

OrlandoSentinel.com

Endless summer for school students

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August 6, 2007

In many parts of Florida, today might have been the first day of school.

But the summer of 2007 is a quirky one for anyone who measures time by a public-school calendar.

Students are getting an extra couple of weeks away from school because of a new law that says schools in Florida cannot start any earlier than two weeks before Labor Day. Local school boards used to set their own calendars. But at the urging of parents fed up with the school year starting so early, legislators set new rules.

School begins Aug. 20 this year instead of early August or even late July. Because the 2006-07 school year ended in May, the later start date for the coming academic year added a couple of bonus weeks to the summer break.

It won't happen again anytime soon. The coming school year will end in June, so the 2008 summer break will return to its usual length of about 10 weeks.

Once upon a time, the extra-long summer break might have been welcomed so children and teachers could work on farms. But the state has largely outgrown its agricultural roots, and the additional time off wasn't cheered by everyone. Here's a look at how some students, businesses and communities are adjusting:

BEACHES

Florida's early start to the school year was not always welcome news for beachside communities.

For one thing, it meant the core group of summer lifeguards -- high-school students -- had to quit before many of the tourists were ready to head back north.

"It used to kill us because Northern schools start closer to September, so we had three weeks of guarding the beach with half of our people not available to work," Volusia Beach Patrol Capt. Scott Petersohn said.

This year's later start will mean longer summer jobs for students and safer beaches for visitors through much of August, Petersohn said.

SUMMER CAMPS

Many camps have extended their summer programs. The Central Florida YMCA and other community organizations have planned more activities to entertain and educate kids right up until it's time to go back to school.

"It's a go-go-go pace," said Gary Cain, president of the Boys & Girls Club of Central Florida. "We're just keeping them busy."

The extended break has taken a financial toll on some of the nonprofit groups. The YMCA provided an additional \$50,000 in summer-camp scholarships for the longer break.

The break has also had an effect at the Boys & Girls Club. "We're not swimming in money," Cain said. But, he said: "We don't have any choice, ethically or otherwise. The kids need us."

BRAIN DRAIN

The long, lazy days of summer can result in a long, slow slide in academic skills.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University have dubbed it "summer learning loss."

Parents who make sure their kids are reading and learning likely helped staunch the loss.

Most kids lose math skills during the summer, but the drop in reading skills is most acute for poor children, who don't always have access to books or have parents who encourage reading.

Schools added programs this year to give kids more opportunities to learn.

In Seminole, the district has a bookmobile touring the county, and some schools offered more summer classes.

"I'm mad because it was fun. I wish it was more than four weeks," said 10-year-old Destyne Akoon during a summer science camp at Eagle's Nest Elementary in Orange County.

LIBRARIES

Summer is one of the busiest seasons for libraries, especially when Harry Potter's latest adventure is out.

But at least one Lake County library is finding it tough. "We didn't realize that the summer was going to be longer until the last minute," said Monica Dunlap, the youth-services specialist at the Tavares Public Library.

The library's summer-reading program ended July 19. Kids are still coming in to hang around, check out books and surf the Internet. But they're getting bored. And rowdy.

"It's mostly kids who live nearby walking over and staying a really long time," Dunlap said. "They start cussing and being disruptive."

THEME PARKS

Florida schoolchildren might squeeze in more visits to area theme parks during their extended summer -- but probably not enough to swell the crowds.

Theme-park officials don't publicly discuss attendance projections but do say they expect at least

a marginal benefit.

"We view this as an opportunity for an additional two weeks of peak season," Universal Orlando spokesman Tom Schroder said.

The end of August and the first week of September always have been part of peak season because the vast majority of states already start school after Labor Day, said Ady Milman, a theme-parks professor at the University of Central Florida.

And theme parks traditionally don't start scaling back the summer seasonal work force until after Labor Day, said Morty Miller, president of the Service Trades Council, a Walt Disney World employees union.

However, the parks normally start swapping out high-school-student summer employees for college-student and senior-citizen autumn employees by mid-August. The transition should be easier now, said SeaWorld Orlando spokeswoman Becca Bides, "so we have seen some positive benefit from the later [school] start date."

DAY-CARE CENTERS

Working parents are paying more this summer because of the longer break.

That's good for business at day-care centers and preschools, but it also made it tougher to find things to keep kids busy when activities such as \$1 summer movies stopped.

"Thank goodness skating is continuing," said Becky Henson, who owns Kiddie Koledge Preschool in DeLand. "We're running out of things to do."

Kids R Kids, in Orlando, focused on having its 200 children read every day and go on field trips three times a week.

"Our kids really aren't bored," said Paula Edwards, a director at the school. "They really don't want to go back to school."

TEACHERS

An extra-long summer means teachers go an extra-long time without a school-district paycheck. Teachers unions started urging members months ago to prepare for the additional weeks without pay.

Plenty of teachers, however, work during the summer at schools or camps or anywhere else that needs seasonal help.

Some teachers are using the extra time to fit in more professional-development classes. And some are just enjoying more vacation time, especially with out-of-state friends and relatives whose school schedules did not mesh well with Florida's.

"We're just doing all kinds of things," said Kristin Brown, a middle-school teacher in Seminole. She plans one last getaway before reporting back to school.

BUSINESSES

Businesses that count teenagers among their best customers expect to have a strong August as a

result of this year's extended academic recess.

Retailers who employ youthful part-timers are generally looking forward to the delayed reopening of school.

"We will be able to keep them on the same schedule that they worked during the summer a little longer," said Manuel Davila, assistant manager of the Carlton Cards shop in Altamonte Mall. "Most of my workers are in high school, so it makes a difference."

For many stores, the need for high-school-age workers coincides with school schedules. Teenage students are available to work during summer, and they also have more time to shop, which creates additional business. So retailers need more part-time workers to serve the teenage customers.

"I would guess 70 percent of our high-school workers are going to stay with us longer this August," said Western Ulysse, a manager at the West Colonial Drive Steak 'n Shake.

Dustin Coe, co-manager of the Pacific Sunwear store at Florida Mall, employs about 15 high-school students. He said the extra income they receive from summer jobs usually finds its way into the economy quickly.

"We can offer them more work during the summer, which gives them more money to spend when they shop," Coe said. "It's good for everyone."

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