



Parent group lobbies for later school-start dates

Tuesday, 02 September 2008

Current early-August school-start dates receive an "F" for fiscal responsibility and student compassion, according to many parents. The parent group Save Indiana Summers recently "flunked" the schools for forcing children back to school in early August.

"Fuel costs are at an all time high and school districts should be doing everything they can to tighten budgets without taking money from student programs," said Carmel mother Nancy Curless. "Starting the year in mid-August doesn't help academic performance but does limit educational opportunities outside of the classroom."

Parents in the group say they are baffled when they listen to school board members discuss making cuts to academic programming, classroom supplies and staffing levels when the districts' have not pushed back the school start date.

"The standardized tests have been moved to the spring," said Curless. "School districts can no longer say the early school start dates are needed to prepare our children for fall standardized tests."

Research shows early-August school start dates don't aid academic performance but do increase non-instructional costs. "It's ridiculous to suggest a start date impacts academic performance. That credit belongs to our hardworking students, talented teachers and involved parents," said parent Alfredo Casetti of Granger.

Data collected from other states clearly shows that reducing the number of school days in August translates into great savings in cooling costs. Save Indiana Summers supporters believe this money could help keep buses running, increase the number of teacher aides in classrooms and reduce the out-of-pocket costs for teachers.

"If a later school start date added five hours of small group tutoring, one teacher or more money for classroom supplies, it would be worth it," said Casetti.

Last year, a number of Texas schools saw dramatic savings after a new state law passed requiring schools to begin on the fourth Monday of August. The Dallas Independent School District cut its electric costs for August in half, and saved more than \$2 million.

"Funding for student programs should be our number one goal," said Casetti. "Holding school in August takes valuable tax dollars out of our classrooms. It simply costs much more to cool our schools in August with students in the classrooms than in May or June."

Mississippi Superintendent Henry Arledge said a late-August-to-May calendar could work in everywhere. The key would be to push back the date for state standardized tests by three weeks in the spring. "If all public schools begin classes on the same day and take the standardized tests on the same day, it creates a system of fairness across the state," Arledge explained. "A uniform calendar allows us to more accurately analyze test scores and best practices."

"In sports, we insist that all participants begin at the same starting line," Arledge said. "We need to apply this consistent approach to school start dates and testing dates as well."

Arledge said pushing back the school start date should also reduce school cooling costs, since early August tends to be the hottest time of the school year. Utility savings could be used for instructional programs, such as better preparing children to start kindergarten. "I think most administrators and teachers would agree that shifting money from air conditioning to student achievement makes good sense," Arledge said.

A recent SurveyUSA poll of Indiana residents 69 percent of respondents said they prefer a calendar which included a longer summer vacation with traditional holiday breaks versus a plan involving a shorter summer vacation and more breaks during the school year. Sixty-two percent favored a uniform school start date for all schools.

The survey also showed Seventy-eight percent favored a school start date of the last week on August or later with the majority wanting a post-Labor Day school start date. And, 78 percent said they had never been asked for input on the school calendar.

Those interested in showing support for a later school start date can log onto the Save Alabama Summers web site at www.SaveIndianaSummers.com and sign the on-line petition.

Wisconsin, North Carolina, Michigan, Texas, Florida, South Carolina, Virginia, Arkansas, Iowa, West Virginian and Minnesota all have laws governing school start dates on the books.

Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Indiana, Tennessee, Kentucky and Ohio all have similar grassroots movements underway to push back the start to the school year.