

THE LONG AND SHORT OF THE SCHOOL YEAR

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The length of the school calendar is the subject of dueling pieces of legislation in the Georgia state House of Representatives, one that calls for shortening it (Reps. Martin and Stephens's HB 262) and one that calls for lengthening it (Reps. Ashe, Hugley, Teillet, Porter, and Smyre's HB 347)

Two of the motives behind Rep. Martin's year shrinkage proposal are defensible, namely requiring that the beginning of the school year be after Labor Day and establishing Veterans (formerly Armistice) Day as a school holiday.

As to the latter motive, Martin's assertion that it is fitting for "students, teachers, and administrators to participate in Veterans Day programs to honor veterans of the armed forces" would face little, if any, opposition.

As to the former, his rationale is a mixed bag of the sensible and the nonsensical. It is sensible to argue that keeping the schools closed in August would generate solid financial savings in energy (especially air conditioning) and transportation costs. However, to achieve such a gain, one does not need to shorten the school year, but rather merely to open early in September and close near the end of June. This was the structure of the school year when I was in public school in the late 1940s and 1950s, and it worked fine. For us, the summer began (appropriately) with Independence Day and ended (equally appropriately) with Labor Day.

Furthermore, Martin bolsters neither his credibility nor his case when he provides inane justifications such as claiming that longer school years "kill economic development," something easily refuted by simply glancing at California where school years have been lengthened without detriment to the economic prosperity of the state.

When Martin claims further that parents are angry about the loss of summer vacation time, there is a grain of justice in the complaint—but in a society where most families have merely two weeks available for whole family vacations (that they frequently cannot afford to take), it would only apply to July and August, the dominant vacation months (and the months in which students who wish to accelerate might want to attend academic enrichment programs outside the region, say in the Northeast or New England, where schools still typically begin later).

Finally, to those who say that the current summer break is too short, I can only say again that when I was in school, to those of us whose parents were too poor to send us to summer overnight camp or advanced course at nearby universities, the summer break of July and August always seemed too long, and we became bored from staying at home way before the scheduled opening of school, which we would have welcomed earlier. We inevitably reached a point at which we eagerly desired to do something rather than nothing. In addition, the fact that first semester ended after Christmas break in January did not bother us at all. Indeed, in high school, when we were assigned, in many classes, semester research papers, we were grateful to have the winter break free to concentrate on those papers intensively for final submission. Therefore, the current mania to end first semester before Christmas break and second semester before Memorial Day makes no sense to me.

On the other hand, Rep. Ashe's bill, which more sensibly calls for funding a pilot program (beginning in the 2009-2010 school year) to determine whether a longer school year would be productive of academic improvement, is far more defensible as a response to the current crisis. Those who deny that there is such a crisis in our schools are ostriches with their heads in the sand of the comfortable status quo.

Although a debate about the number of days needed in a school year, even about the number of minutes needed in a school day, would be appropriate in its proper place, we are far from being in such a place. Discussing the dimensions of the school year before we establish a coherent, comprehensive, and cogent curriculum is tantamount to putting the cart on the horse.

Consequently, neither proposal is meaningful as long as the current standards and curricula remain in place. Since those standards and curricula are empty of rigorous content, Rep. Martin is correct that they can be conveyed as well in 170 days as in 180, but that is not saying much. He is correct because it takes little time to deliver nothing or next to nothing.

For the same reason, Rep. Ashe is incorrect. She is incorrect because 180 times nothing and 200 or 220 times nothing are all equally nothing.

Therefore, the issue of the length of the school year is marginal and moot until we first address the content of, delivery system for, and accountability for what is taught.

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