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Texas schools' later start means big savings on utilities

Schools' later start is saving big bucks

Since mandate, energy bills have fallen by millions

By Jennifer Radcliffe | August 21, 2008

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Texas public school leaders may still be fuming about the legislative mandate that delayed the start of the school year until the last week of August, but advocates point to lower utility bills as a sign that lawmakers made the right choice.

In the first year, schools statewide appear to have saved millions of dollars in August utility bills. The Houston Independent School District's monthly payment to Reliant Energy, for example, dropped almost \$200,000 between August 2006 and August 2007. Officials attribute about \$66,000 of the savings to lower electricity costs.

HISD spends about \$57 million a year on electricity, meaning \$66,000 is a slight savings, officials said. And they said some of the savings probably were erased by extra days in May and June, but they couldn't provide the figures.

Some districts reported using half as much energy in August 2007 as in past Augusts, according to records provided by some of Texas' largest school systems.

And the later start date has been popular among parents, who remember an era when the school year started after Labor Day.

"I'm happy to see **Texas schools** saving money," said Sen. **Eddie Lucio Jr.**, D-Brownsville. "The fourth Monday in August is really, in my opinion, family-friendly, and it's putting money in our classrooms."

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Districts used waivers

Before the law took effect last year, most Texas school districts got waivers to start the year in early or mid-August. School districts adamantly opposed the later start date, saying it didn't allow enough time to prepare students for the **Texas Assessment** of Knowledge and Skills or to administer final exams before Christmas break.

They're even discounting the apparent savings on utility bills.

"I can't say the delayed start date didn't have an effect, but there's obviously other variables," HISD controller **Ken Huewitt** said.

Searching for Texas School Start Date 2013?

San Antonio parent **Tina Bruno**, head of the **Coalition for a Traditional School Calendar**, said she's not surprised that school officials are dismissing the savings.

"The school districts were so against having a uniform start date that they're not ever going to admit there's any benefit," Bruno said. "When you look at August-to-August utility bills, there were savings, even though electricity rates went up. This was a smart move."

Indeed, the **Texas Association of School Boards** is discussing lobbying the Legislature to reverse the law when it convenes in January. Each school district should have a say in setting its calendar, officials said.

"The tourism industry pushed very hard – and successfully – to move the school start date later in the year to no sooner than the last Monday of August," said TASB spokesman **Dax Gonzalez**. "The argument was that cities would benefit from increased sales taxes. ... Meanwhile, districts have less time to prepare for TAKS, and midyear holidays must be truncated or eliminated altogether."

School calendars should be driven by academics, not finances, said **John Brooks**, head of the **University of North Texas'** principal certification program.

"I really think the Legislature would be well-advised to give local boards the opportunity to set their start times," he said.

75 degrees for students

But the new law also keeps children at home during one of the hottest times of the year. With electric rates climbing quickly, Pasadena school district spokeswoman **Candace Ahlfinger** said she's sure that bills would have been higher under the old calendar.

The district keeps thermostats at 75 degrees when students are in the building and 80 degrees when they are not.

Like most suburban Houston districts, Pasadena has added new schools and is experiencing higher rates – other factors that would have further inflated August utility bills.

State Rep. **Rob Eissler**, R-The Woodlands, said he's not surprised that districts, even those that are financially strapped, aren't celebrating the savings. They don't like being told what to do, he said.

"I understand why they're not happy. I do. But in the Legislature, you have to look at the bigger picture," he said. "If you can subtract some August days from your air conditioning bill, you can't help but to save money."

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