heard. There’s clearly a great deal of passionate support for the year-round calendar. But we’ve heard little (if any) from the supporters of the traditional calendar. Where are they? Why aren’t they speaking up?

The answer, of course, is that they don’t feel threatened like we year-rounders do. After all, they’re the “establishment” calendar. If anybody’s going anywhere, it’s the new calendar on the block. And let’s face it – in coastal South Carolina, “one calendar” means “traditional calendar.” Why? It all comes down to the high schools. They’re never going to put the high schools on the year-round calendar, because teenagers who go to school in the summer can’t have summer jobs. And when teenagers don’t have summer jobs, the summer tourism industry doesn’t have a cheap labor supply. A shameful misuse of our young people at the expense of their education? You didn’t hear me say that. Ours is a free market economy, and the teenagers want these low-paying jobs as much as the employers want to hire them. Until someone can prove that the year-round calendar is far superior to the traditional calendar (with test scores, naturally), the powers-that-be have no reason to mess with a good thing. And I’m not saying they should. I’m not arguing that all Beaufort County schools should use the year-round calendar. I’m just arguing that schools that want to – schools where the parents have chosen to – should continue to have that option, even if it does cost the district a whopping 1/10 of one percent of its annual budget.

To be fair, there are folks on the national scene who oppose year-round school for less cynical, more idealistic reasons than those mentioned above. At summermatters.com, they wax eloquent about the “different type of learning” that children experience in the summer, when they’re allowed to loll about and their minds to wander. There’s something to be said for that notion, certainly, but isn’t there such a thing as too much lolling and wandering? I remember being miserably bored, as a child, by the middle of every long, hot summer. On the current calendar, my daughter will have five full weeks to loll and wander this summer, not to mention three weeks in the fall and two weeks in the spring, which are actually much better lolling/wandering seasons, if you ask me.

Hey, I’m as nostalgic about summer as anyone; in fact, I’m nostalgic about pretty much everything. I’m not a fan of change for change’s sake. I believe that, in many facets of American life, our attempts to innovate, modernize and progress have been misguided... that we’ve thrown out lots of babies with the bathwater. But even a fuddy-duddy like me can shake off the cobwebs of tradition and middle-aged inertia when something makes as much sense as year-round school. We no longer live in an agrarian society. We don’t need our kids to work the fields all summer. This is the 21st century and ours is a global, technological economy. Our children will need to think for a living, not plow.

Year-round education is a relatively new concept, so I don’t have scads of statistics proving that students test better when they attend year-round school. All I have is anecdotal evidence, and lots of it, from parents and teachers across the nation who say these children suffer less burn-out during the school year and less learning loss between terms. Teachers spend less time reviewing at the beginning of each term (sometimes several weeks less), so

they can spend more time teaching new material. When children fall behind, they can get help throughout the school year, during intersession classes, instead of waiting until summer school, when it might be too late to catch up. None of this is rocket science. Just plain ol' common sense. Maybe that's the problem. With all the complicated reforms we've witnessed in education over the years, we may have become blind to the value of something as simple as a better schedule. But there are many educators out there who believe the "when" of school is just as important as the "where and how," that time – and how it's used – is literally of the essence. (See www.nayre.org for more information)

I don't know why Interim Superintendent McDaniel has made the abolishment of the year-round calendar such a high priority, but I do know that, ultimately, the decision isn't his. It's in the hands of our new school board. If you believe that maintaining the year-round calendar option is worth a whole 1/10 of one percent of the school district's annual budget, I urge you to contact your school board rep before the board revisits the issue at its March 6th meeting. Again, time is of the essence.