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Pennsylvania School Boards Association

**Mr. Harry Mathias**  
**Superintendent, Central Columbia School District**  
**Testimony – House Bill 137 (P.N. 75)**  
**House Tourism and Recreational Development Committee**  
**December 8, 2011**

Good morning. My name is Mr. Harry Mathias, and I am the Superintendent of Central Columbia School District in Columbia County. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today testifying on behalf of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association on House Bill 137.

Pennsylvania has a long tradition of local control of public schools. From the creation of school boards in 1834, the General Assembly has deferred to local officials in making many decisions about how best to operate public schools on a daily basis. State government establishes the minimum number of days that schools must operate, but which days they are open is a local decision, and appropriately so. Needs of communities vary widely and may be unique, and school calendars reflect that diversity. Pennsylvania's 500 school districts must work to find the best means to provide a quality education to students tailored for their individual communities. A state mandate restricting the start of classes in every school district would sharply conflict with this longstanding and effective policy of permitting local officials and locally elected school directors to establish the school calendar. Eliminating the flexibility our school districts now have, as proposed in House Bill 137, does not serve the best interests of our students or our communities.

My school district, Central Columbia School District, traditionally starts school before Labor Day each year to accommodate a community tradition. Like many of the other school districts in Columbia County, my district schedules vacation during the fourth week of September every year so that students, staff, and their families can attend and participate in the Bloomsburg Fair. The Bloomsburg Fair, which has been going strong in Columbia County since 1855, is the number one tourist event in Columbia and Montour Counties. The fair alone employs 500 workers, its 635 vendors employ thousands of residents of the region, including hundreds of high school students, and in 2010, the fair generated \$3.7 million in direct revenue during its eight-day run, making it a tremendously important event in our community.

Each year our school district's calendar permits four weeks of instruction before the Bloomsburg Fair vacation. If our school district, as well as the surrounding districts, were not permitted to begin school until after Labor Day each year, less than three weeks would fall between the start of school and the start of the fair. In that case, with so few instructional school days between the first day of school and the fair, it may be difficult to recommend that our school district close during the fair. As a result, House Bill 137 could actually harm the number one tourist event in our region.

It is not just my school district that opens its doors before Labor Day each year. Over the years, more and more school districts have begun opening school before the Labor Day holiday. This school year, in fact, 84% of school districts, or 421 out of 500, started their school year before Labor Day. In addition to accommodating community events, many of these districts start classes before Labor Day to permit long weekends during the winter months as a means of saving energy and to enable school districts to incorporate snow days into the calendar to account for adverse weather conditions that make school transportation dangerous. Most importantly, with increasing pressure put on school districts to reach student achievement targets and to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind law each year, many school districts seek to ensure that their students have as much classroom instructional time before the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment tests are given in the spring to help guarantee that students are adequately prepared for these tests. This is also the case with Advanced Placement examinations, which are given to students in the spring on a timeline set by the College Board. Starting classes before Labor Day gives students more instructional time and ensures that they have the best opportunity to succeed on these vital assessments, while later school start dates could have the potential to negatively impact a district's ability to achieve AYP or a student's ability to score well on an Advanced Placement exam.

Additionally, without flexibility in developing the school calendar, many school districts would be forced to tack on days at the end of the year. This can create conflicts for families going on vacation, for students and staff who have registered for college courses over the summer, and for students attending academic, religious and sports camps. We have also seen an increase in concerns from older students about military training occurring in early June. Additionally, this may prevent seniors from having adequate transition time between high school graduation and the start of their post-secondary studies.

In the current school year, Central Columbia missed five days due to the September flooding. Three of these days occurred because the Bloomsburg municipal water supply failed to operate. We are fortunate that our teacher's association agreed to alter the school calendar and add three of these days back prior to PSSA testing, but we will still be tacking two days on to the end of our school year. Had we started school after Labor Day, the last day would currently be scheduled for June 13; and that would be prior to any winter weather affects.

As this committee considers the concerns of the tourism and amusement industry, I hope that you will remember that a school district has no agenda in school calendar decisions other than to ensure our students are learning in optimal education environments with due consideration to local community concerns and events. If school districts in certain regions affected by summer labor needs wish to apply those considerations to their school calendar, they may do so under current law. If other school districts, like Central Columbia, have a unique scheduling need, they may make that scheduling consideration under current law. School calendar decisions are never easy for Pennsylvania's 500 school districts, but we do our best to balance community desires with what we know is right for students. Our school districts and locally elected school directors are in the best position to understand the critical factors that drive their calendars, such as the amount of classroom time over the mandated 180 days that is necessary and appropriate to prepare students to compete and live successfully in a global community, the number of parent-teacher conference days, in-service days, and mandated testing days needed each year, the possibility of adverse weather conditions, and local and community events and traditions.

I urge this committee not to mandate a blanket approach to school calendars that would negatively impact the vast majority, 84%, of our school districts, preventing them from addressing the needs of their students and their communities. I respectfully urge this committee not to approve House Bill 137 and to continue to allow school districts the flexibility to make these decisions based on what is right for their district.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to try to answer any questions you may have.