

Is mid-August too early to start school?

Some parents say start should be after Labor Day.

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Students in South Bend and Mishawaka tied their new shoelaces, loaded up their backpacks and headed back to school Aug. 12.

A day later, Penn-Harris-Madison School Corp. students did the same thing.

That's 10 days earlier than the previous year.

For many parents, like Jennifer Casetti of Granger, mid-August just feels too early to send children back to school.

"When we moved here seven years ago, it wasn't this way," said Casetti, who has three children in elementary school. "Last year it moved to (Aug. 23) and this year it moved to Aug. 13. I feel like I'm being robbed of my family time."

Casetti would prefer that Indiana follow the recent path of Michigan, which passed a state law in 2005 that a public school year not begin before Labor Day, which is the first Monday of September.

Michigan lawmakers made the move in large part to help protect the state's tourism industry.

Casetti feels strongly enough about a later start date that she is helping circulate petitions advocating for it.

It has been decades since most schools in Indiana began the school calendar after Labor Day.

But, it has only been a couple of years since the start date has crept nearer to the beginning of August than its end.

Educators in Indiana point to the ISTEP exam and the enhanced state and federal accountability tethered to it for pushing up the start date.

Many school corporations and teacher organizations began trending toward mid-August start dates several years ago.

The school calendar is a negotiating point between teachers' unions and school corporations.

With students taking the ISTEP in early to mid-September, the extra time allowed for review and preparation of the previous school year's standards.

A year ago, however, Indiana decided to switch its ISTEP testing cycle from fall to spring. Therefore, 2008 will be the last fall ISTEP test before moving to the spring in 2009.

Among the reasons for the change, Gov. Mitch Daniels mentioned, is that students are starting school too early.

"The test will be in the spring," Daniels said last October. "The results will be in hand months sooner, the cost to taxpayers will go down and school will no longer start sooner than it should."

James Kapsa, interim superintendent of the South Bend Community School Corp., said he can't see schools moving toward a later start date even with the spring ISTEP.

"Simply because," Kapsa explained, "the high school teachers are very comfortable with having the first semester over with at Christmas."

State law mandates that schools provide 180 instructional days per year. The earlier start date allows the end of the first semester to coincide with winter break.

It also allows the school year -- with the exception of snow days in some cases -- to conclude before Memorial Day.

State Rep. Ryan Dvorak, D-South Bend, said the school start date topic has been broached recently downstate, but never made a serious run through the legislature. In fact, it never got out of committee.

Casetti would at least like to have a statewide conversation about when school should start and end. She also is cautious that school corporations are angling toward a year-round school calendar without adequate discussion.

"We have talented teachers," Casetti said. "We have dedicated parents. And we have hard-working students. That's what makes our schools great, not how you configure the schedule."

A typical year-round school has a 30-day summer break followed by 45 days of instruction.

Fall break is 15 days followed by 30 days of instruction then three days off for Thanksgiving break.

After 15 more instructional days, students have 15 days off for winter break.

Then it's 45 days of instruction, 15 days off for spring break and 45 days more days of instruction to close out the cycle.

Kapsa said that South Bend schools took a look at the year-round concept back in the early 1990s, but it never really gained traction.

Across the country, however, the idea has picked up considerable momentum since the first year-round school was opened in California 40 years ago. Today, there are nearly 3,000 year-round schools in the United States, including 26 in Indiana, according to the National Association for Year Round Education.

Mary Ann Zimmerman, Uni-Serv director of the National Education Association-South Bend, said that the possibility of year-round school in South Bend has never come up during her three-plus years here.

With the change in ISTEP testing, Zimmerman said it will be interesting how it affects the start date.

"It might change what we do next year," Zimmerman said. "But we just don't know yet. We haven't even put out questionnaires about it yet."

"There were a significant number of teachers who don't like the earlier start date, but the majority of them do like it."

Dvorak said he surveyed his constituents on a variety of issues, among them if they would favor legislation mandating a post-Labor Day start to school.

He said of the 1,600 responses he received, 66 percent were in favor of it.

Still, that doesn't mean there will be a big push at the statehouse for such a law, he said. It simply means there is some support for such a change.

"There is more potential for a productive debate at the local level," Dvorak said. "It's going to be easier to affect that kind of change there rather than with legislation."

Casetti believes it's a debate worth having.

"Honestly, I love spending time with my kids (in the summer)," Casetti said. "Whether it's riding bikes, swimming at the lake ... doing all the things that are wonderful about summer, which we don't have a lot of here in Indiana."