

Lowery says school districts need autonomy on start of school year

Superintendent doesn't want statewide mandate to start after Labor Day

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Maryland State Superintendent of Schools Lillian Lowery said Tuesday that school districts across the state should be allowed to determine for themselves when to start classes after summer break, whether it's before or after Labor Day.

Lowery said districts now have the autonomy to start the school year when they see fit and she doesn't want a statewide initiative mandating a post-Labor Day start for all districts.

The superintendent spoke in Anne Arundel County at a meeting of a task force considering starting the school year after Labor Day. The Task Force to Study a Post Labor Day Start Date was created by Gov. Martin O'Malley and the General Assembly during last year's Annapolis session to study whether the tourism industry would get a boost if public schools start after Labor Day.

Greg Shockley, chairman of the Maryland Tourism Development Board, said pushing back the start of school would not only benefit tourism, but also education through tax revenue.

"It's about money," said Shockley, owner of Shenanigan's Bar & Grille in Ocean City. "I know you're reluctant to tinker, just as I'm reluctant to tinker with my business, but sometimes you have to take that step."

State school districts must have 180 days of instruction and include certain holidays on the school calendar. Though districts in Maryland can choose to start after Labor Day, none currently do.

The task force meeting at the West County branch library in Odenton was held a day before the start of this year's legislative session — and on one of the coldest days on record in the state. Lowery said school openings Tuesday illustrate the need to give districts autonomy: About one-third of schools were open, one-third had delayed starts and one-third were closed.

"That was a local decision, and they had to look at the needs that were unique to their counties before making a decision," Lowery said. "No one precludes anyone from making a decision to open after Labor Day. ... We believe that the local jurisdictions should have the flexibility to make those decisions."

Members of the task force include Del. Anne Healey of Prince George's County and Sen. James Mathias, who represents Somerset, Wicomico and Worcester counties. The two Democrats had pressed the tourism issue during the 2013 session. Healey had sponsored legislation calling for a statewide post-Labor Day start, but lawmakers chose instead to form the task force.

The group is slated to submit its final report in June, but Healey said the work could be wrapped up as early as February, which would allow legislation to be crafted for the 2014 legislative session, which runs until April 7.

If the task force supports changing the statewide start date to after Labor Day, Healey said, she's ready to sponsor a measure.

"If the task force supports it, then I would be happy to move forward," she said.