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Our view: Do public schools open too soon? Maryland's comptroller says yes, the silly-billy

August 19, 2013

Between Egypt and disgraced politicians, August has proven itself a more robust month for news than usual this year, yet there's always room in the summer doldrums for the wacky and off-beat. And for generations, few individuals have proven themselves better suited to provide that brand of comic relief than the men who have served as [Maryland's](#) comptroller.

Whether it was Louis L. Goldstein's tireless campaigning or his cheerful but grammatically-challenged signature send-off, "God bless y'all real good," or even William Donald Schaefer's diatribes against the world or generally bizarre behavior, Maryland comptrollers have a tradition of quirky entertainment. How comforting to recognize that Peter Franchot, the man who has held the office since 2007, is continuing this proud tradition.



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The latest evidence of this, of course, is a 12-page report issued by Mr. Franchot claiming that if Maryland's schools would simply start students back after Labor Day instead of one week earlier, the state would reap substantial economic rewards: \$74.3 million in direct economic activity and \$7.7 million in state and local [tax](#) revenue.

Where would this newfound wealth come from? It is the comptroller's belief that Marylanders would take a lot more vacation days and spend them at places like [Ocean City](#) and the Maryland State Fair in Timonium. It would provide, in the comptroller's own words, "the chance for [families](#) to spend precious time together and build lifelong memories."

And all that as a result of starting school on Sept. 3 instead of Aug. 26. We would be skeptical of the methodology used by the Bureau of Revenue Estimates, but the one-page description of methodology in the report is so slight on how these calculations were actually made (aside from using "models" and "data"), that critiquing it would be impossible.

Instead, let's assume Mr. Franchot is correct. Maryland's gross domestic product is along the order of \$301 billion, so \$74.3 million would potentially add something between a minuscule and barely discernible amount to it. (That's 0.0025 percent, to be precise.) Meanwhile, school systems across the state would have to completely rewrite their calendars to either toss out existing holidays or teacher training and planning days or else extend the 180-day school year deeper into June. This would be problematic for any number of reasons, most glaringly because of the fixed dates of standardized testing and the need to cover certain curriculum by a certain date.

Add to that the need for days off for planning, for teacher education, to fulfill contracts and to allow parents to take vacations at other times of the year, and what you would have is a considerable burden for school systems from [Ocean City](#) to Deep Creek Lake. How curious that if this would such a good idea — and [Ocean City](#) so desperately needs it to staff its late-summer tourism attractions — that even the Atlantic beach resort's own Worcester County school system starts classes in August, not September.

Indeed, it isn't hard to find a lot of neighbors who see the advantage in an August 26 start date for public schools. That's when students in the District of Columbia go back. Same with students in York, Pa. and New Castle, Del. Classes at Towson University start in August as do students at the University of Maryland [Baltimore](#) County. Shouldn't the comptroller get on their case?

What makes this whole exercise especially silly is that what Maryland's elected leaders (including its chief tax collector) ought to be asking is, why do public schools still take off so much time in the summer? The far more important question — to the state's economy and well-being — is whether Maryland is educating its children to the highest possible

standard.

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[Summer vacation](#) is a vestige of the nation's agricultural past. Year-round schooling might be more effective. Studies show students who attend school year-round do as well or better than their peers in the traditional schedule. Even some business leaders have advocated for it as a means to boost employment opportunities for young people beyond the summer months.

When it comes to public education, our sole focus ought to be on producing better outcomes, not on economic chump change. As amusing as it may be to see Mr. Franchot advocate for this misguided crusade annually, it's a bit of a guilty pleasure. Ultimately, the quality of Maryland's public schools is serious stuff, and school systems don't need such sideshow distractions.

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