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Proposal: Start school after Labor Day

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A proposal to require school to start after Labor Day is gaining momentum in the House, a ranking lawmaker said Wednesday.

Rep. Tom Tangretti, D-Westmoreland, chairman of the House Tourism and Recreational Development Committee, said a bill mandating later school starts could pass the House by this summer. But he was unsure if it could also pass the Senate and be enacted in time to affect the 2007-08 school year.

"I really believe it does have legs," Tangretti said of the bill sponsored by Rep. Robert Godshall, R-Montgomery.

Tangretti presided over three hours of committee testimony on the bill Wednesday, and opinions were mixed.

The bill, which would not affect the state-required minimum of 180 school days by June 15, is backed by many tourism-related businesses who say it would allow an extra week for family vacations, allow students to complete summer jobs and boost the state's economy.

Many school officials oppose it, saying the state should not meddle in local school calendars. Critics also say earlier starts are needed to ensure snow days can be rescheduled and accommodate teacher contracts that increasingly require more instructional days.

Starting classes before Labor Day is a trend that began after a stretch of bad winters in the 1970s, and almost 90 percent of Pennsylvania public schools now start before Labor Day.

States such as Virginia, Michigan and Minnesota already require school to start after Labor Day.

Besides Godshall, those who testified for the bill Wednesday included officials from the Pennsylvania State Association of County Fairs and the Pennsylvania Golf Course Owners Association. The Pennsylvania Convention and Visitors Bureau is also a lead supporter. Officials from the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators testified against it.

Godshall touted a recent study by the bipartisan Legislative Budget and Finance Committee that concluded later school starts would pump $378 million into the state's economy. Godshall also argued that schools could accommodate the new mandate by cutting back on mid-year holidays.

PSBA president Bill LaCoff argued against the bill, calling it "an unwanted state mandate that is capable of being resolved at the local level."

"Every school district is different and every case is different," added Stinson Stroup, executive director of the school administrators association.

Rep. Dan Moul, R-Adams, sits on the committee and said he strongly backs the bill.

Moul said the Gettysburg area depends on tourism and "taking away one week of the summer is very detrimental to economic growth."

Rep. Keith Gillespie, R-Hellam, also sits on the committee and said he's leaning toward supporting the bill. Gillespie recently surveyed his constituents, and a majority support a later school start, he said.

"I'm generally against mandates, but I think on this one I'm leaning toward it because of the feedback I got on my survey," Gillespie said.

ON THE WEB:

Backers of the bill from Rep. Robert Godshall, R-Montgomery, have a Web site at www.savepennsylvania

summers.org

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