



# POLICY NOTES

Series No. PN 2026-01



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## Reclaiming Instructional Time for Learning: The Case for a Three-Term School Calendar in Philippine Basic Education

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April 2026

### Why a Three-Term School Calendar Matters

- Protects instructional time by reducing losses of up to 53 days yearly.
- Extends instructional periods (63-64 days) to improve learning continuity and reduce disruption.
- Shifts the focus from time spent in school to actual learning.
- Enables timely assessment and remediation of learning gaps.
- Supports teacher workload balance and reduces burnout.
- Promotes equity by minimizing learning loss during long breaks.
- Aligns instructional time use with regional practices to improve learning outcomes.
- Remains consistent with the existing legal framework.

# From Four Quarters to Three Terms: *What Changes?*

## FOUR-QUARTER CALENDAR

## THREE-TERM CALENDAR

### Structure of the School Year



**4** short quarters  
(~49–50 days each)

**3** longer terms  
(~63–64 days each)

## FOUR-QUARTER CALENDAR

## THREE-TERM CALENDAR

### Instructional Time & Learning Continuity

Up to **53 days** lost annually;  
frequent breaks

More **protected instructional time**; fewer interruptions



## FOUR-QUARTER CALENDAR

## THREE-TERM CALENDAR

### Assessment & Teacher Workload



Quarterly exams; **frequent grading cycles** and administrative peaks

**Structured** term-based assessments; fewer grading periods and more distributed workload

## 1. Introduction

The Department of Education’s (DepEd) shift from a four-quarter to a three-term school calendar, starting in School Year 2026–2027 and approved by the Economy and Development Council, chaired by the President of the Philippines, on March 19, 2026, represents a structural reform to safeguard instructional time and improve learning continuity. Under the current system, the school year is divided into four grading quarters, with class days distributed unevenly, averaging approximately 49–50 days per quarter (DepEd, 2025). The proposed three-term calendar organizes the school year into three longer instructional periods, each comprising approximately 63–64 days.

The reform responds to a persistent system-level problem: the loss of up to 53 instructional days annually due to weather disruptions, non-instructional activities, and fragmented scheduling (EDCOM II, 2025). EDCOM II’s assessments show that these losses significantly constrain curriculum pacing, remediation, and broader learning recovery efforts.

The current four-quarter structure is not mandated by law but was introduced through a DepEd issuance (DepEd, 2015). Existing legislation does not prescribe a specific grading format and grants DepEd the authority to organize and manage the school calendar (Republic Act (RA) 9155). The proposed three-term calendar, with approximately 201 class days, remains well within the statutory maximum of 220 days (Section 3, RA 11480), indicating that the reform is within the existing legal and regulatory framework (RA 10533).

**We support the calendar reform while emphasizing that it must be understood not as an administrative adjustment, but as a strategic tool for protecting instructional time, structuring assessment and remediation, and managing system workload more effectively.**

International evidence further shows that learning outcomes depend not only on the quantity of instructional time, but also on how effectively it is used to engage students in learning. Calendar reform must therefore ensure that instructional time is consistently translated into meaningful learning time. Education reform must include a sustained commitment to protect instructional time and reduce non-essential activities that weaken learning continuity and classroom focus (EDCOM II, 2025).

Drawing on regional experience and implementation insights, this note provides recommendations to align the three-term calendar with reforms in curriculum pacing, assessment, remediation, teacher workload management, and equity—ensuring that the reform delivers sustained improvements in teaching and learning.

## 2. From Instructional Time to Learning Outcomes

The effectiveness of school calendar reform depends not only on the number of instructional days, but on how allocated time is translated into actual learning. International evidence distinguishes three interrelated but conceptually distinct dimensions: (i) allocated instructional time as defined in policy, (ii) actual instructional time delivered by teachers, and (iii) engaged learning time, or the portion of classroom time during which students are actively participating in learning tasks (Figure 1).

Research consistently shows that learning outcomes are most strongly associated with this third dimension—time on task—rather than with nominal instructional hours alone. In many education systems, particularly in developing country contexts, students receive only a fraction of the officially mandated instructional time due to school closures, teacher absenteeism, and inefficient classroom

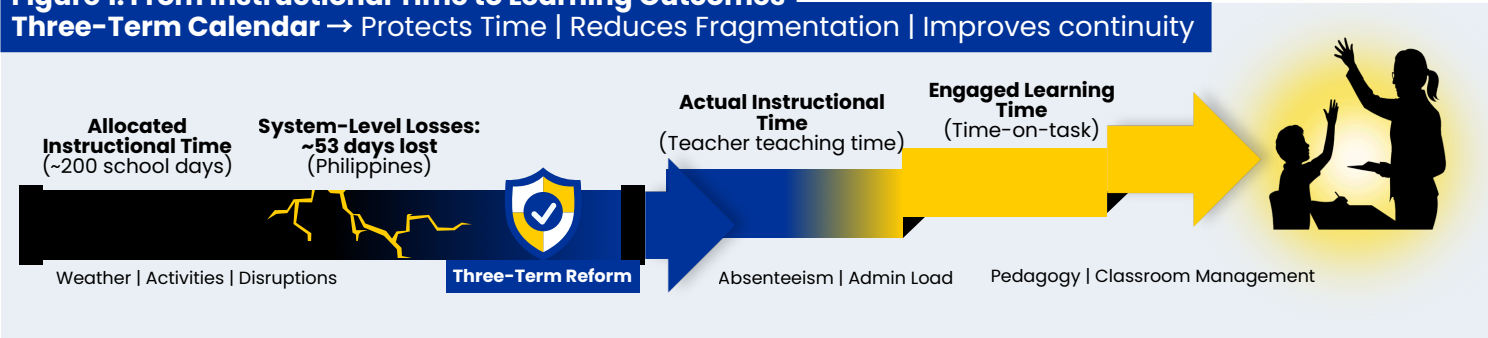
practices. For example, multi-country evidence indicates that students are engaged in learning for only 39% to 78% of the intended instructional time, depending on context (Abadzi, 2007). Similarly, studies on service delivery in education highlight that even when teachers are present, a substantial portion of classroom time is not devoted to instruction, reflecting weak incentives and ineffective classroom practices (Bold et al., 2010).

Empirical evidence confirms that instructional time does matter for learning outcomes, but its impact is conditional on how effectively it is used. Cross-country analysis finds that an additional hour of instruction per week increases average student achievement – by about 0.15 standard deviations in OECD countries and 0.075 in developing contexts (Lavy, 2015). However, these gains are significantly mediated by factors such as teacher effectiveness, classroom practices, and student engagement. More broadly, the literature emphasizes that students must have sufficient time to process and practice learning tasks; simply increasing inputs without ensuring effective use of time yields limited gains (Abadzi, 2007).

This implies that increasing the number of instructional days or hours—while necessary—is not sufficient. The critical policy challenge is ensuring that allocated time is converted into meaningful learning opportunities. Instructional time thus functions as a mediating variable in the education production process, linking system inputs—such as financing, teachers, and materials—to learning outcomes (Bold et al., 2010).

Within this framework, school calendar reform should be understood not merely as a scheduling change, but as a structural mechanism to: protect instructional time from disruption; improve the efficiency of time use within classrooms; and enable more consistent and sustained student engagement.

**Figure 1. From Instructional Time to Learning Outcomes**



A three-term school calendar can contribute to addressing these constraints by reducing fragmentation, minimizing cumulative time losses, and creating more predictable instructional blocks that support effective teaching, timely assessment, and structured remediation. In this sense, it is a time-efficiency reform that protects and converts instructional time into learning.

### 3. Why Calendar Design Matters

Building on the framework linking instructional time to learning outcomes, calendar reform extends beyond scheduling to broader system-level effects. Evidence from Southeast Asia and international research highlights four key areas where calendar design matters: policy coherence, equity, teacher capacity, and assessment and remediation cycles.

Frequent breaks and short instructional cycles can disrupt learning continuity, as students often require review time to regain prior knowledge after each interruption. A three-term structure reduces these transitions, minimizing re-teaching and increasing the share of instructional time devoted to new learning and deeper engagement. In this way, calendar design influences how effectively instructional time is converted into learning—supporting DepEd’s objectives of protecting instructional time, improving learning continuity, and reducing teacher workload pressure.

**a. Policy Coherence.** The four-quarter structure compresses planning and curriculum alignment into short pre-opening periods, contributing to fragmented implementation. Protecting instructional time depends not only on calendar length but also on decongesting the curriculum so that time is concentrated on essential competencies (DepEd and SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2020). Curriculum reform yields stronger results when supported by clear competency progression, timely materials, teacher support, and coherent implementation (Abrigo et al., 2025).

**b. Equity of Access and Learning Continuity.** Calendar design has important implications for equity. Long academic breaks are associated with significant learning losses, particularly among disadvantaged students, who can lose one to three months of progress in reading and mathematics—the “summer slide” (Kuhfeld & Lewis, 2023).

These disparities intensified during COVID-19. In Cambodia, Grade 6 mathematics proficiency declined from 51% to 26%, with poverty and rurality identified as key predictors of low achievement and dropout risk (SEAMEO & UNICEF, 2025). Prolonged disruptions have also been linked to substantial long-term economic costs, including losses in lifetime earnings and productivity (ASEAN, 2025; World Bank et al., 2021).

Emerging evidence suggests that shorter, more frequent breaks can mitigate learning loss and improve retention among disadvantaged learners. In the Philippines, such approaches align with Flexible Learning Programs and support efforts to protect instructional time and advance SDG 4 (SEAMEO & UNICEF, 2025; Phyo & Ilie, 2025). Consistent with this, OECD (2025) highlights that both the amount and distribution of instructional time are critical for maintaining learning continuity and fairness.

**c. Teacher Capacity and Well-being.** The four-quarter grading system creates multiple administrative peaks, contributing to workload pressure and burnout. Excessive administrative demands and poorly paced cycles are key drivers of teacher disengagement and attrition (Appiah-Odame & Frempong, 2025).

A three-term structure, particularly with End-of-Term Blocks, can distribute workload more evenly and create space for continuous professional development, consistent with practices in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

**d. Assessment Cycles and Learner Support.** Assessment under the current system is concentrated in quarterly examinations, limiting timely feedback and intervention. A three-term structure enables more structured assessment cycles, allowing earlier identification of learning gaps and more responsive remediation (SEAMEO & UNICEF, 2025).

Research also shows that shorter, well-paced cycles with regular breaks are associated with lower student stress and more consistent engagement (Haque & Sharmin, 2022), though outcomes depend on effective implementation and alignment with curriculum pacing.

## 4. Regional Experiences in Southeast Asia

Regional experience in Southeast Asia shows that there is no single model for organizing the school year in basic education. However, across the region, the school calendar is consistently treated as a strategic policy instrument—one that structures instructional time, regulates assessment cycles, and schedules breaks and remediation to respond to local conditions such as climate risks and learning gaps. Importantly, these approaches emphasize protecting instructional time to ensure it is effectively translated into engaged learning time and improved outcomes.

As shown in the regional comparison of school calendars and grading structures (Table 1), systems vary in calendar type, number of school days, and daily class hours. Despite this variation, a common pattern emerges: most countries organize the school year around semester- or term-based structures with two to three main grading periods.

In this context, the Philippine basic education system stands out—not in total instructional time, but in its continued use of a four-quarter grading structure. Earlier regional work by DepEd and SEAMEO INNOTECH (2012) highlights that the Philippines was the only system examined organized around four grading quarters, while systems with stronger learning outcomes used alternative term structures. Subsequent analysis (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2013) further emphasized the need to better align assessment systems with teaching and learning processes.

Comparative experience from **Malaysia** shows that calendar structures can evolve while maintaining coherence. The 2025/2026 academic session was organized into three *penggal*, while 2026 shifted to a two-term structure with scheduled breaks. This illustrates that the key issue is not the number of terms, but how calendar design protects instructional time, reduces fragmentation, and creates space for remediation and recovery.

**Table 1. Instructional Time, School Calendars, and Grading Structure In Southeast Asia**

Country	Academic Calendar	School Days / Year	Ave. Class Hours / day	Calendar Structure	Typical Grading Periods
<b>1. Singapore</b>	Jan–Nov	~200	6.0–6.5 hrs	4 terms	4
<b>2. Malaysia</b>	Jan–Dec	~190–200	6.5–7.0 hrs	2 semesters	2–3
<b>3. Thailand</b>	May–Mar	~180	8.5–9.5 hrs	2 semesters	2
<b>4. Philippines</b>	<b>Jun–Mar</b>	<b>~180–200</b>	<b>Up to 6 hrs</b>	<b>Quarters (to three-term)</b>	<b>4 → 3</b>
<b>5. Indonesia</b>	Jul–Jun	~180–200	6.0–7.0 hrs	2 semesters	2–3
<b>6. Vietnam</b>	Sep–May/Jun	~200	7.5–8.0 hrs	2 semesters	2
<b>7. Cambodia</b>	Sep–Jul	~190	8.0–8.75 hrs	2 semesters	2
<b>8. Lao PDR</b>	Sep–Jun	~170–180	6.0–7.0 hrs	2 semesters	2
<b>9. Myanmar</b>	Jun–Mar	~180	8.0–8.5 hrs	2 semesters	2
<b>10. Brunei</b>	Jan–Dec	~200	6.0–6.5 hrs	2 semesters	2

Sources: 2026 World Population Review, UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2025 OECD Indicators, Deped Order No. 012, s. 2024

Other systems follow similar principles. **Singapore** uses a four-term structure within two semesters, while **Brunei Darussalam** organizes clearly defined instructional periods with scheduled breaks. As shown in Table 1, these systems emphasize predictable instructional blocks and fewer grading points rather than short quarterly cycles. In **Indonesia**, locally determined semester breaks demonstrate how flexibility can be incorporated without compromising system coherence.

Taken together, these experiences support two conclusions.

**First, a three-term calendar is a practical option for the Philippines. Second, calendar reform must be understood within the framework linking instructional time to learning outcomes.**

As discussed in Section 2, learning gains depend not only on the amount of time allocated, but on how effectively it is converted into actual teaching and engaged learning time.

In this context, calendar reform alone is insufficient. Its effectiveness depends on complementary improvements in assessment, curriculum pacing, remediation, and instructional support to ensure that protected instructional time translates into meaningful learning gains.



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## 5. Key Implementation Considerations

The shift to a three-term school calendar is legally feasible and operationally viable, but its effectiveness depends on disciplined implementation and proactive risk management. The central challenge is ensuring that the reform protects and converts instructional time into actual teaching and engaged learning time, rather than simply reorganizing the schedule.

From this perspective, calendar reform is not merely structural but a mechanism for improving the efficiency of time use within the education system. A substantial share of officially allocated instructional time is often lost due to system inefficiencies, reducing the time students spend engaged in learning tasks (Abadzi, 2007, 2009). These losses have direct implications for both learning outcomes and the economic efficiency of education systems. Instructional time can be understood as a form of public investment; when it is lost or poorly used, systems incur higher costs for lower learning outcomes. Evidence shows that systems using a greater share of instructional time for learning achieve better internal efficiency, including lower dropout rates and higher student progression (Abadzi, 2009).

Against this backdrop, several implementation risks must be managed. First, without clear guidelines on instructional weeks, assessment cycles, remediation blocks, and non-teaching activities, existing sources of time loss—such as training and administrative tasks—may be shifted into the new calendar. Second, uneven implementation across regions and schools may lead to inconsistent use of end-of-term and remediation periods, misaligned assessment cycles, and informal adjustments; strong central guidance and phased monitoring are therefore critical. Third, curriculum compression may increase pressure on teachers and students without improving learning; a trimester structure requires prioritization of essential competencies and instructional depth. Fourth, potential gains in workload reduction will materialize only if reporting requirements are streamlined and non-teaching periods are protected. Finally, equity risks must be addressed, as calendar reform may widen learning gaps if remediation and enrichment are not targeted to vulnerable learners.

To address these risks, implementation should be embedded within a broader set of system-strengthening measures:

1. **Institutionalize** continuous formative assessment across terms to support early identification of learning gaps.



2. **Streamline** curriculum into term-based essential competencies, prioritizing depth over coverage, focusing on mastery of key skills rather than superficial coverage of multiple topics.



3. **Integrate** structured remediation and enrichment within end-of-term blocks.



4. **Reduce** administrative workload and safeguard instructional time for teaching and preparation.



5. **Provide** continuous professional development aligned with revised instructional pacing.



6. **Strengthen** assessment and feedback systems for data-driven decision-making.



7. **Align** the academic calendar with climate and disaster risks.



8. **Apply** targeted and cost-effective support for vulnerable learners, recognizing that early remediation reduces the risk of dropout, repetition, and long-term inefficiencies in the education system.



Together, these measures position the three-term calendar not as an administrative adjustment, but as a system-level reform that improves the efficiency of instructional time use, strengthens learning continuity, and enhances the returns to education investment.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

The shift to a three-term school calendar provides a practical pathway to enhance learning continuity and safeguard instructional time. However, its effectiveness depends on how well it is aligned with reforms in assessment, curriculum pacing, remediation, and instructional practice. As emphasized throughout this note, learning outcomes depend not only on the amount of time allocated, but on how effectively that time is converted into actual teaching and engaged learning.

Accordingly, the success of a three-term calendar requires disciplined implementation, including continuous capacity building for teachers and school leaders, a phased or supported rollout, and strong monitoring and feedback systems. A well-designed monitoring and evaluation framework is essential to track whether reforms are effectively protecting instructional time and translating it into improved student outcomes. This should include baseline data collection, periodic reviews, and outcome assessments to support evidence-based adjustments.

Ultimately, calendar reform should be embedded within a broader system reform agenda that strengthens instructional delivery, assessment systems, and learner support. When effectively implemented, it can improve learning continuity, promote equity, and enhance the overall efficiency of the education system.



***SEAMEO INNOTECH is well positioned to support DepEd in this transition by benchmarking implementation against regional practices, facilitating peer learning across Southeast Asian education systems, and supporting evidence-based monitoring and continuous improvement.***



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### Acknowledgements

The authors thank Kochakorn Khattapan-Acidre, Prof. James Roumasset, Atty. Ma. Liana Oliveros, and Angelo Miguel Elijah de Guzman for providing inputs, comments, and suggestions. The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this paper are strictly those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of SEAMEO INNOTECH, its governing board, or any of the above.

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