The Williamsport Sun-Gazette

# Tourism bureaus, Coalition for a Traditional School Calendar present testimony

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HARRISBURG — Pre Labor Day or post Labor Day, that is the question.

Proponents of starting the school year before Labor Day and those seeking a mandatory statewide change to wait until after Labor Day offered testimony to a state House Travel and Tourism Committee on Wednesday.

Immediate action was not taken, but the testimony provided will be reviewed by the committee in the coming weeks before being called to a vote to send it to the full House. State House Bill 258 was filed in February and, if passed, will set the school start date to post-Labor Day for all state public schools for the 2008-09 school year.

Representatives from state visitors bureaus, tourism and lodging agencies and Pennsylvania State Association presented their testimony, saying that their organizations would benefit economically if school had a later start date with longer school days. Others presented in favor of keeping the calendar the way it is or supported year-round school.

“All of us on both sides of this issue have a vested interest in seeing that quality education is being provided to children in Pennsylvania,” said Jason Fink, executive director of the Lycoming County Visitors Bureau. “It’s just that we each have a different perspective on how this should be delivered.”

Tina Bruno, executive director of the Coalition for a Traditional School Calendar provided her testimony for the group opposed to a post-Labor Day school start date. The group believes that the non-traditional school year interferes with learning that takes place outside the classroom and hinders the educational process.

“Bloated school calendars, extended-year calendars and year-round school calendars limit the time teachers have to update skills and earn advanced degrees, reduce student working experiences and interfere with many families’ ability to spend quality time for our students and offer no proven results,” according to the group’s statement.

In her testimony, Bruno highlighted how non-traditional calendars impact families, teachers and students with key topics involving the agrarian calendar, student activities and college start dates.

In Harrisburg, some concern was raised about why the state is able to place mandates relating to local education. “There are so many districts that are starting after Labor Day anyway ... the state should be the one setting the start date for an equal playing field,” Bruno said.

Area superintendents and school board members think differently about the issue.

Thomas Farr, superintendent at South Williamsport, said his main complaint is regarding the mandate and not the start date.

“It’s another example of over-extension of the legislature into the local schools,” he said. “It doesn’t matter to me when we start. Traditionally we start before, but we could start before or after (Labor Day).”

At present, 88 percent of Pennsylvania school districts begin before Labor Day, Fink said

previously.

“Districts are working hard to improve learning and test scores,” Williamsport School Board President David B. Stone said.

“Most research says that more time in school spread over more days will improve learning and test scores. Saying the school year can be shortened further by adding a little time to each day sounds educationally unsound.”

Stone had a letter to the editor published in the Sun-Gazette and said he received thank you e-mails and praise from teachers in the city for writing it.

“This is a battle that’s been going on forever but our main objection is that we try to fight for local control,” Stone said.

Having set dates for standardized tests could mean less time to teach the material if school started later, Stone said.

“We have had long-standing relations with the superintendents, but this is just one issue we don’t quite see eye-to-eye on,” Fink said.

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