



Minnesota's school start date spurs fights

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More schools across Minnesota are petitioning to begin their school year before Labor Day, pitting the tourism industry parents against schools that want to give students more time to prepare for crucial state and national exams.

Parents in Northfield quashed a proposal last week to start school Aug. 13, saying it would conflict with the State Fair programs like 4-H. In Edina, more than 200 parents are protesting a calendar shift to start in August that will be discussed this week, saying it infringes on valuable family time. And in Le Sueur, schools are preparing for a similar fight this month.

Nationwide, Minnesota is one of only three states that mandate the post-Labor Day school start. Education lobbyists have said they'll push again at the State Capitol this year to let school districts adopt their own calendars. Given the perennial debate, some school leaders say it's about time.

"To be locked in an agrarian calendar is not going to serve our state well," Edina Superintendent Ric Dressen said, citing the competitive nature of education. "I recognize the value of tourism. But we have to put our kids first."

Across Minnesota, 59 school districts won state approval to have one or more schools start before Labor Day this year. That's up from 21 in 2003, according to data from the state Department of Education.

State statute requires the post-Labor Day start. To get state approval to be exempt, a district has to submit a waiver for learning-related reasons such as having a four-day school week or needing an earlier start on spring construction projects \$400,000 or more.

Tourism vs. test prep

In Wisconsin and Iowa, schools aren't supposed to start before Sept. 1, but in Iowa, about 98 percent of districts have waivers to start in August. (While the Minnesota State Fair runs late August through Labor Day, Wisconsin's state fair starts the first week of August and Iowa's often starts the second week.)

"It's always a contentious issue for schools," said Kirk Schneidawind of the Minnesota School Boards Association, which is pushing again this year to change the statute. "And that's where the debate should be had. School boards should be able to set a start time for their school district."

A 2008 survey by his group showed that 72 percent of school districts would start before Labor Day (Sept. 2 this year) if given the option. But if that happens, Dan McElroy, who represents the state advocacy group for resorts and campground owners, counters that it would mean higher costs to consumers because the 10-week prime period for resorts would be shortened. His group and several others including the State Fair are preparing to fight this year to keep the law in place.

"It is highly disruptive to the economy to go away from that tradition," he said of the decades-old post-Labor Day school start.

Last year, a University of Minnesota Tourism Center study concluded that starting school before Labor Day decreases the chances by 50 percent that families will take a trip in August or September, and 30 percent across the summer. And at the State Fair, officials expect a drop in attendance if more schools start in August.

In Northfield, nearly 300 people signed a petition and some 50 parents and students lobbied last week against the early start proposal. While tourism officials project economic losses associated with an August start, Northfield Superintendent Chris Richardson counters that there's no research showing a benefit to schools' starting after Labor Day.

"There's really no educational philosophy or research behind that to say that's the right start date," said Richardson, who pushed for the Aug. 13 start to split the semesters evenly by the winter holidays.

Edina parents rally

In Edina this week, parents are rallying in hopes of preventing the district's proposal. District leaders are meeting Wednesday to discuss possibly postponing the August start date. As of now, the proposal lists a start date of Aug. 26 in 2013, but a decision won't come until the school board meets Jan. 28. If it's approved, the district would apply under the construction exemption, citing upgrades to things like ventilation and parking lots.

The number of school days would stay the same and the change would keep Edina's calendar in line with nearby private schools, including Breck, Blake and Benilde-St. Margaret's. Dressen added that the extra week of preparation could boost standardized and advanced-placement (AP) test scores.

"I personally think it's a better time of learning in the middle of August than June," he said. "We compete nationally and school districts throughout the United States start in August. Having five extra days [before tests] would be a value for learning."

Study: Early start helps

A 2008 study looking at the effect on Wisconsin schools of starting in August or September showed that the extra time to prepare for exams did boost math scores among fourth-graders.

But Edina parents like Roger Erny aren't convinced. With three elementary students, Erny said it's not fair to alter a calendar for the district's 8,300 students just to address the 1,000 high school students who take the AP exams and already score on tests.

"You're impacting 100 percent of families with school-age children, but you're only doing it for 10 percent of the population," Erny said.

The district has gotten more than 100 e-mails from parents, mostly against a pre-Labor Day start, and a petition asking to keep summer family time has gathered more than 200 signatures. Parent Chris Rofidal said he could be swayed to support the proposal if the year had fewer vacation days and ended before Memorial Day so his family would have at least one holiday book-ending the summer.

"Labor Day is like your last swan song; it's your last chance to go to the cabin," said Rofidal, who has two daughters in the district. "Minnesota summers are pretty precious."

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