

Calendar volley

While tourism lobby applauds late school start, school districts scramble

By Kay Nolan

After years of lobbying, Wisconsin's tourism industry is likely to succeed in its efforts to start the school year later in the summer — on Sept. 1 or after.

Local school district officials are scrambling to deal with the change.

Tourism industry leaders say the September school year start will both extend Wisconsin's summer vacation season and also help relieve the industry's labor shortages because local students will be available for another week or so in tourist areas.

Local school districts are grappling with how to comply with a provision in the new state budget which awaits a final signature by Gov. Scott McCallum. The measure calls for all 426 of Wisconsin's school districts to start school no earlier than Sept. 1 beginning with the 2002-2003 school year unless they can prove exceptional circumstances.

A similar but less stringent provision took effect in 1999, which urged schools to start in September but allowed them to start earlier if they requested a waiver and followed through with a public hearing on the matter.

Many districts took advantage of the waiver option and in the Milwaukee area, most schools began classes this year in August.

Schools still will be required to hold 180 days of classroom instruction each year. In addition, most district calendars contain approximately 10 additional days when teachers are expected to be at work for classroom preparation or in-service training.

Most local school district officials say they haven't figured out how they will rearrange their calendar for 2002-03, but they say that, if McCallum signs the school calendar provision, they ought to be done by December or January.

While one school district has formed a task force to tackle the calendar changes, at least one other district — the Milwaukee Public Schools — hopes to challenge the state mandate.

Discussions on how to alter school calendars involve not only school administrators but also teachers' unions.

School calendars are always a negotiated item in teacher contracts. Parents, school boards and staff can offer their opinions, but the final decisions will be made at the bargaining table. The number of classroom instruction days is mandated by the state, but the number of teacher in-service days can be decided by each district.

Further complicating implementation of the anticipated mandate is the fact that, due to quirks in the days where holidays fall, next



Starting school later would conflict with August events, like this volleyball tournament at West Allis Hale High School.

year will be one of the worst-case scenarios for school districts trying to comply.

In 2002, September 1 is a Sunday. Labor Day is the following day. So, the earliest schools could start is Sept. 3. That's a week later than many schools ordinarily start, which means the school year would end a week later than usual unless districts find another way to insert five days into the calendar before June.

Shortening winter break will not be an option because Christmas Day and New

Year's Day both fall on Wednesdays. Most districts were already looking at a fairly late ending date of June 10-12, 2003.

If schools must start in September, the school year could easily run until June 17 or 18. One possible solution is shortening spring break to just a few days.

Holding classes until mid- to late June is not favored by many teachers, who say students are too restless to learn. In addition, some teachers attend or teach college summer classes starting in June. Colleges and

universities will not be affected by the state mandate, so there is the potential for conflict.

But other teachers think it would be worse to limit or eliminate in-service days or mid-school year breaks, saying that students do better if given breaks and that teacher preparation days are vital.

"It's hard to find two teachers who agree on when they would rather take vacation," said Bob Beglinger, president of the Wisconsin Federation of Teachers. "I think it is going to be all over the board. Some districts will try to preserve the breaks as much as they can. You'll run into problems in districts where a large number of teachers attend graduate studies."

PARENTS AND THE CALENDAR

Parents are also divided on how to rearrange school calendars.

Parents of elementary school children would like to see school start after Sept. 1, while high school students and their parents prefer the opposite, because athletic and band practices begin in early- to mid-August, said Mary Pat Pfeil, director of community relations for the Wauwatosa School District.

"(August) is not a good vacation month for families," Pfeil said. "If you extend the school year through most of June, you create a very small window for a family vacation."

The bottom line is there are only so many options, and shortening winter and spring break are likely to be unpopular with students and parents, said Phil Sobocinski, superintendent of the West Allis schools.

The Cedarburg School District has already decided to start next school year after Labor Day due to extensive construction projects next summer, but is still juggling the rest of the calendar, said superintendent Daryl Herrick.

Pam Rewey, director of legislative services for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, is concerned that if school contract negotiations are reopened for the purpose of changing the calendar, it could open the door to renegotiating other issues.

"That could mean spending a lot of time and energy that could be spent on kids," said Rewey.

Mike McNett, a spokesman for the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC), an umbrella organization for the majority of local teachers unions, said that "might not happen as much as people think" because most Wisconsin districts are

in the midst of teacher contract negotiations anyway.

The Waukesha School District has already settled its teachers contract through 2003, with a tentative school calendar that would have started Aug. 26, 2002. Superintendent David Schmidt said he doesn't anticipate such problems if the calendar needs to be changed because the district has a collaborative relationship with the local teachers union.

The Milwaukee schools would rather fight than switch their schedule.

MPS officials are awaiting more information for the "exceptional circumstances" under which early-school-year-start waivers will be granted, said Karen Salzbrenner, spokeswoman for Milwaukee Public Schools.

"As the largest school district in the state,

"If you extend the school year through most of June, you create a very small window for a family vacation."

— *Mary Pat Pfeil,*
Wauwatosa School District

we feel that if anyone qualifies for an exception, we would," Salzbrenner said. "We intend to discuss the issue with the Department of Public Instruction."

One of the concerns about starting school later is potential conflict with athletic schedules, graduations, band concerts, and other school-related events.

Doug Chickering, executive director of the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association, said that athletic schedules were already scheduled to begin a week later in 2002 than this year, because the association routinely "rolls back" its calendar by one week every five or six years.

However, the WIAA plans to hold a series of meetings beginning in September and the school calendar is expected to be at the top of the agenda. He predicted there would be few options.

"It's hard to start fall sports any later because the weather gets too cold," he said. "Plus, you might have as much as two weeks overlap between fall and winter sports. The only other option would be to shorten all seasons."