

Common Misperceptions of the Texas School Start Date Law and the Reality

By Tina Bruno
Executive Director
The Coalition for a Traditional School Calendar

Why did the state legislature set the school calendar?

Setting a school start date was no easy task. Parents strongly supported a post-Labor Day school start date, as shown in 1999 and 2005 Scripps Howard Texas Polls, while local school boards and administrators wanted total control. The date set by the legislature was a compromise to the first week of August school start dates being experienced by some and the post-Labor Day date wanted by many.

The date set allows just two weeks for parents and educators to review Adequate Yearly Progress Report data and for parents of children in low performing schools, just a few short weeks to take advantage of transfer options.

The compromise date also allows for the school year to be completed in May, should the school board elect.

My district needs the ability to set its own vacation days and holidays.

When the legislature set the school start date for all Texas public schools, that is as far as they went. The legislature left the decision as to how long semesters should be, when exams should be administered and what holidays to observe up to the local school boards and school administrators.

Why did the state legislature pick the 4th Monday in August as the required start date?

The 4th Monday in August school start date was a good compromise to the wishes of school board members and school administrators and the needs of families and teachers. It not only allows the state to meet federal reporting guidelines and not face financial fines, but it allows flexibility for school districts and consistency for parents and teachers.

Also, the later school start date is expected to put more tax dollars into the state budget, meaning homeowners won't have to pay as much in property taxes to better fund our schools. The later school start date will help schools reduce cooling costs, as it is more expensive to cool schools with 20 children in each classroom in August than in May or the early part of June. And lastly, having exams after the winter break will help ensure our children are retaining what they are taught and not simply regurgitating it for a test.

In a 2004 report, then Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn said, "The benefits of stretching the school year have not been proved; what we do know—it's costing Texans \$790 million annually.

My superintendent says we can't have the semester end before the winter break, because of the law.

The state law you to which you are referring sets only the school start date. The division of semesters, how many days in each semester and all holidays and vacation days are left to the decision of the local school board. Many school districts ended the first semester prior to the winter break this year and are planning the same for the upcoming school year, while other districts chose to end the first semester after the winter break. Regardless, the decision was left entirely to the school board or calendar committee.

I'm afraid my daughter won't score as high on end-of-semester tests if they are given after the winter break.

Top rated educational states have long administered exams after the winter break, as have a few Texas districts and students in these districts have not cried fowl play. Actually, top rated Carroll ISD has given exams after the winter break for several years, by choice. Carroll ISD scored just a tad higher than Round Rock ISD students in 2005-06 ACT scores. This shows the school calendar doesn't change test scores or impact what students learn.

Students who have expressed their opinions in newspapers, blogs or via discussion groups say they enjoyed taking exams after the holidays, as they finally had the opportunity to enjoy holiday activities associated with the week before winter break.

Many have also pointed out exams were not given until a few weeks after they returned, giving students plenty of time to study. One 4.0 student wrote in a Dallas Morning News blog that he was happy to be able to rest and review course material in a relaxed, non-rushed environment. He said this is the first year he was able to participate in school extra curricular activities and be able to then spend the time he needed to study for exams – without feeling stressed.

The longer summer vacation is going to increase my daycare cost and force my child into day care longer each year.

The start date of the 4th Monday in August is actually saving parents approximately \$42 million dollars in child care costs, according to a 2004 report, Saving Summer: Lessons Learned issued by then Texas Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn.

Students receive 180 days of instruction, regardless of when the school year begins and ends. Depending on how districts set their school calendars, the later school start date could make it easier and less costly to find quality child-care for students. Data shows child care is more readily available and less costly during the summer months than during the holidays and vacation days scheduled into the school year. So, regardless of when the school year starts and stops, all parents must find child-care for the same number of days.

I have heard that more breaks during the school year are better for children academically.

Doesn't the later school start date make numerous breaks difficult?

The school start date law does not impact the length of vacation time or when the school year ends. So, a district can still offer numerous breaks, should they desire. But, it is important to know that peer-reviewed research shows that the calendar configuration does not impact academic performance, but early-August school start dates do take valuable taxpayer dollars out of the classroom and away from our teachers in order to pay the higher cooling costs.

The early-August school start date and numerous breaks were costing Texas schools \$155 million in increased non-instructional costs, according to a 2004 Special Report by Texas Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn. This money could go to small group tutoring, academic programming or an increase in classroom supplies.

Research in 2007 by Dr. Paul von Hippel, a research statistician in sociology at Ohio State University, clearly showed the school calendar configuration is not an academic concern. A Science Daily article regarding his research said, "One supposed benefit of year-round calendars (or calendars with a shorter summer) is that they do away with the slowdown or loss of learning that students commonly experience over the summer. But, 'year-round schools don't really solve the problem of the summer learning setback – they simply spread it out across the year,' von Hippel said."

Additionally, the school districts housed in the top academic states in the nation, based on the American Legislative Exchange Council's annual Report Card on Education, report higher standardized test scores than students in states with early-August school starts. And, the top academic states report a higher percentage of students receiving a three or higher on Advanced Placement exams, and the majority of these districts begin the school year around the end of August or later.

Why were the needs of the travel and tourism industry put in front of local control?

While travel and tourism is benefiting from the law, their concerns were never voiced during the House or Senate Education Committee hearings. Committee members heard from parents about the hardship the early-August school start dates were creating for them and for teachers.

Also, the state is required by federal law to issue Adequate Yearly Progress Reports no later than the first day of school and the federal government recommends the reports be out no later than two weeks before the start of the school year. The reasoning is the reports contain information that will allow parents of children in schools that have not made adequate progress for two consecutive years to transfer their child to a better performing school. Texas statistics showed us less than one percent of eligible students were taking advantage of this option. In order to be compliant with the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, the 4th Monday in August was selected so that parents have two weeks to review the reports and exercise transfer rights before the school year began. It was also important that we had a solid date so that TEA knew, in advance, when all schools would begin, so Texas didn't face financial fines for not issuing the reports before the first school district in the state began classes.

Also, while the later start date is a benefit to those in the travel and tourism industry, their increase in business also means more tax dollars to fund public education, more jobs for Texans and a longer opportunity for students and teachers to make extra money during the summer.

According to the Texas Comptroller's 2004 report on the issue, early-August school start dates were costing Texas students \$79 million in lost personal revenue and teachers and school support staff were losing another \$62 million.

For more information, please contact:
Tina Bruno, Executive Director
The Coalition for a Traditional School Calendar
210-559-5277
TBruno2@satx.rr.com