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Area Boards Want State OK to Start School Before Labor Day

B.P.'s Smith, Lawmakers Back Early Start to Improve Academics

When the Belle Plaine School Board met in a planning retreat earlier this month, improving academic performance and implementation of a 1 to 1 technology plan to help students earn better grades were among the main topics.

But another idea for improving academic performance and grades on standardized tests is starting school earlier than the traditional day after Labor Day.

One of the ways to improve performance on statewide mandated tests could involve more time preparing for the exams through starting school before the holiday weekend. Just how early the districts may ultimately want to start the school year before the traditional end-of-summer holiday weekend is to be determined.

A group of school districts in the Minnesota River Valley south and southeast of Belle Plaine and the Minnesota River Conference is pushing for legislation to permit them to start before the Labor Day holiday. This would give students time to get back into the swing of things academically after the summer break and prepare for the exams.

Currently, state law prohibits schools to begin before Labor Day without a state OK.

The Minnesota Department of Education has required windows of time during which the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) can be administered. School officials believe additional time preparing students for those exams – be it a few days or a week or two – could help improve scores.

Change the Law

Area school districts in the Minnesota River Valley, including St. Peter, Le Sueur-Henderson and Tri-City United, are supporting legislation permitting them to start before Labor Day when the legislature returns to St. Paul later this month.

Smith likewise supports the district's right to start the school year when it wants to and not by a formula at least partially rooted in agrarian tradition.

Sen. Kevin Dahle, DFL-Northfield, has supported legislation allowing districts to start school at a date of their selection. Dahle, a teacher when the legislature is not in session, said strong opposition comes from lobbyists representing the state's tourism industry.

"I believe local school districts, with community input, should have the final say in those decisions," Dahle said.

Rep. Kelby Woodard, R-Belle Plaine, also supports the idea of districts being able to select their own start date. His district includes portions of southern Scott and eastern Le Sueur counties, including Le Center.

"I am optimistic that this change can be made in the next session," he said, "but the odds

are not good due to the strong opposition of groups such as the resort owners.”

St. Peter School District Superintendent Rich Olson, Le Sueur-Henderson Superintendent Rich Hanson and TCU Superintendent Teri Preisler see the start date as a matter of local control districts are pursuing legislatively. They are supporting legislation that permits local school districts to select their own start dates.

Smith agrees with the idea of local control. Although the Belle Plaine School Board has not formally taken a position on the legislation. Smith believes it is a potential benefit for academic performance and improved test scores.

With board approval, Belle Plaine could start the school year before Labor Day even if the other districts in the SouthWest Metropolitan Learning Cooperative decided to follow tradition and start after Labor Day.

Keith Kottke, superintendent of the Springfield, Minn. School District said scores on MCA II and MCA III standardized exams have seen improvement since the district and its 610 students in kindergarten through 12th grades began starting the school year two weeks before Labor Day. The district is in its fourth year of an early opening day.

In 2010, half the Springfield district's seventh-graders were proficient in the MCA II math exam. Last year on the MCA III math tests, 72 percent of the district's seventh-graders achieved proficiency. The district finished just ahead of the state average in the MCA III exam in science. Its overall proficiency rate jumped from 39 to 63 percent since 2010. The district has also seen its rate of graduation slowly increase, from 87 percent of the Class of 2010 to 93 percent of the Class of 2013.

Kottke also believes the at-risk students significantly benefit academically from an earlier start.

Part of the improvement on exams is that overall academics are the result of more time for staff professional developments. The Springfield School District works with neighboring school districts.

Proponents say another facet of starting earlier is the alignment of a school calendar. An earlier start could potentially allow the semester to end at the holiday break in December. Currently, the semester ends just after students return from the holiday break. The earlier start also aligns better for students earning college credits through post-secondary enrollment option (PSEO) and college in the schools (CIS) courses.