

## Delegates offer new approaches to Labor Day school debate

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Members of the House of Delegates are trying new ways to approach a perennial debate.

Two lawmakers have offered paths to give schools flexibility from Virginia's mandate that schools start classes after Labor Day.

For years, education groups have lined up on one side of the debate, arguing that a quality education should trump dollars and cents and that starting earlier would allow more instructional time ahead of high-stakes tests.

In the other corner are the tourism, travel and retail associations, which argue that taking a bite out of the end of summer could sap hundreds of millions of dollars in economic activity.

The House Education Committee on Monday advanced three proposals, two that take a different approach.

Del. Chris Stolle, R-Virginia Beach, wants to allow a division to open a school early if that school has failed to achieve full accreditation. The entire division could set its own calendar if more than 15 percent of all of its schools have failed to achieve full accreditation status.

Stolle has said his House bill 577 would give schools the option to shift to a year-round calendar.

"We've talked a lot about actually taking schools away from localities," Stolle told a subcommittee last week. "We need to give them the tools to function without going through unnecessary steps to get that done."

House bill 610, brought by Del. Roxann L. Robinson, R-Chesterfield, would allow schools to set their own start dates but requires that they give students a five-day weekend for the Labor Day holiday.

Schools could either close the Thursday before Labor Day through the holiday or close the Friday before through the day after Labor Day.

Representatives of chambers of commerce and the tourism industry have told lawmakers that they prefer how the state currently handles the school calendar.

If school divisions want to start before Labor Day they can request a waiver from the Department of Education for a “good cause,” which can include weather closings or if the schools share a program with another school that has a waiver.

Schools may also seek a waiver if they have an innovative program, including a year-round schedule, but the program must require an earlier opening date.

Kristian Havard, director of government affairs for the Virginia Hospitality & Travel Association, has noted that an early start for students means that teachers would go back even earlier and possibly also athletic teams, bands and others.

“Once school starts, it’s the traditional end to summer” she said Monday.

A study sponsored by the University of Minnesota Tourism Center that looked at travel patterns in five states, including Virginia, found that family trips of two-plus nights away from home dropped by 50 percent in August or September when schools started before Labor Day.

Del. Thomas A. “Tag” Greason, R-Loudoun, has House bill 333, which would give all school divisions the flexibility to set their own calendar. It also passed the Education committee on Monday.

Grace Dwyer, a Chesterfield County resident and student at Maggie L. Walker Governor’s School, asked the House Education Committee on Monday to support Robinson’s legislation.

She said the earlier start would give students more time to prepare for tests such as the Advanced Placement exams in May.

“It would make us more competitive with the private school students who have a lot more time to study for the AP exams in May for high school level and for the June SAT ... it would put us at a much higher level to compete with them,” she said.

Efforts to dump the post-Labor Day start date have failed in the past. Gov. Terry McAuliffe said last week on WRVA radio that he would be open to having certain struggling schools open year-round as a corrective measure, but that he did not generally support schools opening before Labor Day because of the multimillion-dollar economic impact it would have on the state’s tourism industry.

The House Education panel also passed House bill 1229 to delay the A-F school grading system to Oct. 1, 2015 and House bill 720 requiring schools to have a private, designated area for employees who are mothers to express milk for their child.