

Revisiting the academic calendar for basic schools in Ghana: A position paper on extending the first-term vacation

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ABSTRACT

This position paper proposes a revisiting of the academic calendar for Ghanaian basic schools, emphasising the need to extend the first-trimester vacation period to better align with sociocultural, economic, and environmental realities. The current first vacation, which runs from late December to early January, overlaps with festive events, farming requirements, and the harmattan season. However, its present duration of roughly 18 days has been found inadequate for sufficient rest and recuperation for students and teachers, while also creating challenges for families and teachers in farming communities. The suggested modification extends the first-trimester vacation until the third week of January, addressing several crucial issues:

1. Sociocultural Demands: Ghanaian festive customs require substantial family and community participation, leaving little time for recuperation and preparation for the subsequent term.
2. Agricultural Responsibilities: The dry season is critical for harvesting in farming areas where children and teachers often balance educational and farming duties.
3. Environmental Challenges: Severe harmattan conditions disrupt school attendance and learning, particularly in early January.
4. Financial Strain: Families experience economic strain following festive expenditures, causing delays in school readiness for numerous pupils.

To preserve the 42 weeks of instructional time, the third-trimester vacation was reduced by two weeks. This balanced adjustment ensures curriculum delivery is not compromised while addressing the unique requirements of stakeholders across urban and rural areas. The recommendations include testing the revised calendar in chosen districts, seeking stakeholder feedback, and announcing changes well in advance to facilitate smooth implementation. In summary, the proposed alterations aim to boost school attendance, enhance learning outcomes, and foster the well-being of Ghana's educational community, reflecting a more responsive and inclusive approach to academic scheduling.

Keywords: Vacation, Ghana education service, recuperation, rest.

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INTRODUCTION

The academic calendar serves as a fundamental framework for the organisation of educational activities in schools (Anand et al., 2024). Anand et al. (2024) further posited that academic calendars establish semester, term, or quarter systems, course schedules,

examination periods, and holidays to enhance resource allocation and coordination. In Ghana, the basic school academic calendar is structured into three trimesters, interspersed with three vacations, designed to balance instructional time with rest periods for both learners and

teachers. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic that disrupted the 2019/20 to 2020/21 basic school calendars, a review of the school calendar from 2015 to 2019 shows that the first and second trimesters each had 14 contact weeks and 25 vacation days, while the

third trimester had 12 contact weeks and 47 vacation days. Between 2020 and 2021, the Ghana Education Service (GES) employed innovative strategies to ensure that basic schools in Ghana completed academic engagements so that students were not

shortchanged in the process. Post the Covid-19 disruptions, GES has successfully reconfigured the academic calendar to align with the pre-Covid-19 status. Table 1 summarises the structure of the academic calendars from the 2015 to 2025 academic years.

Table 1. Basic school calendar 2015-2025.

Year	First-trimester			Second-trimester			Third-trimester			Total	
	In school	Vacation		In school	Vacation		In school	Vacation		In school	Vacation
2015/16	8/9/15	19/11/15	53	12/1/16	14/4/16	25	10/5/16	28/7/16	41	37	119
2016/17	13/9/16	15/12/16	25	10/1/17	13/4/17	25	9/5/17	27/7/17	47	40	97
2017/18	12/9/17	14/12/17	25	9/1/18	12/4/18	25	8/5/18	26/7/18	47	40	90
2018/19	11/9/18	20/12/18	25	15/1/19	11/4/19	25	7/5/19	25/7/19	47	40	90
2019/20	10/9/19	19/12/19	19	8/1/20	16/3/20				308		327
2021	18/1/21	16/4/21	18	4/5/21	6/8/21	30	6/9/21	10/12/21	37	41	85
2022 (JHS)	18/1/22	9/6/2022	45	26/7/22	16/12/22	24			37		69
2022 (P)	18/1/22	15/4/22	18	4/5/22	6/8/22	31	6/9/22	10/12/22	32	42	81
2023	10/1/23	24/3/23	10	4/4/23	16/6/23	10	27/6/23	14/9/23	18	34	38
2023/24	3/10/23	21/12/23	18	9/1/24	11/4/24	18	30/4/24	25/7/24	46	38	82
2024/25	10/9/24	19/12/24	19	8/1/25	17/4/25	18	6/5/25	24/7/25		42	

Note: Date form is Day/Month/Year; Vacation is counted in days, In-school contact is counted in weeks
Source: Ghana Education Service

The first-trimester vacation, averaging 18 days (Table 1), coincides with major festive events, agricultural activities, and harsh weather conditions (Dini-Osman, 2024). While designed for rest and recuperation, this period has proven inadequate for learners, parents, and teachers to fully recover and prepare for the second term. Studies highlight that insufficient vacation

time may lead to delayed school attendance, reduced instructional hours, and diminished learning outcomes (Abadzi, 2007, 2009; Kolbe et al., 2012). Similarly, the National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT) has called for a review of the basic school calendar, citing increased stress among teachers due to limited breaks (Osei, 2023). These concerns raise questions

about the calendar's effectiveness in addressing the socio-cultural, economic, and educational needs of students and teachers in Ghana.

A graphical representation of the total number of days basic schools were on vacation and in school is presented in Figure 1 for easier interpretation.

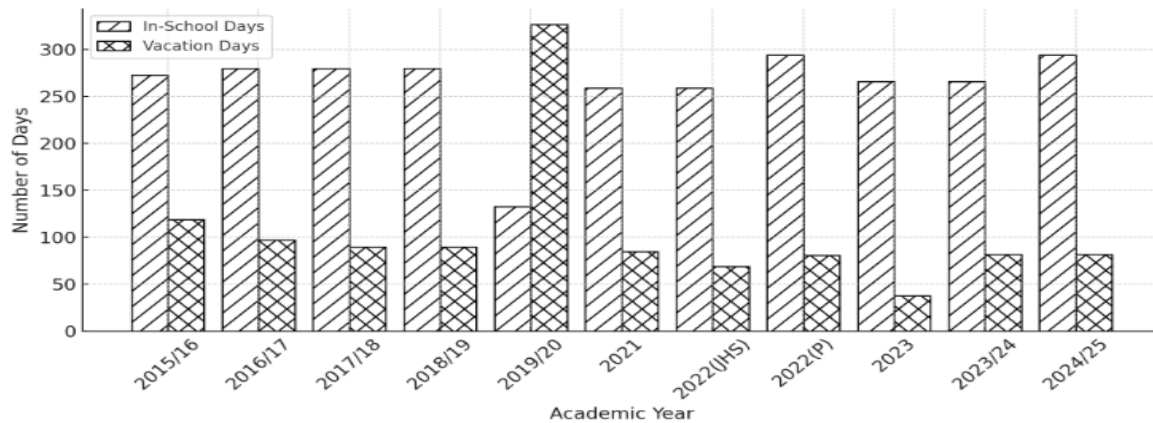


Figure 1. Trend of in-school and vacation days (2015 – 2025).

This position paper utilises a policy analysis approach to investigate and propose modifications to the existing academic calendar for basic schools in Ghana. The position presented in this paper was derived through a critical analysis of the collected data. This involved analysing the literature and stakeholder perspectives to identify the impact of the first-trimester vacation on student attendance, teacher well-being, and agricultural activities. The analysis also incorporated the concerns and recommendations of key stakeholders, such as NAGRAT (Osei, 2023), into the analysis and exploring potential modifications to the academic calendar and assessing their feasibility, potential benefits, and potential drawbacks.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SCHOOL VACATIONS

Besides national holidays and dedicated weekends, schools proceed on recess after several weeks of academic engagements between students, teachers, and management. Depending on the structure of the school calendar, countries/regions/states that practice the semester programme may observe two vacations (first-semester and second-semester vacations) while countries/regions/states that practice the trimester programme may observe three vacations (first-trimester vacation, second-trimester vacation, and third-trimester vacation). These vacations have pseudonyms unique to countries/regions/states. Such pseudonyms include winter break, summer break, Christmas break, long break and the like. The first-trimester vacation period for basic schools in Ghana, commonly known as the Christmas holiday, generally spans from the third week in December to the beginning of January, aligning globally with the winter breaks. In the Northern Hemisphere, countries often schedule winter breaks to coincide with colder temperatures and reduced daylight hours. Southern Hemisphere countries have traditionally observed winter breaks during the December-January period. Educational planners in tropical regions, where

distinct winters are less apparent, organise their holidays differently based on regional circumstances. Some countries observe this break to coincide with harvest seasons or other cultural events. For instance, many Western countries, including the USA and Canada, schedule winter breaks to align with Christmas and New Year festivities (December-January). Whilst the USA and Canada typically enjoy a 2 to 3-week holiday, Russia experiences extended winter breaks due to severe cold weather conditions.

Teachers are tasked with several additional responsibilities beyond their primary teaching duties, including taking on a parental role, providing social and psychological support, attending meetings, and submitting reports (Bouras, 2019). It can be argued that the teaching profession is both mentally and physically demanding, emphasising the necessity for adequate periods of breaks (Atalay and Karaman Kepenekci, 2023). Consequently, school vacations play a crucial role in facilitating rest and recuperation for both teachers and students. Research indicates that teachers experience significant reductions in stress levels during vacations, accompanied by notable improvements in recuperation, contributing to teachers' health and well-being (Aronsson et al., 2003; Kellmann and Heidari, 2020). Notably, vacations are variously characterised as opportunities for "discharge", "clearing the mind", and "making time for oneself and family" (Atalay and Karaman Kepenekci, 2023). However, Kellmann and Heidari (2020) observed that the benefits associated with these vacations tended to diminish upon the resumption of school activities, highlighting the importance of the optimal utilisation of vacations to manage occupational stress.

REVISING THE FIRST-TRIMESTER BASIC SCHOOL VACATIONS IN GHANA

In Ghana, the first vacation period of the academic calendar aligns with major cultural, religious, and social

festivities, especially Christmas and New Year celebrations. These events are integral to Ghanaian society, involving elaborate community gatherings, traditional ceremonies, and family reunions that demand active participation from both children and adults (Nortey, 2009; Petrelli and Light, 2014). During this time, families often travel across the country to ancestral homes or different regions to partake in these celebrations. Festivities typically follow a predictable pattern, with intense social activities extending through the first week of January, characterised by continuous celebrations, family gatherings, and community events essential for maintaining social bonds and cultural traditions. The second week of January traditionally serves as a period of rest and recovery, while the third week is reserved for preparing for the upcoming academic trimester, including acquiring school supplies and making logistical arrangements for children's return to school. Although the first-trimester vacation is intended to provide rest for learners and teachers, its current duration (about 18 days, from late December to early January) is insufficient given Ghana's rich cultural practices. The intense festive activities and the physical and emotional investment required for cultural ceremonies often leave students and teachers needing more recovery time than the current calendar allows, suggesting a need to re-visit the duration and timing of the first-trimester vacation period.

The timing of this first-trimester vacation period coincides with a critical agricultural season, the dry season characterised by harmattan winds (Gyasi et al., 2022). This temporal alignment is particularly significant in regions where agriculture serves as the primary means of sustenance. The dry season is a crucial time for harvesting and storing various crops, especially tubers and cereals, which are subject to environmental conditions. For instance, tuber harvesting is strategically timed to coincide with Harmattan winds, as this timing helps prevent rot from bruised tubers during the harvesting process. Harvesting typically intensifies after the New Year festivities, with January marking the peak harvest period. This timing creates a complex interplay between the educational and agricultural calendars, particularly in farming communities. Traditionally, children in farming areas play vital roles in their families' agricultural activities, assisting with harvesting, processing, and transporting farm produce (Baah, 2010; Brobbey, 2011). However, this agricultural involvement often conflicts with the intended purpose of vacation as a period of rest and preparation for upcoming academic terms. The physical demands of farm work can leave students fatigued rather than refreshed when the school reopens.

The intersection of agricultural demands and educational pursuits presents multifaceted challenges. In Ghana's farming communities, parents grapple with the dilemma of balancing their children's schooling against crucial agricultural labour needs (Bukari, 2022). The reluctance to send children back to school during peak harvest seasons results in delayed returns and

disrupted academic schedules. According to Bukari (2022) and Martey et al. (2023), the issue is particularly acute in rural regions, where family farming is the primary economic activity, and children's labour is essential for household survival. The situation is further complicated by teachers who also engage in farming. In rural areas, teachers who maintain farms often find themselves conflicted between their agricultural responsibilities and professional obligations, particularly among female agricultural teachers, who struggle to balance their careers with family responsibilities (Murray et al., 2011). This dual role can impact their readiness and commitment to resume teaching duties, especially when the current first-trimester vacation period fails to adequately accommodate both sets of responsibilities. A potential solution to these competing demands could involve extending the vacation period to the third week of January. Such an extension would allow families to complete critical harvesting activities with their children's assistance, potentially fostering greater parental support for timely school attendance upon the resumption of classes. Moreover, this extended break would better accommodate the needs of farming teachers, enabling them to fulfil both their agricultural and educational commitments without compromise.

The harmattan period, extending into mid-January, is marked by chilly mornings and winds carrying dust and dryness (Dini-Osman, 2024). This weather phenomenon poses considerable obstacles for Ghana's education system, creating unfavourable circumstances for students attending school in the early hours. Young students face difficulties during this time, as they must make their way to school when temperatures are at their lowest. These climatic conditions frequently lead to tardiness, disrupting classroom schedules and reducing teaching time. Studies have indicated that such weather-related interruptions can have a substantial effect on educational outcomes, with students experiencing diminished engagement and academic achievement during specific periods (Goodman, 2014). A Joy news report from the northern region of Ghana in 2013 showed that basic schools in the area recorded low turnouts due to severe harmattan conditions. One of such affected schools, according to the report was the Lingbung DA Junior High School in the Tolon District of northern region (Myjoyonline.com, 2013). In 2023, Graphic Online also reported how learners of Wambung Primary School in the Yendi Municipality in the Northern Region, trek about five kilometres every day to fetch water from a nearby dugout. Narrating the story, a learner is quoted as saying that they always wake up very early to search for water to bathe before going to school, affecting their education because they get to school late and are very exhausted. "You can't even concentrate in class," a learner lamented (Graphiconline, 2023).

The educational challenges posed by the harmattan season are further exacerbated by the post-festive season financial constraints experienced by many families in rural Ghana. The confluence of holiday expenditures and the necessity to procure new

scholastic supplies often imposes considerable strain on household budgets. This financial pressure, coupled with adverse weather conditions, frequently results in delayed school returns for many students. Some families may postpone their children's return until they can equip them with the necessary school materials or until weather conditions improve. This pattern of delayed returns engenders a ripple effect that disrupts classroom dynamics and necessitates that teachers manage varying levels of student preparedness and attendance. The convergence of environmental and financial factors also presents a complex challenge for educational planning and delivery. When students return to school intermittently over an extended period, teachers encounter difficulties in maintaining consistent instructional momentum and ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all students. The impact is pronounced in the initial weeks of the term when establishing a routine and introducing new concepts is crucial for academic progress. Given these multifaceted challenges – environmental, financial, and instructional – there exists a compelling need to reassess the current academic calendar structure. A more responsive approach would entail extending the first-trimester vacation to the third week of January, allowing the harmattan season's most severe effects to subside and providing families with additional time to recover financially, and from the festive period.

This adjustment could be balanced by modifying the third-trimester vacation period, ensuring that the mandatory 42 weeks of instructional time are maintained while better serving the needs of the educational community. Such restructuring would demonstrate sensitivity to Ghana's unique climatic conditions and socio-economic realities while prioritising optimal learning conditions for students.

Counterarguments and rebuttals

Some stakeholders (e.g. educational directors of GES) may contend that extending the first-trimester vacation period to the third week of January could potentially disrupt the overall academic calendar, thereby impeding the completion of the required curriculum within the stipulated timeframe. They may express concerns regarding the potential impact on national examinations, including the Basic School Certificate Examination (BECE), typically administered in July by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) to assess and grade learners for high school entry in November of the same year. The proposed adjustment maintains 42 weeks of instructional time by reducing the third-trimester vacation period. This ensures that the curriculum is not compromised. Furthermore, the revised calendar can be communicated in advance to allow teachers and school administrators to plan effectively, ensuring a seamless transition. Moreover, WAEC has consistently demonstrated its capacity to conduct examinations, complete marking, and release results

within six weeks. Given this track record, even if the BECE were scheduled in August (similar to the practice in the 1990s), results could still be released in time to allow for high school enrollment in November.

An additional concern might be that reducing the third vacation would limit the time available for teachers to prepare for the subsequent academic year or attend professional development programmes. Although the third-trimester vacation would be shortened by two weeks, teachers would still have sufficient time to prepare. Additionally, the extended first vacation could allow teachers to engage in mid-academic planning and training, balancing their workload across the year.

Urban schools, which may not face the same socioeconomic and environmental challenges as rural schools, might resist the proposed changes, arguing that their learners and parents do not experience similar difficulties during the first-trimester vacation. The revised calendar is designed to address the broader needs of the entire educational system, ensuring equity for all learners, particularly those in rural areas, who face significant challenges. Urban schools can utilise the extended first-trimester vacation for enrichment programmes or other activities that benefit their learners without disrupting their overall academic schedule.

Adjusting the academic calendar might necessitate additional costs for communication, the reprinting of materials, and the reorganisation of school activities. The financial implications of revising the calendar are minimal compared to the long-term benefits of improved attendance, learning outcomes, and the overall well-being of learners. Effective planning and phased implementation can further mitigate associated costs.

By addressing these counterarguments, the proposed adjustment to the academic calendar demonstrates its feasibility and alignment with the holistic needs of learners, parents, and teachers in Ghana.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the preceding analysis and concerns raised by NAGRAT regarding the impact of the current calendar regarding the need for adequate rest and recuperation for teachers, which are supported by research on teacher burnout, several suggestions are put forward for the Ghana Education Service. Firstly, the first-trimester vacation period is modified to extend from late December to the third week of January, allowing ample time for students, parents, and teachers to recuperate from holiday festivities, tend to farm duties and cope with severe weather conditions. Secondly, the duration of the third-trimester vacation is shortened by a fortnight to preserve 42 weeks of teaching time, thus maintaining a well-balanced and efficient academic schedule. Moreover, the revised timetable can be piloted in chosen districts for a single academic year to evaluate its effects on attendance, learning outcomes, and satisfaction among stakeholders before nationwide implementation. Additionally, discussions can be held with key parties,

including teachers, parents, and education administrators, to secure support and tackle any issues regarding the suggested alterations. Lastly, the updated calendar should be disclosed well in advance to enable proper preparation by educational institutions, teaching staff, and families.

For further studies, this position paper lays the foundation for measuring the impact of the school calendar on student attendance, academic performance, teacher well-being, and overall learning outcomes in Ghana. Further qualitative research can gather in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of students, teachers, parents, and community members regarding the revised calendar. By addressing these suggestions for further research, educators can gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the academic calendar and continue to refine and improve the Ghanaian education system to better serve the needs of all learners.

CONCLUSION

The current academic calendar for basic schools in Ghana does not fully reflect the sociocultural, economic, and environmental realities of learners, parents, and teachers. Extending the first-trimester vacation to the third week of January and shortening the third-trimester vacation offers a solution that aligns better with these realities while maintaining 42 weeks of instructional time. This adjustment addresses issues of insufficient rest, financial strain, and weather-related difficulties, potentially improving attendance, learning outcomes, and overall well-being for all stakeholders. With careful planning, piloting, and stakeholder engagement, this revised calendar could meet the evolving needs of Ghana's educational landscape.

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