RESEARCH ARTICLE

JENER Journal of Empirical and Non-Empirical Research
Volume 2, Issue 10, Page 898-904 | Article No. 96
DOI: 10.4898/jenerv2i10.a96
ISSN: 7895-9216
Journal homepage: https://jenerjournal.com
Journal email: editor@jenerjournal.com

JENER Journal
JENER Journal of Empirical and Non-Empirical Research

Early Implementation of the Three-Term School Calendar: Teacher-Perceived Challenges and Opportunities in SDO Tabuk City

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Article history:
Published: October 2026

Keywords:
Three-Term School Calendar
Basic Education Reform
Teacher Perspectives
Policy Implementation
Qualitative Case Study
Tabuk City

ABSTRACT

The Philippines introduced a three-term school calendar for basic education in School Year 2026–2027, changing the rhythm of instructional blocks, assessment, professional learning, and planned breaks. The study examined the early transition from teachers' perspective in the bounded administrative setting of the Schools Division of Tabuk City. A qualitative case-study demonstration integrated documentary analysis of publicly available DepEd policy issuances a 24 purpose-built teacher narrative profiles representing six school contexts. The analytic procedure used reflexive thematic coding, pattern comparison, an evidence matrix, and explicit separation of policy claims from teacher-experience propositions. Eight themes concerned assessment pacing, longer teaching blocks, reporting adjustments, intervention opportunities, orientation needs, protected wellness time, emergency disruptions, and communication with families. The most prominent concern in the constructed corpus was actionable orientation, followed by assessment pacing. The reform's perceived educational benefit depended on alignment between time allocation, teacher workload, assessment expectations, and locally feasible implementation support.

1. Introduction

School calendars served instructional, organizational, and welfare functions. They established when teaching occurred, how assessments were sequenced, when feedback reached families, and how teachers allocated time to preparation and professional responsibilities. Changing a calendar structure therefore affected more than the appearance of dates on a schedule; it required practical adjustments to lesson design, learner support, record keeping, and communication.

On 16 April 2026, the Department of Education issued DepEd Order No. 009, s. 2026, on implementation of a three-term school calendar in basic education. The reform was planned for School Year 2026–2027 and introduced an instructional structure organized around three terms. DepEd public explanations described objectives that included more coherent teaching time, planned term blocks, and better organization of assessments and other school activities.[1,3]

Because the change was already a national policy rather than a local proposal, the pertinent research question concerned implementation. The 2026 orientation campaign covered classroom assessment, grading, lesson planning, education in emergencies, flexible learning arrangements, and strengthened senior high school implementation. These interconnected subjects suggested that teachers needed to translate policy into scheduling decisions across grades and subject areas, often within existing resource and reporting constraints.[2]

The calendar was also accompanied in June 2026 by revised guidance on assessment and grading, lesson planning and learning design, and learning continuity in emergencies. The policy environment was therefore not appropriately described as the addition of a third grading period alone. Teachers were working through a coordinated set of policy changes whose practical effects could differ by level, learning area, learner needs, and school circumstances.[4,5,6]

The Schools Division of Tabuk City provided a meaningful bounded setting for a case-study design because divisions coordinated school implementation while local teaching contexts could differ in staffing, facilities, travel conditions, access to connectivity, and community schedules. These differences were raised as relevant case dimensions, not as verified shortcomings of particular schools. A case study could preserve such context rather than average it away.

A distinction between official policy and teachers' interpretations was essential. National announcements could establish what DepEd intended, but those materials could not establish the extent of local orientation, compliance, satisfaction, or disruption in Tabuk City. Equally, individual teacher accounts could reveal challenges without proving that the formal policy had failed. The study combined both evidence types while keeping their warrant separate.

The analysis was limited to early implementation during the first term and transition toward the second term of School Year 2026–2027. It did not claim evidence about the completion of Term 3, which lay beyond the manuscript's October 2026 preparation date. This temporal boundary helped avoid retrospective conclusions about outcomes that had not yet occurred.

Three case questions guided the work: (1) How did the three-term structure change teachers' descriptions of instructional pacing and assessment? (2) What opportunities and constraints emerged for learner support, lesson design, communication, and staff well-being? (3) Which implementation measures could a schools division and school leaders prioritize to align the reform with feasible daily practice? The study did not formulate null hypotheses because explanatory qualitative inquiry did not require significance testing.

2. Methods

2.1 Case-study rationale and boundaries

A qualitative single-case design with embedded school-context profiles was adopted to examine how an implemented national policy might be experienced within one schools division. Yin's case-study approach emphasized attention to real-world context, clear boundaries, multiple evidence sources, and plausible alternative explanations. The administrative case was SDO Tabuk City; the temporal case comprised the start of School Year 2026–2027 through early October 2026.[8]

The school contexts in the analytic design consisted of six profiles, each associated with four teacher-role narratives, yielding 24 profile units. Twelve profiles corresponded to elementary teaching and 12 to secondary teaching. Role and school-context contrasts were deliberately varied, including early-career and experienced educators, small and large school routines, diverse assessment responsibilities, and differences in home–school communication needs. These were organizing variables rather than verified characteristics of named Tabuk City schools.

2.2 Documentary evidence and analytic questions

The documentary strand included the April 2026 three-term calendar order, the Department's implementation orientation advisory, the May 2026 explanation of the reform, and subsequent June orders on assessment, lesson planning, and learning continuity. Documents were treated as authoritative evidence of policy intent and requirements, not as independent evidence of whether schools had executed those requirements successfully.[1,2,3,4,5,6]

The inquiry used a policy-to-practice matrix. For each policy obligation or reform objective, it specified the teacher-level activity potentially affected, the type of evidence needed to verify implementation, and an alternative explanation for reported difficulty. For example, a perception of compressed assessment might arise from calendar structure, from incomplete orientation, from competing events, or from documentation practices unrelated to the new term structure.

2.3 Qualitative analysis and quality criteria

The profiles were examined with reflexive thematic analysis following recursive reading, initial codes, comparison across profiles, tentative theme construction, and definition of distinct thematic claims. The analysis preserved negative cases when a profile described an apparent benefit under circumstances where another profile described a challenge. Themes were chosen for analytical coherence and relevance to the case question, not solely because they had large code frequencies.[9]

Pattern matrices compared elementary and secondary contexts, the initial orientation phase, the first-term teaching period, the term-transition period, and the possible implications for subsequent terms. Counts of profiles linked to a code were supplied as an audit aid but not treated as representative survey estimates. No hypothesis tests, confidence intervals, or p-values were used because purposively constructed qualitative case material did not justify such statistics.

A prospective field study would increase credibility through approved interviews, review of actual lesson-plan revisions and nonconfidential policy documents, member reflection, careful transcription, and reflexive documentation. Transferability would be addressed by describing school contexts, not by claiming that 24 profiles represented all division teachers.

3. Results

Table 1. Policy-document evidence and bounded claims

Document	Verified policy content	What the document cannot establish
DO 009, s. 2026	National three-term school calendar framework	Local implementation quality or teacher satisfaction
April 2026 orientation advisory	Implementation briefings covering assessment, planning and other changes	Who in Tabuk City completed which orientation
May 2026 reform clarification	Policy intent: organized instructional time and learning opportunities	Actual instructional gains in individual classrooms
DO 015, s. 2026	Revised classroom assessment and grading guidance	Actual school gradebook workload
DO 016, s. 2026	Updated lesson-planning and learning-design guidance	Actual fidelity or effectiveness of teachers' plans
DO 014, s. 2026	Guidance on learning continuity in emergencies	Effectiveness of specific school contingency arrangements

The documentary comparison showed that the three-term change was part of a broader set of operational reforms. Assessment, planning, continuity, and senior high school adjustments appeared in the implementation materials. Teachers therefore faced a coordination task spanning multiple practices even when the visible reform was presented as calendar restructuring.

The document table imposed an important evidentiary boundary. An order could demonstrate the Department's formal intent and provide a standard against which an implementation plan could be checked. It could not establish how many Tabuk City teachers had been oriented, whether workload decreased, or whether learners experienced better continuity.

This separation avoided attributing local conditions to the mere existence of national policy. A subsequent field investigation would need independent school records, teacher accounts, and appropriate learner indicators to test whether intended efficiencies materialized.

Table 2. Structured qualitative corpus used in the case analysis

Embedded context	Teacher profiles	Analytical role
Context A: primary-grade planning	4	Developmental pacing and formative assessment
Context B: upper-elementary instruction	4	Subject integration and parent communication
Context C: secondary core learning areas	4	Assessment rhythm and coverage
Context D: secondary applied/elective areas	4	Performance tasks and resource needs
Context E: mixed-grade or small-school operation	4	Staffing flexibility and learning continuity
Context F: varied administrative responsibilities	4	Grade reporting, orientation, and wellness boundaries
Total	24	Purposeful conceptual variation; no population representativeness

The six embedded contexts supported attention to differences in professional work rather than a single generic teacher perspective. For example, early-grade teachers and subject teachers could experience the pacing of assessments differently even under the same calendar. A bounded case study benefited from comparing these contrasts without claiming that every school type had the same challenges.

The distribution was balanced across contexts by design, not by observed personnel counts. Four profiles were assigned to each analytical context to prevent one teaching arrangement from dominating thematic development. The equal distribution made systematic comparison possible but carried no sampling interpretation.

The context labels also helped identify likely sources of variation outside the calendar itself. A challenge attributed to term scheduling might actually reflect scarce planning time, competing reporting requirements, or limited access to assessment resources. Considering alternative explanations was necessary to prevent a reform narrative from becoming overly deterministic.

Table 3. Themes identified in the constructed teacher-perspective corpus

Theme	Profiles coded (of 24)	Interpretive focus
Compressed assessment cycles	19/24	Constraint
More coherent instruction blocks	18/24	Potential opportunity
Gradebook and reporting adjustment	17/24	Constraint
Recovery and differentiation opportunities	16/24	Potential opportunity
Need for practical orientation	20/24	Constraint
Wellness-break boundary concerns	15/24	Constraint
Local disruptions and continuity planning	14/24	Constraint
Family communication complexity	13/24	Constraint

Actionable orientation emerged as the most recurrent code, followed by compressed assessment cycles. The pattern suggested that teachers' perceived readiness was likely to depend on procedural examples, not merely awareness of the new calendar's broad objectives. Knowledge of when a term began did not automatically resolve how assessment evidence should be accumulated and reported.

At the same time, longer coherent blocks of instruction and expanded opportunities for learning recovery formed a distinct opportunity cluster. These themes reflected the reform's stated objective of making time for teaching and intervention more organized. Their presence alongside workload concerns illustrated that respondents could regard the overall reform favorably while questioning particular implementation details.

Code-frequency counting was used as a transparency check, not as a poll. A theme linked to 14 profiles was not necessarily less important than one linked to 20; a serious barrier affecting a smaller set of contexts might still warrant division-level attention. In qualitative case analysis, coherence, consequences, and explanatory value remained central.

3.1 Theme 1. Assessment compression and sequence alignment

The constructed narratives characterized assessment pressure as a mismatch between teaching tasks, assessment timing, and the administrative calendar. Teachers anticipated that frequent summative activity could reduce the period available for feedback and remediation if tasks were copied unchanged from an earlier system. The difficulty was not necessarily the number of terms but the need to recalibrate each subject's evidence of learning.

A workable response would distinguish classroom assessment used to guide teaching from required reporting milestones. Teachers would map competencies, identify essential assessment evidence, and schedule feedback before high-stakes collection points. This approach was consistent with examining the revised assessment order alongside the three-term policy instead of treating each in isolation.[4,1]

3.2 Theme 2. Longer instructional blocks as a design opportunity

Several profiles framed uninterrupted teaching blocks as an opportunity to organize concept development and applied practice more coherently. This was especially relevant for tasks requiring iterative revision: literacy work, science inquiries, mathematical practice, and performance-based learning. The possible benefit depended on using time deliberately rather than simply postponing the same volume of assessments.

The reform could support coherent sequences only when planning time, teaching materials, and access to specialist support were adequate. Teachers whose timetable was disrupted by school events or emergency closures might not experience the same continuity even with an improved official calendar. The theme thus pointed to implementation conditions rather than a guaranteed learning outcome.

3.3 Theme 3. Administrative transition and reporting burden

The gradebook-adjustment theme concerned teachers' efforts to reconcile new reporting cycles with existing templates, subject requirements, and family expectations. Repeated manual entry into parallel systems was interpreted as a risk to instructional time. Participants in a real study would need to identify specific forms and reporting systems before the workload effect could be substantiated.

School leaders could reduce duplication by providing unified term checklists, consistent reporting templates, and clear deadlines that respected periods reserved for teaching and assessment. A pilot audit should record the actual time required for planning, grading, checking, and reporting before attributing a workload increase to the three-term design.

3.4 Theme 4. Learning recovery and differentiation

Teachers' opportunity-oriented profiles emphasized that a predictable term rhythm might create better points for detecting learning gaps and providing targeted support. The value of the structure would depend on whether teachers could interpret evidence promptly and connect learners with support rather than simply record a final grade at the end of a term.

Different learners required different forms of remediation and enrichment. A generic catch-up day was unlikely to serve every learning need. The more useful implementation strategy was to connect baseline assessment, ongoing feedback, and targeted response through clear plans, sufficient materials, and appropriately trained staff.

3.5 Theme 5. Orientation translated into practical examples

The profiles distinguished information sessions from usable instructional guidance. Teachers could attend a presentation yet remain uncertain about borderline grades, performance tasks spanning term boundaries, assessment adjustment after class suspension, or the division of reporting duties. The needed output from professional learning was therefore exemplars and decision support.

The national orientation program acknowledged interdependencies among assessment, lesson planning, flexible learning, and emergency continuity. Division technical assistance could build on that structure through worked grade-level examples, frequently asked questions, and a channel for consistent answers to recurring policy questions.[2]

3.6 Theme 6. Wellness time and professional boundaries

Planned breaks could support recovery and preparation if school schedules protected them from becoming additional reporting or meeting periods. Some profiles framed the reform as a potential improvement in professional rhythm; others anticipated that unfinished administrative work might spill into scheduled rest. This tension required attention to actual assigned tasks and time use.

Well-being should not be inferred from calendar design alone. The OECD's TALIS work documented the broader relationship between professional demands and teacher experiences. It offered comparative context for considering workload, while local field evidence would be necessary to determine whether the reform affected stress or satisfaction in Tabuk City.[7]

3.7 Theme 7. Weather-related disruption and continuity

The continuity-oriented profiles identified emergency interruption as a complicating condition for any fixed calendar. A planned instructional block could be interrupted by environmental events, transport difficulty, or reduced connectivity. The appropriate question was how schools adapted learning plans and assessment timelines while protecting the safety of students and staff.

The updated learning-continuity guidance made this a substantive part of implementation rather than an exceptional afterthought. Teachers needed clarity about which competencies required prioritization, how interrupted tasks could be completed equitably, and how families would receive timely instructions through redundant communication channels.[6]

3.8 Theme 8. Family communication and expectation management

Family communication emerged as a distinct domain because term changes affected the expected timing of assessments, progress reports, conferences, and interventions. Teachers might understand the reform internally yet encounter confusion among parents who continued to expect an earlier reporting rhythm. Plain-language term calendars and consistent school messages were therefore central to public-facing implementation.

Communication needed to reach families with unequal access to digital notices. Printed information, learner journals, local-language explanations, and school contacts could complement online announcements. A future field study should examine comprehension and response rates rather than count messages distributed.

Table 4. Cross-context case pattern matrix

Analytic context	Primary pressure	Potential enabling condition	Alternative explanation
Primary grades	Assessment pacing and family support	Clear learning-progress exemplars	Developmental differences, not calendar alone
Upper elementary	Integrating content across term blocks	Collaborative planning windows	Local event calendars
Secondary core areas	Coverage/assessment sequence	Department-level assessment maps	Subject content volume
Applied/elective areas	Extended performance tasks	Flexible task milestones	Material availability
Smaller or mixed-grade setting	Coverage continuity under staffing constraints	Cross-grade support plans	Staffing and transport conditions
Administrative-role context	Reporting and verification burden	Unified forms and clear deadlines	Legacy duplicated systems

The cross-context matrix clarified that a common calendar might produce different work sequences. Performance-based teaching could benefit from longer project windows, while administrative duties could accumulate around reporting milestones. These potential differences supported bounded implementation guidance rather than a single intervention applied without regard to grade, subject, or school routines.

Alternative explanations reduced over-attribution. If a teacher reported compressed time, the cause might involve unplanned activities, delayed materials, existing assessment requirements, or school-specific reporting procedures. An empirical case study would test these alternatives through documentary review and direct inquiry.

The matrix suggested that school-level planning teams should pair policy fidelity with local flexibility. The central office could state non-negotiable standards; division and school leaders could then clarify which sequencing choices teachers legitimately controlled. Making that boundary explicit could strengthen consistency without unnecessarily restricting pedagogical judgment.

Table 5. Chronology of the policy transition used for analysis

Period	Verified or bounded event	Primary analysis question
April 2026	National three-term policy issued; orientations announced	What were teachers asked to learn before implementation?
May 2026	Public explanation of policy structure and purpose	Which intended benefits required operational support?
June 2026	School year began; complementary classroom policies issued	How were planning and assessment requirements aligned?
June–September 2026	First term and initial classroom implementation window	What early practices and adjustment difficulties emerged?
September–early October 2026	Transition into Term 2; manuscript case cutoff	Which issues persisted across the first transition?
After October 2026	Beyond the analytical observation boundary	No outcome conclusions were drawn for later terms

The temporal boundary was a substantive design decision. As of the manuscript date, early implementation could be examined, but the later phases of the school year had not fully unfolded. The study therefore avoided language implying that all three terms were observed or that year-end learner outcomes were available.

Documentary evidence dated the reform and its related issuances. The teacher-experience strand was limited to an illustrative early implementation window. An eventual field study should preserve actual interview and record dates because perceptions might change once teachers completed further terms and encountered a full cycle of grading and school activities.

A repeated case follow-up after Term 3 would offer a useful extension. It could distinguish transitional difficulties, which tend to improve after experience and guidance, from structural workload problems that remain even when teachers become familiar with the policy.

Table 6. Policy-to-practice evidence requirements

Implementation dimension	Empirical verification source	Minimum analytic check
Curriculum and lesson pacing	Approved lesson plans and teacher planning logs	Map learning targets to term dates
Classroom assessment	School-approved assessment plan and graded samples	Check number, timing, and feedback interval
Parent communication	Published notices, parent guidance and feedback	Check comprehension and accessibility
Workload	Teacher time diary, required forms and schedule	Separate reform tasks from legacy tasks
Wellness and professional learning	INSET schedules and assigned activity records	Check protection of rest boundaries
Continuity in emergencies	School continuity and safety plans	Check feasible alternatives during disruption

The evidence matrix translated general opinions into testable implementation claims. If a teacher perceived new reporting burdens, a diary and form inventory could determine whether duplicate entry was the relevant cause. If assessment was described as rushed, a sequence map could identify whether the problem arose from task concentration or reduced formative feedback opportunities.

Triangulation would be useful only if evidence sources were genuinely independent and relevant. Two documents repeating the same central guidance would not independently prove local implementation, and a school head's report of completed orientation would not necessarily establish that teachers could apply the policy.

A well-designed case record would therefore include dated policy documents, securely handled interview material, teaching-plan artifacts where appropriate, analytic memos, and a clear explanation of why each source supported a particular finding. Confidentiality and voluntary participation would take priority over the appearance of exhaustive documentation.

4. Discussion

4.1 Policy intent, fidelity, and adaptation

Calendar reform posed a familiar governance challenge: preserving national policy objectives while adapting operational details to diverse school conditions. Fidelity should refer to compliance with essential requirements rather than identical implementation in every classroom. Adaptation was legitimate when it respected the policy, learning standards, and learners' right to consistent education.

School administrators could operationalize the distinction by publishing a term implementation map that identified mandated activities, locally adjustable sequences, communication responsibilities, and escalation channels for unresolved policy questions. This would reduce the tendency to interpret every uncertainty as a violation.

4.2 Implementation was an instructional-design problem

Teachers' work was shaped by the sequence of evidence gathering, feedback, practice, and adjustment. A school year divided into three terms could support learning when those sequences were coordinated. It could also produce congestion if every subject retained disconnected assessments without considering the new term rhythm.

Instructional leaders could promote small collaborative planning sessions centered on term maps, unit durations, checkpoints for feedback, and explicit intervention periods. The emphasis should be on classroom examples and decisions rather than compliance presentations that reproduced policy language without showing its application.

4.3 Teacher well-being as an implementation condition

The study considered teacher well-being a condition affecting implementation, not a benefit automatically delivered by a revised calendar. Protected planning and rest time could be undermined if reporting deadlines or training demands crowded the same periods. Consequently, workload audits and careful scheduling mattered as much as public communication about wellness breaks.

This interpretation was consistent with broader evidence connecting teachers' professional experiences to autonomy and demands, while avoiding direct extrapolation from international surveys to a Philippine division.[7]

4.4 Learner equity and continuity

Learners experiencing interruption, disability-related barriers, limited connectivity, or unstable attendance could require differentiated pacing and assessment accommodations. A calendar reform that appeared efficient in aggregate might still disadvantage particular learners unless school plans created realistic opportunities for recovery and participation.

Emergency learning continuity guidance offered a useful policy basis for anticipating disruption before it occurred. A school plan should identify priority objectives, acceptable offline approaches, communication methods, and roles in documenting unfinished tasks. These processes could protect instructional continuity without compromising safety.[6]

4.5 The role of division-level technical assistance

Division assistance would be most useful when it addressed frequently encountered decision problems: interpreting assessment provisions, adjusting long performance tasks, synchronizing grade reporting, and protecting teacher time. Clear written answers shared across schools could prevent inconsistent interpretations and repeated requests for clarification.

A help-desk log could distinguish one-time questions from recurrent implementation bottlenecks. Rather than ranking schools by reported difficulties, supervisors could use patterns to prioritize exemplars, targeted coaching, or policy clarification. The aim would be to strengthen adaptive capacity rather than reward silence about implementation problems.

4.6 Contribution and limits of an early case study

A bounded early case study could explain how reform expectations interacted with teacher routines, but it could not demonstrate effects on learning achievement, overall teacher stress, or final-year completion before appropriate outcome data were available. Its principal contribution was a structured analytic agenda for comparing policy intent with the lived process of adjustment.

Following Yin's case-study logic, stronger field evidence would involve explicit source chains and credible rival explanations. Reflexive thematic practice would further require clarity about the investigator's interpretive role. These requirements distinguished a rigorous case from a collection of attractive but unverifiable personal stories.[8,9]

5. Conclusion

The three-term school calendar offered a coherent policy opportunity to reorganize instructional time, assessment, and learning support. The early case-study framework nevertheless showed why implementation needed more than announcing new term dates. Teachers required concrete assessment exemplars, usable lesson-planning guidance, efficient reporting procedures, meaningful preparation time, and reliable communication with families.

The analytical case also highlighted implementation as a shared responsibility. Schools controlled daily planning and communication, while division and national offices shaped standards, interpretation, and technical assistance. Monitoring should examine the quality of this connection rather than equate compliance with attendance at orientation sessions.

The verified policy sources supported the reform context; the teacher-perspective corpus supplied a transparent methodological illustration. Conclusions about actual experiences in SDO Tabuk City could be made only after the case was reconstituted with approved and traceable field evidence.

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