

Cox wants schools to start later

Voluntary delay would let standardized testing retakes be counted, she says

By Brandon Larrabee | Morris News Service

Tuesday, June 17, 2008

ATLANTA --- State Schools Superintendent Kathy Cox plans to press local boards to postpone the start of the school year until late August.

This would reverse a previous hands-off approach to start dates and offer the possibility of better-looking test results.

Schools would start next year's academic year no earlier than the third week of August under the plan, which would be voluntary, Ms. Cox said. In return, state Department of Education officials would have more time to crunch testing data from the districts, with the potential that fewer schools would fall short of federal standards. The extra time would allow for standardized testing retakes to be considered.

Ms. Cox plans to propose the idea formally to local administrators at a Georgia School Boards Association meeting this weekend in Savannah.

Less than four years ago, when lawmakers were considering legislation requiring schools to follow a "universal start date" to keep schools from starting too early, Ms. Cox said that "there is no one-size-fits-all approach to improving education."

"We must resist the temptation to mandate generic solutions for the unique challenges faced by our state's individual school systems," Ms. Cox said in a statement issued by her office. "Forcing all of Georgia's public schools to begin on the same date each year would not only undermine the principles of local control, it would hurt the very children who are now being helped by new programs made possible through individualized school year calendars."

But, last week, the superintendent said she was troubled at the previous push for a later start date because it was aimed at boosting the state's tourism industry instead of student performance.

In this case, the later start dates would allow her agency to take the results of students who retake state-required standardizing tests into account before deciding whether a school falls short of the federal standards, known as Adequate Yearly Progress. That isn't possible now because of how quickly the state has to crunch test numbers to meet federal requirements on notifying parents two weeks before school starts of their school's performance.

Currently, the department can consider retesting results if a school district appeals. But if state officials rule that the district missed adequate yearly progress, the school system has to continue to offer students extra help or a choice of going to a different public school regardless of the outcome of the appeal.

That can also confuse parents, Ms. Cox said.

Ms. Cox said she would like to see about 80 percent of the state's school systems agree to move their start dates before she would feel comfortable moving forward with the idea.

Laura Reilly, a spokeswoman for the school boards group, said members likely would be willing to consider the superintendent's proposal.

"I think as long as its voluntary, they would be receptive to it," she said. "Now, whether or not it works out in their local systems, that just depends on ... a whole host of local events and dates that they have to manage locally."

Reach Brandon Larrabee at (678) 977-3709 or brandon.larrabee@morris.com.

2008 SCHOOL START DATES

RICHMOND COUNTY: Aug. 11

COLUMBIA COUNTY: Aug. 11

AIKEN COUNTY: Aug. 18