

School start date has no bearing on tourism

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The Gaffney Ledger, February 18, 2013

A uniform start date of late August for school districts in South Carolina has not increased tourism since the law went into effect in 2007, according to a study released Friday by the Olde English Consortium.

Local school districts were able to choose their own opening date for schools until a state law went into effect for the 2007-2008 school year.

Citing the tourism industry's concerns about early school start dates, state lawmakers created a uniform start date for all 85 school districts. The law now mandates schools cannot open before the third Monday in August.

Cherokee County students will start classes Aug. 20 for the 2013-2014 school year, which is the earliest time allowed under state law.

State law was changed after the Travel and Tourism Industries issued a Morse Report that argued earlier start dates in schools created shorter summers and were a factor in declining August hotel occupancy rates from 1997-2002. The tourism report suggested school calendars were a factor in a decline in tourism indicators.

"We believe that the start dates of schools have no bearing on the strength of the tourism industry and that elected school boards should make such decisions representing their community," Olde English Consortium Executive Director Michael Fanning said.

The OEC released a report Friday that examined hotel occupancy rates and other tourism data since the uniform school start date took effect. The nonprofit education group serves school districts in Cherokee, Chester, Clover, Fairfield, Lancaster and York, and the University of South Carolina at Lancaster.

Before the uniform start date, the OEC found hotel occupancy rates declined in August from 64.6 percent in 2005 to 63.7 percent in 2006. This was offset by a hotel revenue increase in May when the occupancy rates went from 62.4 percent in 2005 to 64.1 percent in 2006.

South Carolina hotel occupancy rates were 1.1 percent behind national figures (63.2 percent vs. 64.3 percent) between 2005- 2007. Since the uniform start date took effect in 2008, the OEC found the gap in hotel occupancy rates between May and August has more than doubled to 2.6 percent.

"The August tourism boom predicted by the Morse Report has simply not taken shape," Fanning added. "The occupancy data suggests that little correlation exists between school start dates and hotel occupancy in the summer months, and is a net negative."

The Olde English Consortium has shared its research study with a group of lawmakers, including state House Reps. Dennis Moss and Steve Moss. Fanning said the consortium hopes the study will lead lawmakers to consider changing the uniform start date law.

The “third Monday” legislation resulted in the 2012-2013 school year having the latest start date in the past six years, as school districts across South Carolina could not start classes before Aug. 20. If left unchanged, the start date would be pushed back even further in August of 2016.

“This change has made it virtually impossible for schools across the state to complete the first semester prior to winter break and has reduced the number of instructional days before students take high-stakes standardized testing in the spring,” Fanning said. “The law changed in an effort to boost tourism with little concern for its impact to students and the educational process in South Carolina.”

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