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**PRESENTATION TO THE TEXAS HOUSE COMMITTEE ON**  
**PUBLIC EDUCATION**  
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. My name is William Cunningham and I am a professor in the Red McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin. I am here today representing myself.

I was asked by the Comptroller in Fall 2004, to Chair the School Start Date Task Force.<sup>1</sup> I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work with a diverse group of individuals representing parents, teachers, administrators, and community and business leaders from across Texas. One of the key elements in the committee's charge was to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of the traditional school year calendar.

I strongly believe that starting school in September and ending shortly after Memorial Day will improve the educational opportunities for the children of migrant families, increase our student's long term retention of knowledge, strengthen our families, realize more funding for our schools, allow families to keep more of their hard earned dollars, enhance economic activity and put more experience in our classrooms and place Texas on the path to joining the top academically ranked states in the nation. I will examine each of these concepts below.

### School Attendance and Migrant Children

School attendance and high school completion are adversely affected by an early school start date. The earlier school starts, the fewer students show up for the first week of class. Texas is home to many migrant families who must decide between much needed income and getting their children to school on time. As a result, many migrant students start late, get behind and eventually drop out of school altogether.<sup>2</sup>

A 1967 report commissioned by the Texas State Board of Education to discover the most successful methods of educating migrant children recommended a shorter school year with longer days (Senator Lucio has introduced a bill on this issue) and fewer holidays. Migrant student in schools that adopted these recommendations had increased academic performance.<sup>3</sup> When we improve the education of our most disadvantaged students, we create a brighter future for all of our state's citizens.

### Improved Learning: The Spacing Effect

Most people recognize that while cramming for a test may produce good test scores in the short term, it is the worst way to encourage long-term learning and content mastery. Yet our current calendar, with exams taken the last week before vacation, encourages students to cram for their examinations.

A widely known psychological phenomenon known as the spacing effect implies that students' long-term learning will be improved if students study the material, take a break from their studies, review the material again and then take an examination. This is perfectly consistent with the traditional school year where students take their fall semester exams after the Christmas holiday.<sup>4</sup>

### Family Values

Summer has always been viewed as a time for families to relax, take vacations and spend quality time together. During the school year, many families are so busy with after school activities and increasing homework loads that they are hard pressed to find the time to eat dinner together. The absence of such distractions when school is not in session allows for parents to spend more time with their children, which leads to a more cohesive family unit and children who are more likely to become productive, well-functioning adults.<sup>5</sup>

### Money Saved For School Districts

Texas schools could save as much as \$184 million in utility and operational costs alone with a later school start date.<sup>6</sup> The recent Legislative Budget Board Report on House Bill 2 stated that a later school start date would produce a net savings of \$8.9 million per year in electrical costs for all districts in Texas. The reason for the difference between the Comptroller's numbers and the Legislative Budget Board's is that the Legislative Budget Board assumes that school districts will maintain their school calendars and end classes in late June. We do not believe that such a late school year end date is necessary (see Appendix A for a sample calendar). There is no doubt that a traditional school year that begins after Labor Day and ends shortly after Memorial Day will save school districts millions of dollars.

Carroll ISD, by adopting a traditional school year that ends in the first week of June, estimates that it will save \$110,000 per day in salary accrual alone, saving a total of \$1.2 million by starting 11 days later than originally planned.<sup>7</sup> That is \$1.2 million saved by one district in Texas without any consideration of the further savings in utility bills mentioned by the Comptroller and the Legislative Budget Board.

### Money Saved For Texas Families

An early school start date costs our families \$214 million annually in lost earnings and additional child care costs.<sup>8</sup> A September school start date helps the working families in Texas save their hard earned income. Single parents or dual-income parents have a more difficult time and greater expense finding child care for several little holidays and vacations as opposed to one long break. Some families are left with the decision to leave their children in unsafe environments or stay home and give up the wages that put food on the table. No parent should have to make such a decision when we have the ability to provide a calendar that is conducive to low-income families' needs.

## Economic Development through Enhanced Tourism

Due to the ever shrinking summers for Texas school children, the traditional August family vacation has all but disappeared. Every one of Texas' top 30 travel and tourism attractions have suffered a reduction in economic activity because of the shortened summer season.<sup>9</sup> The shortened summer season has also translated into lost jobs for Texans living in areas with tourist economies. San Antonio alone "lost 2,800 jobs—more than 28 percent—in amusement and recreation from June to September 2002."<sup>10</sup> A September school start date would recapture lost jobs and lost tax revenue from the tourism industry that estimates earnings for the last two weeks of August to be almost \$400 million.<sup>11</sup>

## Experience in Our Classrooms

Our schools have an incredibly high turnover rate with some 37,000 teachers leaving the profession each year. This turnover rate directly translates into a shortage of experienced teachers who can improve student performance. Salary is the main reason why teachers leave the profession. With our summers eroding away, we are reducing their opportunity to supplement their salaries so that they, and their experience, can remain in the classroom.<sup>12</sup>

Shortened summers limit a teacher's ability to pursue an advanced degree or otherwise remain competent and aware of best teaching practices. A traditional summer break would allow teachers to take up to two college summer sessions, while summers that end in July or early August reduce the number of college sessions to one.

Teachers benefit from more time in the summer. They are able to take two summer school sessions to further their education rather than just one. They are able to supplement their income with work that can last for 3 months rather than 2. Both these factors help to reduce teacher turnover providing more experience in our schools. Additionally, this saves the state money in teacher training.<sup>13</sup>

## Top Academically Ranked States

The nation's top academically ranked states all have a majority of their school districts starting school in September, taking fall exams in January and ending school in June. This is true whether states are ranked by SAT scores, ACT scores, graduation rates, or a combination of all three.<sup>14</sup> Adopting a traditional school calendar is one of many steps we must take to ensure that our children have the skills and education to compete in a world-wide workforce.

Carroll ISD, one of only 19 districts in Texas to receive the state's highest accountability rating of exemplary, recently decided to move to the type of school calendar most successful districts in the nation use. Sharon Eaves, Carroll ISD's CFO, spoke to parents concerned about the change and was quoted in *The Courier: Colleyville* as saying, "Most

districts across the country have a later starting date with later exams and they are successful.”<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

You have an opportunity in this legislative session to adopt the traditional school calendar that will improve learning, enhance the state's economy, support family values, and save the state millions of dollars. I know of no other piece of legislation that has so many positive aspects for our citizens and actually saves money for the people of Texas. As an educator, a parent and a Texan, I urge you to consider what is best not just for the children in your district, but for the children across Texas- for truly, they are the future of this great state. Thanks for giving me an opportunity to speak with you.

<sup>1</sup> [www.window.state.tx.us/schoolstart2004/taskforce/report/](http://www.window.state.tx.us/schoolstart2004/taskforce/report/)

<sup>2</sup> Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, Saving Summer: Lessons Learned, 2004, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Texas Education Agency, The Texas Project for Education of Migrant Children, 1967. Abstract.

<sup>4</sup> Same as reference number 1, Appendix L.

<sup>5</sup> "Family Pediatrics Report of the Task Force on Family," Journal of Pediatrics, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Same as reference number 2, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Saudi Harris, "Carroll Uses Calendar for Cuts," The Courier: Colleyville, 28 January 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Same as reference number 1, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Same as reference number 2, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Same as reference number 2, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Same as reference number 2, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Texas Comptroller of Accounts, The Cost of Underpaying Teachers, 2004, Introduction, Reasons for Leaving.

<sup>13</sup> Same as reference number 12, Costs of Teacher Turnover: *State Costs*.

<sup>14</sup> College Entrance Examination Board, College-Bound Seniors: 2002 Profile of SAT Program Test Takers, 2002. Table 136; American College Testing, Inc., 2001 ACT Composite Averages by State, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Lori Drummer, ed., Report Card on American Education: A State-by-State Analysis: 1981-2003, American Legislative Exchange Council, 2004; Average school start dates of states found through state and district web sites.

<sup>15</sup> Same as reference number 7.