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Labor Day first, then school?

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By Alison Knezevich

HARRISBURG -- School bells have been ringing for days in many Pittsburgh-area classrooms, but some state lawmakers want to ensure that no Pennsylvania public school starts until after Labor Day in coming years.

A bill in the state House of Representatives would require all schools to delay the first day of school until after Labor Day -- a move the proposal's sponsors say would help the state's amusement parks, which often cut hours and lose profits when their school-aged employees return to classes before the holiday.

"The Labor Day weekend can be a make-or-break weekend for them," said Rep. Robert Godshall, R-Montgomery County, chairman of the House's committee on tourism and recreation development.

Godshall said tourism and recreation are crucial to Pennsylvania's economy, making up the state's second biggest industry after agriculture.

The idea has been circulating in state government for about two decades, said Andy Quinn, spokesman for Kennywood, Sandcastle and Idlewild parks, where hours have been slashed in the past week due to the lack of employees.

But many say local education officials need flexibility to make the right decisions about school schedules.

"They're the ones that ultimately are accountable for the performance of their students," said Tim Allwein, assistant executive director for governmental relations at the Pennsylvania School Boards Association. "And they're the ones that should set the calendar, not the state."

Currently, such decisions are left up to local school districts. Across Allegheny County, the earliest start was Aug. 22; the latest, Tuesday, according to the Allegheny Intermediate Unit.

Many school administrators say months of planning have gone into determining those dates.

All districts must first ensure that students get 180 days of instruction, as mandated by the state. But after that, a number of other factors come into play: Weather, teacher contracts and building renovations.

"It's a pretty interactive process," said Jody Spolar, the director of employee relations for Pittsburgh Public Schools who helps plan the calendar.

The district, whose students started Thursday, chooses start and end dates with input from principals, transportation and financial administrators, sports coaches and others, she said.

The city's schools had for years started after Labor Day, but the holiday fell so late last year that administrators broke tradition, worried that students would be stewing in hot classrooms late in June, Spolar said.

"It worked fairly well and so we did it again this year," she said.

Weather and the lack of air-conditioning in older buildings is a frequent factor in developing school calendars in other districts, too. They also must consider the possibility of snow days.

Construction is another consideration.

The Mt. Lebanon School District won't return until after Labor Day because of renovations to the elementary schools, spokeswoman Cissy Bowman said.

Students in the Baldwin-Whitehall district have been in school since Aug. 22 because the district needs a long summer next year for renovations to its high school, superintendent Donna Milanovich said.

The renovations won't be completed until 2008, so Milanovich said that would dictate the district's calendar the next few years.

"I think it needs to be a local decision," she said.

Both Godshall and Quinn said the legislation would take such factors into account.

"There's always room for exceptions to everything," Godshall said. "There are valid reasons for why somebody has to start early."

But he said that in some districts, too many vacation days during the school year are often the problem, not late starts. He has analyzed six school districts so far and found that they had an average of one vacation day for every 10 school days.

"That's a trend, and it's getting worse," he said.

Quinn said it seems schools have been starting earlier and earlier in recent years.

That has big effects on Kennywood's, Idlewild's and Sandcastle's operations, he said, because up to 85 percent of the three parks' 2,800 seasonal employees attend school.

The scant workforce at summer's end means Idlewild and Sandcastle closed last week, and Kennywood didn't open until 5 p.m., he said. All the parks are open again during the holiday weekend.

Quinn said amusement parks help fuel local economies and generate tax revenue.

Only seven states have laws mandating specific school start dates, said Sara Vitaska, an education research analyst at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Of those states, Minnesota and Virginia require schools to start after Labor Day. In Virginia, the law is nicknamed the "Kings Dominion Law" after an amusement park there. Some states specify other dates, such as on or after Sept. 1 or Aug. 25.

More states are considering school-start laws, Vitaska said. A government committee in Tennessee has been commissioned to look at the issue, and Kentucky created a task force this year to study the effect of school calendars on the state's tourism industry.

No legislative action has been taken on the Pennsylvania bill, but the House tourism committee will discuss school start dates at an informational meeting in Harrisburg on Sept. 13.

(Alison Knezevich is an intern for the Pennsylvania Legislative Correspondents Association.)

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