



## The return of summer vacation

ISSUE: Later school start

OUR VIEW: Longer summer vacation was due in South Carolina

When the State Board of Education voted in November 2002 to require that the state's schools delay their start for the year until late August, the citizens on the panel made the case they were responding to parents' wishes.

The state's education establishment argued differently, saying the later start date would endanger instruction for the state-mandated Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test in the spring and result in students taking exams after the winter break. Lawmakers agreed, with the General Assembly doing an end-around and undoing the board's decision.

Their reasoning sounded good: Leave control of school start dates in the hands of local boards. As hard as it is to argue with government closer to home being better government, reality is that local boards are not in control on this matter. School was starting earlier and earlier each summer through a systematic change engineered from the education establishment.

Mandating a later or uniform start date for the state seemed politically unachievable despite arguments that operating nearly year-round was costing the state major revenue in terms of lost tourist dollars.

With school not ending until Memorial Day, early start dates left families just two months for a vacation period. That meant tourism locations once getting a three-month window between Memorial Day and Labor Day in which to enjoy the summer boom saw prime time reduced by a full month.

There was also the issue of summer jobs for students. As important as student labor is for young people making money and tourist-related enterprises getting extra help during the peak season, business in general benefits when students are able to hold summer jobs.

But it was the wishes of parents that no longer were to be ignored. A 2003 survey conducted for the tourism industry found that nearly half of parents wanted a school start day near Labor Day. Despite claims of bias in the study, the results were closer to accurate than foes wanted to admit.

In 2006, lawmakers decided the earliest start date for public schools in the state would be the third Monday in August. The law takes effect this year, with most T&D Region schools beginning on Aug. 20.

Critics of the later start date will remain. Most notably, educators will continue to make a case that lawmakers should have stayed out of the matter.

John Bamberg, 2006 president of the South Carolina School Boards Association and a Bamberg-Ehrhardt School District 1 trustee for two decades, has written that school districts have distinctive needs that cannot be effectively addressed from Columbia.

"Uniform school start date legislation would eliminate local ability even to set the school calendar, requiring schools to start on dates dictated by the General Assembly -- whether or not those dates accommodate local school and community schedules or academic needs. ...The question isn't when school should start ... but where and how such local decisions should be made: in Columbia, by force; or at the grassroots, by choice. Under South Carolina's school governance system, the proper educational business of the General Assembly is to establish the goals and set the broad policies that advance student achievement across the state."

Local school boards will continue to have a say. It's simply that start dates can be no earlier than a specified time. A state standard is not a bad thing. After all, there is a state mandate on days of instruction, standardized tests, etc., etc.

State lawmakers made a good call.