

A Quest for Innovations



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Quest Charter Academy

AS PEORIA'S ONLY CHARTER SCHOOL, Quest Charter Academy is on a mission, not only to provide a STEM-focused, college prep curriculum for students in grades five through 12, but also to provide an innovative approach to teaching and learning.

In the spring of 2016, staff, parents, board members and community volunteers came together to engage in strategic planning to use research-based strategies and creative thinking to propel us into the future. The result was a dynamic three-year strategic plan that addressed topics such as family engagement, social-emotional learning needs of students, innovation in STEM curricular offerings, career academies at our high school, and a restructuring of the school day and school year. Today, all aspects of the strategic plan have been launched with the addition this year of our balanced calendar.

After a year studying all of the options, we are pleased to say that we launched a *balanced calendar* for the 2017-2018 school year. The goals of a balanced calendar are simple. We hope to lessen the "summer learning loss" for our scholars, thus accelerating students further on their path to college and careers. (The average student loses two to three months of the learning they had gained during the previous school year.) We also are looking to provide a more balanced approach to the school year, where students and staff could take time to rejuvenate, relax and achieve more of the work-life balance that we all desire.

As we interviewed other schools that use this approach, we learned that parents, students and teachers alike really enjoy having breaks more frequently during the year. For parents and students, it allows for more family opportunities; it also gives students and teachers a chance to get re-energized for learning. Parents like that the summer is shortened a little because of the structure that school provides. In addition, students are less likely to forget what they learned during the school year, and there is still plenty of time for them

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to enjoy summer.

A balanced calendar includes the same number of school days as before; they are simply more spaced out, resulting in more frequent breaks throughout the year and a slightly shorter summer break. Quest has always operated on a longer school year, with students attending for 185 days. But what used to be an eight-week summer is now a six-week summer, with school beginning on August 1st and ending mid-June. Students enjoy a fall break in the middle of October for a week and a half, as well as a two-week winter vacation and a two-and-a-half-week spring vacation.

Upon returning from fall and spring break, students experience three days of Quest's first-ever STEM camp, where they enjoy hands-on learning activities around STEM curriculum in areas of student interest. Having completed our first STEM camp, we want to thank the many community volunteers and businesses who participated. We had students engaged in several opportunities throughout our community and many community partners who came in to teach a session or two. These rich experiences all contribute to our students being prepared for college and careers.

As a charter school, it is our goal to always try new, innovative and cutting-edge ideas. Our ultimate goal is outstanding academic achievement, ensuring our students are fully prepared for college and on a course for successful careers. We truly believe moving to a balanced calendar will result in higher learning retention, test scores and attendance rates; fewer tardies; less teacher stress and turnover; increased staff communication and planning; and enhanced positive school culture.

We are collecting data and will be excited to share with the Peoria community the results of this new approach in how we utilize time to enhance student achievement. As always, we thank you for your support of Quest. Our doors are always open for tours and volunteer/partnership opportunities. **iBi**

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