

Heat sparks drive to start school after Labor Day Metro to have half-days for rest of week

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Some parents are proposing a solution to the sweltering school buses, malfunctioning air-conditioning units and unbearable learning conditions brought on by the dog days of August.

Skip August.

A recent round of early school closings and canceled athletic practices is reviving a grass-roots movement to start school after Labor Day. A bill that would have prohibited school start dates before Aug. 25 died two years ago, but some parents say lawmakers would have more luck after recent events. A nonprofit group called SaveTennesseeSummers.org points to successes delaying school starts in other states, including Florida and North Carolina.

On Tuesday, Metro Nashville school officials announced a half-day schedule for the rest of the week to cope with temperatures lingering in the high 90s. Across the Midstate, restrictions on recess and athletic practices continue. In Rutherford County, students are restricted to a 15-minute outdoor recess, and buses must park in a shaded area before picking up students.

Christopher Rogers, a parent of two children, Judson, 11, and Donovan, 10, at J.T. Moore Middle School in Metro, said schools should start after Labor Day like they did where he grew up in Virginia. He said ending the school year early makes for chilly beach days.

"Oftentimes we've gotten out of school at the end of May, and if we want to go to the beach or something it is cold," he said. "And it's always hot going back (to school). It doesn't make sense that we can't start back after Labor Day, when the rest of the country seems to acknowledge that summer's over."

Board chief defends plan

Metro's early-August start is by design, said school board Chairwoman Marsha Warden. The district wants to give students more time to prepare for spring state standardized testing and to finish fall exams before the long holiday break.

Warden said this summer is not typical for Nashville, and start dates shouldn't be changed over one unusual year.

"My belief is we don't let the anomaly of one year create a shift," she said. "I think we have to look at what we're choosing to do, what we're trying to accomplish and ask, 'Does the calendar affect that?'"

The district has not determined whether the lost time will be made up. The district's calendar includes some flexibility for shortened days and inclement weather.

The 2005 start-date bill also would have required the school year to end by June 10. A desire for local school district control killed it.

"It's debated every year, and every school district is different," said Sen. Jim Tracy, R-Shelbyville, who was a member of the Bedford County Board of Education member for nine years. "So that's why I think it should be decided at the local level."

SaveTennesseeSummers.org argues there's no proof the early start date improves learning and says it actually hurts students because it interferes with family time and lessens the time teachers have to update and improve their skills.

Group co-founder Carol Duffin, parent of three Montgomery County students, said every hot August day is more ammunition for her group's stance.

"If they were still on break, they would still be at the pool. They would still be running through sprinklers," she said. "But instead, they are sitting in classrooms all day long with no outdoor recess or play."