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Mounds View cuts half days from school district calendar

Officials say move is within state law

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Mounds View school leaders say state law will not affect removing inconvenient half days from its calendar.

Parents in the north suburban district have long complained that the half-day sessions are inconvenient. Classes are being dismissed early six times this school year, leaving parents to deal with transportation and day care problems.

So Mounds View removed the half days from next year's calendar. There will be no classes on those dates. Rather, 10 minutes will be added to every regular school day to make up the time. Next year, each school's starting time will begin five minutes earlier and end five minutes later.

"Instructional time is not being reduced," Mounds View Superintendent Dan Hoverman said.

But the number of class days is. And while Mounds View's move could run counter to a state law that sets the number of days schools must be open each year, the district will move ahead with its plan. Response from parents has been overwhelmingly positive, officials said.

A 1997 state law says a school's annual calendar must equal the number of days it scheduled for the 1996-97 school year. For Mounds View, that was 175 days.

Cutting the half days from the 2010-11 school year will leave Mounds View with 168 class days, said John Ward, human resources director.

Officials have worked with the state Department of Education on the plan and have studied the law and say there is no need to change course. In fact, they point out that state funding is based on hours, not days.

"We're meeting the intent (of the law)," Hoverman said. He added that before the school board's Jan. 12 decision, he contacted Tom Melcher, program finance director for the state Education Department, numerous times to ensure the appropriateness of the change. The Department of Education declined to comment on the conversations.

No matter the legal interpretations, the law lacks teeth. There is "no penalty provision," said Bill Walsh, state Education Department spokesman.

Ward said the district's share of money from the state would not be affected.

Mounds View used half days to accommodate final exams, allowing teachers time to grade tests in the afternoons, said school board Vice Chairwoman Barb Bollum. Later, when schools were required to add three days to the school year, Mounds View made them half days as a compromise between the teachers union and the school board.

Cutting half days and lengthening the others means the district is creating longer time segments,

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Hoverman said. Instead of teachers having afternoons to assess student work, they can dedicate the entire day, he said. And with the lengthened school days, teachers get extra time to work with students.

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