



Proud Leadership for Pennsylvania Schools

**Comments on
H.B. 137**

**Presented by
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**Before the
House Tourism and Recreational Development Committee
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Good morning, Chairman Stern, Chairman Kirkland and distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Jim Buckheit. I serve as executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA). PASA represents over 800 school superintendents and other school system leaders from across the commonwealth. Our members are responsible, together with their elected school board members, and professional staffs for the design, delivery, and scheduling of instruction in Pennsylvania's 500 school districts and other educational entities including charter schools, career and technical schools and intermediate units. We appreciate having the opportunity to share our views on House Bill 137.

PASA members are opposed to this bill. They do so as enactment of the bill into law will limit the authority of locally elected officials to determine what is best for their community, it will disrupt long-established family and community schedules in approximately 86 percent of school districts across the state, it may be harmful to tourism and economic activity in some communities and, most importantly, it is educationally unsound.

In a state as large and diverse as Pennsylvania, our geographic features, regional economies, historic and cultural traditions, religious diversity and even weather patterns each factor into decisions made about annual school schedules. School districts across the state reflect this

diversity and each district's unique conditions by developing school calendars that address the needs and interests of the entire community.

Section 508 of the Public School Code requires that fixing the length of the school term requires a recorded vote of all members of the board of school directors. Section 1504 states the board of school directors of each school district *shall fix the date of the beginning of the school term.*

Section 1503 provides boards of school directors authority to decide which five holidays it wishes to designate as local holidays in addition to the five days designated as state holidays (Memorial Day, 4th of July, Christmas, Thanksgiving and New Years Day). It further states that *the board of school directors may provide for such vacations in its district as it deems wise.*

These provisions date back to the School Code of 1911. The General Assembly has amended these provisions numerous times over the past 100 years and has wisely not limited the ability of local school boards to establish the annual school calendar.

Examples of how districts consider community needs include: School districts in some regions of the state close one or more days during the opening week of deer season. One school district closes down the entire week that the county fair operates each September. Several districts close each year on days that are special holidays in that community. Many school districts close on major religious holidays such as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover, Holy Thursday and Good Friday. Districts in some parts of the state that regularly face severe winter weather conditions also must build their schedules in such a way that provides a significant number of make-up days without extending the planned end of the school year into late June.

Districts also design school calendars taking into consideration the start of college summer programs, many of which begin during the second week of June. These programs permit graduating seniors to get an early start in earning college credits and district staff to earn college credits during the summer including those necessary to earn a Level II ("permanent") teaching certificate, certification in additional subject areas or professional education credits necessary to maintain a valid teaching certificate.

The point is that there are many different patterns in school calendars among school districts across the commonwealth, and that each exists for a reason. Each calendar was crafted by school officials in that specific community to respond to the needs of that community, with the central need being that of offering a full year of instruction to each student in the community.

In Pennsylvania households with school age children, 66 percent have both parents employed full -time. Who cares for their children when school is closed? For some, relatives or friends. In many communities non-profit agencies, childcare centers, townships and churches operate day camp programs during the summer months. My daughter attended such a program and later served as a camp counselor. Her camp shut down the week before the scheduled start of school the week before Labor Day because the camp was staffed by college students who left to return to college, leaving few counselors available to supervise hundreds of children. Pushing school back another week will further extend the gap in which working parents will need to either take off from work or find alternative care for their children. This certainly will not add to the productivity of business in our state. Shifting the school calendar back one week ignores the challenges and costs to the other programs and services that support children, families and educators both during the summer and during the school year. These systems of support are much too valuable to toss aside without considering all the ramifications and impacts on families and communities across the state.

In preparation to deliver testimony at this hearing, we reviewed a random sample of ten percent (50) school district calendars for the 2011-12 school year. We found 86 percent held the first day of school before Labor day and 86 percent also held the last day of school after Memorial Day. We also found that districts across the state vary considerably in the number of student instructional days and staff contract days. While every district must offer 180 days of instruction, most school districts provide between 181 and 184 days. One school district in our sample provides 191 days of student instruction and 197 staff contract days. Until state and federal funding cuts hit school districts this year, in recent years many districts across the state have been seeking to add instructional days and contract days when negotiating new labor contracts with employee unions.

Because House Bill 137 takes a one-size fits all approach, while it may improve economic activity around Labor Day weekend, it will hurt economic activity in some areas of the state during other times of the year. The Bloomsburg School District most likely would not shut down during the week of the Bloomsburg Fair, losing dozens of high school students who work at the fair. School districts in areas where deer hunting and fishing is a major activity, districts may not be able to close school to allow students to hunt or serve those who do. Punxsutawney Area School District may not be able to close the district for two days to celebrate and support activities associated with groundhog day. And, as I discussed previously, child care issues will require working parents to shift existing vacation plans, take additional days off or find less than optimal child care for their children during the week prior to Labor Day.

Perhaps the most compelling reason not to approve this bill is that it is educationally unsound. Duke University Professor Harris Cooper is recognized as one of the leading researchers on the issue of summer learning loss. In his research, he found:

We found that kids do forget over the summer. Across the board, all kids lose some math skills. In reading, the middle class hold its own, but the poor lose reading and spelling skills, and that pattern has emerged as a possible explanation for the academic achievement gap between those who have financial resources and those who don't.

People have a vision of what summer vacation ought to be that may not coincide with the reality for most kids. He states We need to dispense with romanticized notions associated with the traditional summer break, look at what's really going on, and consider the consequences. Lots of kids get bored over the summer. Poor children spend lots of time unsupervised and with limited resources for any constructive activity. Children learn best when instruction is continuous. The long summer vacation breaks the rhythm of instruction, leads to forgetting, and requires a significant amount of review of material when students return to school in the fall.

He suggests there are three strategies to reduce summer learning loss: 1) Extend the school year beyond 180 days. 2) Require additional students to attend summer school. 3) Modify the school calendar to eliminate the long summer vacation and replace it with shorter cycles or attendance breaks throughout the year.

This bill would require districts to compress their school schedules between Labor Day week and early/mid-June. In many school districts it will actually end up extending summer vacations by one week and in a few cases by two weeks. This is the opposite direction from where we should be heading. If we are serious about improving student achievement across the state, we need to expand learning time, not compress it.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts about House Bill 137.

I would be pleased to respond to your questions.