

To: Watertown School Committee
From: John R. Brackett, Interim Superintendent
Date: March 13, 2017

RE: 2017-18 Calendar

I recommend the adoption of the 2017-18 Calendar as presented with schools open on March 30, 2018 (Good Friday). Any staff or student who wishes to be absent in observance of this religious day would be excused. (See alternative option below.)

For a number of years, Good Friday has been a 'non-school' day in WPS. Two years ago, it was scheduled as non-school, but was converted to an early release day because of the exceptionally high number of snow days that year.

Earlier this year, at a superintendent's coffee, some of the participants questioned our practice in light of the growing ethnic and religious diversity that resides in the town. At about the same time, we were called upon as a school district to restate our commitment to celebrate diversity and remain an open and inclusive school community. In the recent statement from the Chair and me to the community we stated, that recent events "prompt us to reiterate and reassure that Watertown Public Schools is an open, welcoming, and inclusive place to learn and work." We closed by saying "Together, we build and support a diverse and respectful community." It is with this in mind, that I make this recommendation.

Nevertheless, I am cognizant that tradition is to be honored and for a high percentage of our families, Good Friday remains a very special day.

What has informed my recommendation?

- Through the WEA president, we polled the teachers about this change. 57% favored Good Friday being a school day. 43% favored the current practice of no-school on the day. A number of those favoring a school day, also suggested an option being an early release day.
- I talked with the priests at St Pat's Roman Catholic Church and St. Stephen's Armenian Apostolic Church. They indicated that services were offered at various times during the day, but Good Friday is a very special day in their church calendar and they believed a number of families would choose not to send their children to school that day.
- Of the neighboring districts, only Belmont (starting in 2017) and Winchester (starting in 2018) have made Good Friday a school day.
- I emailed parents a copy of the draft calendar and asked for their feedback. Five (5) parents responded in opposition (several with strong statements supporting their position) to school being held; three (3) in support of the draft calendar; one (1) expressing an understanding why we would make the change but that his children would not be attending that day; and one (1) raised questions about the calendar not related to Good Friday. One (1) parent talked about childcare

issues when school is not in session.

- I talked with the Belmont superintendent of schools about their change this year. He indicated that this year (with Good Friday preceding April Vacation) a high number of teachers have indicated they will be taking the day as a religious observance day. Classroom coverage may be an issue. They may reassess the 17-18 calendar based on this year's experience.
- Watertown Town Hall closes at noon on Good Friday.

Alternative option:

If making Good Friday a school day is a significant change, an interim step is possible.

For 2017-18, designate Good Friday as an early release day. While educationally, this is not as advantageous as a full day of instruction, it would:

- "Pilot" the change and assess how many staff may opt-out and require coverage for classrooms. This would be a data point when considering the 2018-19 calendar.
- Allow us to be in synch with the Town Offices.
- We would offer Extended Day Programs to support working parents
- School is in session and count toward the 180 day requirement, but will dismiss in time for family events or afternoon services.
- Caveat: we do not provide such consideration on special or religious holidays for other ethnic or religious groups.

I offer this recommendation for your consideration and fully understand that you will vote what you believe to be in the best interest of the students and school community.