



SUMMER START DATE: MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Issue Overview

The debate over summer and school calendar start dates has been a hot topic in Georgia over the past year. But there is much more to the issue than simply whether the 180 days of school begin before or after Labor Day. The school start date debate encompasses larger educational issues, including summer learning loss, access to out-of-school learning opportunities, and local control. Historically, it has been up to local school districts to take into account “the summer slide” and incorporate community preferences into their local school calendar. Proponents of a later start date, however, argue that Georgia’s economy can greatly benefit from a start date after Labor Day, as students fill seasonal and part-time jobs and families can take summer vacations that also boost the state economy. So, why does Georgia start school so early? And what other options are there for Georgia?

Significance for Georgia

Historically, school start dates in Georgia have ranged from July 10 to September 8, with a majority of schools beginning within the first two weeks of August. While the 2018–2019 school year start dates lacked uniformity, most fell around early August. Only two districts started the school year after Labor Day. A mandated September start date would significantly shift the calendar for the majority of schools in the state. Currently, local school board members select and approve the calendar that is the best fit for the needs and interests of their local community.

While a change in start date is not about the total number of school days in a calendar year, which is specified in Georgia Code at 180 days, many other impacts and issues should be considered before making such a change. Issues such as summer learning loss, availability of summer learning activities, economic development, and student safety are among those.

In March 2018, Senator Steve Gooch (R - Dahlonega) called together a Senate study committee to explore the school calendar in Georgia and a possible state-mandated start date after Labor Day for all schools. It is clear that many stakeholders have opinions about the school calendar and start date in Georgia. How does Georgia prevent summer slide and ensure student safety, while also maximizing economic growth for our state? It is important to look at this issue from a broader perspective and consider all of these factors when discussing school calendars.

Action Steps

Georgia will likely see legislation in 2019 around summer learning. The Senate study committee has recommended changes to the state law that would place “guardrails” on each district’s ability to set school year start and end dates. The committee is recommending a required start date no earlier than seven to 10 days before Labor Day and an end date around June 1.

The calendar debate is drawing important attention to how students spend their summers in Georgia. This could be a good time for legislators, stakeholders, and interest groups to draw on this momentum and push conversations around summer learning opportunities for all students across the state. Summer does not look the same for all students, and many do not have access to summer learning opportunities, especially low-income students and students in rural communities. For example, summer learning program participation was only 28% in rural communities, compared to 41% in urban communities. With the increased attention being paid to school calendars, it is an opportune time for Georgia to dig deeper into summer learning and explore what can be done to support students across the state during this critical time.