

LEGISLATIVE EFFORT TO CUT SCHOOL CALENDAR DESERVES AN “F”

Before this session of the Legislature began, State School Superintendent Kathy Cox told me she hoped legislators would work with her and her staff to get the department's views on proposed legislation affecting public education in Georgia. That seems fair. Lawmakers know to talk with the Department of Transportation and the Department of Natural Resources, for example, before introducing legislation that impacts either department, but that has not been the case with public education in Georgia. Cox, a former Republican legislator herself, wants to change that.

Obviously, Reps. Ron Stephens (R-Garden City) and Charles Martin (R-Alpharetta) didn't get the message. They have introduced HR 262, a piece of totally unnecessary legislation that would allow local school boards to cut the school calendar from 180 days to 170. Their reasoning? According to Stephens, “Year-round schools kill economic development.” (Since when did 180 days become a year? I need to look at my calendar more often.)

Please remember also that this is the same Ron Stephens who sponsored the infamous HR 218 in the last session, a measure that was intended to take economic development negotiations involving our tax dollars behind closed doors. That effort blew up like a cheap balloon. I didn't think anything could trump that hideously bad idea, but I underestimated Rep. Stephens' creative abilities.

Not only does having our kids in school for 180 days “kill” economic development, co-sponsor Rep. Martin adds helpfully that the current summer break “doesn't give a lot of time for families to do things, given the constraints in our life.” Aha! Do you think that maybe this bill has nothing to do with improving public education in Georgia and making us more competitive with other states? Perhaps it is about not complicating parents' summer vacation plans.

(Parents: Wait until your urchins join the real world and ask the boss for the summer off because of the constraints on their life and how it will improve economic development. I can't wait to see the look on their little faces when they get their answer.)

I am going to make a wild guess here and say that neither Stephens nor Martin discussed their proposed legislation with Kathy Cox, or more importantly, with the poor public school teachers who are besieged with federally mandated programs, the demands of a state-required curriculum, local educational initiatives, bored students and apathetic parents more interested in a suntan than a well-educated child. I have two high school science teachers in my family who would have been happy to weigh in on the proposed legislation, although I doubt the legislators would have liked their answers.

It makes me uneasy to think about local school boards having the authority to slice the current school calendar from 180 to 170 days, particularly when I hear about one school board member who opposed changing the start date in his system's school year because “Teachers just want another day off.” (Teachers are contracted to spend 190 days a year on the job, including 180 in the classroom regardless of when the school year begins and ends — a fact obviously lost on Mr. Dumbo.)

How do we enhance public education by allowing Mr. Dumbo — and those of his ilk — to arbitrarily reduce the number of days available to present a mind-numbing amount of information to a generation of students who will be forced to compete in a high-tech and highly competitive international economy? You don't make public education better by making it easier.

Maybe Reps. Stephens and Martin have too much free time on their hands. Perhaps they should spend the next 180 days in a Georgia classroom, trying to teach smart kids, disinterested kids, kids with special needs — all in the same classroom at the same time. Not to mention dealing with drugs, discipline, dress codes and enough red tape to hang a horse. They should also be prepared to be underpaid, overworked and unappreciated.

I'm not sure what precipitated this cockamamie idea of cutting the school calendar, but it could not have come from anyone intent on improving the quality of public education in Georgia. HR 262 deserves a big fat “F”.