

Our say: Delaying school's start a backward-looking idea

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Perhaps Gov. Martin O'Malley, so often at odds with state Comptroller Peter Franchot, was just trying ease things during a long Board of Public Works meeting on Wednesday by giving a boost to one of Franchot's pet enthusiasms: Postponing the start of the public school year until after Labor Day.

"I'm for that," O'Malley remarked. "Hopefully the task force will come out our way." The task force isn't scheduled to report until next summer, after the legislative session — so most likely O'Malley will never have to act on this.

That's just as well. This is one of Franchot's worst ideas — and it would move schools in exactly the wrong direction.

Starting school after Labor Day is "one of the traditions we should bring back," Franchot remarked on the Ocean City boardwalk, according to *The Baltimore Sun*. "I almost think starting school before Labor Day is un-American."

The comptroller has been brandishing a Board of Revenue Estimates projection that a one-week delay in places like Anne Arundel County, by sending families out on end-of-summer excursions to state attractions, would generate an additional \$74 million in economic activity and bring in close to \$8 million in state and local tax revenue.

Even if you accept these vaguely derived numbers, the sums are trivial next to the total state economy and total revenue. And Franchot hasn't explained why, if people want to take the kids to Ocean City or Deep Creek Lake, they can't do so during the many weeks of summer break already available.

A statement from the Comptroller's Office says Franchot is "confident" the 180-day school year can be maintained by trimming winter or spring breaks and eliminating some of the closings that allow teachers to catch up with paperwork. Such ideas won't go over well with school systems or their teachers' unions. So it's more likely the end of school would have to be pushed deeper into June — not a popular move.

Worse, this idea reeks of the small-bore gimmickry already on display this month with Shop Maryland Tax-Free Week. And while merchants and customers will take any trifling tax relief they can get, the schools shouldn't be meddled with merely because state officials think they can cadge a little extra revenue.

At the risk of being called un-American by Franchot: States should look at *reducing*, not expanding, summer break, by redistributing vacation days around the calendar. Studies have shown that the two-months-plus break hurts academic performance, with the first weeks of school wasted reteaching things students have forgotten over the summer. The damage is particularly bad for kids from lower-income families that can't afford summer camp or enjoyable vacations.

Schools are a costly public service. Why on earth do they shut down for months on end? The kids aren't needed to help with the harvest anymore.

The schools can best assist Maryland's economy by giving students the best possible education. Doesn't Franchot grasp that?