

Later school start makes economic, educational sense

By ANDREA NEAL
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If Gov. Mitch Daniels wants schools to open closer to Labor Day, he needs to enlist Hoosier parents for support. In other states that have rebelled against ever-earlier August start dates, parents have been the key lobbying group.

In announcing the move of the ISTEP test from fall to spring, Daniels expressed hope that schools would "start at a more natural time" because they would no longer be prepping for September ISTEPs. This year, among Indiana schools following traditional calendars, start dates ranged from an outrageously early Aug. 8 to a sensible Aug. 24. The majority of schools opened the week of Aug. 14.

Daniels' suggestion was nixed immediately by the Indiana Association of Public School Superintendents, which said schools have to start in mid-August so semester exams can occur before Christmas break.

That reaction is typical of the education establishment, which seems to think convenience is the primary driver of policy. There is no academic reason to end a semester before Christmas. The only argument for doing so is to let students relax without having to worry about upcoming tests.

According to Texans for a Traditional School Year, a group that formed when Texas was debating this very issue, "Research shows that the school calendar configuration does not impact academic performance. In fact, a majority of the top 10 academic states in the nation began school in late August or early September and administered first semester finals after the winter break."

Professor William H. Cunningham of the University of Texas, who chaired the Texas School Start Date Task Force, said learning is actually more permanent when there is a short break between instruction and testing.

"A widely known psychological phenomenon known as the spacing effect implies that students' long-term learning will be improved if students study the material, take a break from their studies, review the material again and then take an examination," he said in testimony to the Texas Legislature.

"This is perfectly consistent with the traditional school year where students take their fall semester exams after the Christmas holiday."

This may explain why most public schools in New England and the West Coast start around Labor Day and give first semester exams in mid- or late January.

No matter the start date, schools must hold a minimum of 180 instructional days under state law. Barring a longer school year (which would be a good idea if we want to improve test scores), the two policy questions are: Since Indiana determines the length of the school year, should it also set a uniform start date? If so, is it better to open in August and end in May or to start around Labor Day and end the year in June?

To the first question, the answer is a definite yes. Local control sounds good on paper, but it's caused the race to the front we've already experienced: schools moving their start dates earlier and earlier to get an advantage on standardized tests. Even with ISTEP in the spring, schools will argue that the more content a student covers before testing, the better scores will be.

A uniform start would bring to academics a benefit already in effect for sports teams, which cannot begin practice before a certain date under Indiana High School Athletic Association rules to ensure none has an unfair advantage.

As to the second question, there are economic and academic reasons to delay the start of school. Although many schools have air conditioning, a majority of urban schools do not. Sweltering August classrooms are no environment for learning. This year, Indianapolis public schools and Muncie city schools had to dismiss classes early or cancel them altogether due to room temperatures above 80 degrees.

Energy costs are higher in August, too. In July 2002, faced with a \$17 million two-year budget deficit, the Tulsa Oklahoma school district pushed its Aug. 19 school start date to the day after Labor Day. Savings were close to \$1 million, enough to hire 30 teachers.

In the scheme of things, the start date is a minor issue facing schools. But if it makes sense to mandate a later one, we should do it, as 11 states recently have done. It took more than a decade to get ISTEP switched back to spring, when it should be. At this rate of change, no wonder our test scores aren't improving more quickly.

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