

# **OFFICIAL RESPONSE**

## **to the Welsh Government Consultation**

# **The School Year**

February 2024

## About Community Union

Formerly PAT/PANN and latterly Voice, the **Education and Early Years** section of **Community Union** is an independent trade union representing thousands of serving teachers and support staff, headteachers, lecturers, nursery and early years workers, nannies and other education professionals in schools and academies, nurseries and early years settings, colleges and universities across the whole of the UK.

We provide legal and casework support to our members and regularly engage with them in determining our response to policy proposals.

**Community Union** is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), to the Irish TUC, Scottish TUC and Welsh TUC as well as the General Federation of Trades Union (GFTU).

This Official Response has been prepared on behalf of members of the Education and Early Years section of Community Union by:

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As such this is a public document which will be published on our website following the consultation close.

The information shared within this response may be used and quoted as appropriate for the purposes it was gathered, and **Community Union** should be acknowledged as a contributor. We would be happy to discuss the comments in this response with the education department or a research body acting on its behalf using the contact details supplied.

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## **Consultation on the school year**

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Responses should be returned by **12 February 2024** to:

School Time Branch  
The Education Directorate  
Welsh Government  
Cathays Park  
Cardiff  
CF10 3NQ

or completed electronically and sent to:

email: [ExploringUseOfSchoolTime@gov.wales](mailto:ExploringUseOfSchoolTime@gov.wales)

## Statement

There have been conversations around the structure of the school year for many years. There have been comments about how it came to be in its current form and whether this is good for staff, parents and pupils. But the system does work which is why it is widely adopted all around the world.

Across Europe, for example, the school year generally ends between the end of May and the second half of July. With mid-June being the time when the summer break begins in most countries. Although the actual length of summer holidays varies significantly between countries – from six weeks rising to up-to 13 weeks in Latvia, between 12 and 14 weeks in Italy and Portugal at secondary level and even 15 weeks in Albania and Bulgaria for primary education, it does not seem to have a negative impact on children's learning. Indeed, the high-performance nation of Finland has a summer holiday of between 10 and 11 weeks.

And according to the PISA results, Australia has one of the longest school days and school years across all countries, with the USA is close behind. Even if we take out one 10-week term, those countries still have more in-school time compared to Finland, Estonia, Korea, and Sweden, which all outscore Australia and the USA on PISA.<sup>1</sup>

Holidays and time away from the classroom are important times for children and staff, helping to assuage workload and improve wellbeing and happiness. This is of vital importance during a time of recruitment and retention difficulties since teacher wellbeing is a major issue at the moment. The school holidays are a major recruitment incentive and, in practical terms are necessary to allow staff to properly relax after a busy term.

Regardless of how they are viewed, half term holidays are simply not long enough to constitute a proper break for many teachers and leaders with an increasing number using the time to catch up on administrative tasks, finish marking and begin preparing for the coming term. This unrelenting demand is taking its toll and as workload has risen, so wellbeing has plummeted.

The wellbeing of staff in England, as assessed by the Teacher Wellbeing Index is at just 43.65. This means that staff should be considered at be considered at high risk of psychological distress and increased risk of depression.<sup>2</sup>

Not only are staff stressed, anxious and feeling overworked, but children too are struggling. A 2018 study by the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research

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<sup>1</sup> A Look at the Research on Extending School Days, Length of Terms and Supporting Learning (2021)  
<https://chartered.college/2021/03/10/a-look-at-the-research-on-extending-school-days-length-of-terms-and-supporting-learning/>

<sup>2</sup> Teacher Wellbeing Index (2023)  
<https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/>

and Data (WISERD) at Cardiff University, found that children in Wales have some of the lowest levels of wellbeing among children across 35 countries.<sup>3</sup>

The survey showed that older children have lower levels of wellbeing than younger children, with older children reporting that they had felt sad, stressed and bored in the last two weeks, and that school is the area where all children are least satisfied.

This data was confirmed in the corresponding 2021 study stating that, “children in Wales had some of the lowest levels of subjective well-being (SWB) among the nine European countries polled.”<sup>4</sup>

Whilst it is true that some of this data has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, within Wales, the satisfaction of pupils with what they learnt in school decreased from 7.4 to 5.9, while the overall average decrease was from 8.0 to 6.7 (on a 10-point scale).

Although parents often complain about the cost of childcare, and the need to occupy and entertain children during the holidays, it is telling that according to a Daily Mirror survey<sup>5</sup>, the majority of parents wish to see the school summer holiday remains as is.

The last few years have thrown up huge disruptions – austerity, a world-wide pandemic, curriculum change and the ALN plan implementation have all challenged and changed the way things are done in schools and all of which have impacted upon existing workload and the needs of recruitment and retention.

The impact of Covid-19 - remote learning, social distancing policies, and school closures have disrupted traditional education systems, isolating people from their workplaces, their peers, friends and colleagues.

It is Community’s view that what is now needed is a period of recovery, of stability and familiarity not change - our education system does not have the capacity for further change. These proposals to alter our existing three term pattern add nothing to learner outcomes, do not improve recruitment and serve only to further threaten educational staff workload and system failure.

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<sup>3</sup> Children’s Worlds Report 2020

<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/2431870-international-study-reveals-low-levels-of-wellbeing-among-children-in-wales>

<sup>4</sup> Children’s World – Covid-19 Comparative report (2022)

<https://wiserd.ac.uk/blog/welsh-childrens-subjective-well-being-during-the-pandemic-ranks-below-average-in-international-survey/>

Wellbeing of Wales, 2022: children and young people’s wellbeing

<https://www.gov.wales/wellbeing-wales-2022-children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing>

<sup>5</sup> POLL: Should the school summer holidays be shorter? Have your say

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/poll-should-school-summer-holidays-31490561>

**Question 1** – To what extent do you agree or disagree that the school calendar could be better designed to support the way we live, learn and work today?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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**Question 2** – To what extent do you agree or disagree that the school calendar could be better designed to support socio-economically disadvantaged learners?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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**Question 3** – To what extent do you agree or disagree that the school calendar could be better designed to support learners with additional learning needs (ALN)?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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**Question 4** – To what extent do you agree or disagree that the school calendar could be better designed to support teacher or learner wellbeing and ease fatigue?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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**Question 5** – To what extent do you agree or disagree with an additional break week (taken from the summer break) dividing the longest term (autumn)?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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**Question 6** – To what extent do you agree or disagree with having the flexibility to de-couple (separate) the spring break from the Easter public holiday?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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**Question 7** – To what extent do you agree or disagree with an additional break week in May or June (taken from the summer break and added to the existing May break) to even up term lengths?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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**Question 8** – To what extent do you agree or disagree with holding A level, AS level and GCSE results days in the same week?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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**Question 9** – To what extent do you agree or disagree with Option 1: maintaining the existing school calendar?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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**Question 10** – To what extent do you agree or disagree with Option 2 and the proposed draft direction: a school calendar with a 2-week October break, a spring break at broadly the same time each year (despite when Easter falls) and a 5-week summer break?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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**Question 11** – To what extent do you agree or disagree with Option 3: a school calendar with a 2-week October break, a spring break at broadly the same time each year (despite when Easter falls), a 2-week May break and a 4-week summer break?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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**Question 12** – For 2025 to 2026, do you agree or disagree with the proposed term dates as set out for Options 2 and 3?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
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**Question 13** – What, in your opinion, would be the likely effects of the proposals on the Welsh language? We are particularly interested in any likely effects on opportunities to use the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English.

Do you think that there are opportunities to promote any positive effects?

Do you think that there are opportunities to mitigate any adverse effects?

**Supporting comments**

It is unlikely that any of the proposals to change the school year will, in and of themselves, have any impact on Welsh Language or Welsh Language teaching. Instead, the issue will be on ensuring that staff wellbeing is prioritised to secure sufficient high-quality teachers for all subjects in all schools.

Community fear that introducing such seismic changes to the school calendar may prevent people from opting for a career in education. One of the big selling points of a career in education has always been the long summer break and this proposal seeks to undo this. Although the leave entitlement will not actually be changed, there will be a perception that it has reduced. It will be vital to mitigate this with improved flexibilities, working conditions and pay in order to limit the impact and prevent staff from moving to work in other jurisdictions.

**Question 14** – In your opinion, could the proposals be formulated or changed so as to:

- have positive effects or more positive effects on using the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English; or
- mitigate any negative effects on using the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English?

**Supporting comments**

No comment.



**Question 15** – We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them:

**Supporting comments**

Responses to consultations are likely to be made public, on the internet or in a report. If you would prefer your response to remain anonymous, please tick here:

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