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Later start for schools requested

By *BRITTANY BROWN*

Pine Belt public schools could begin classes in late August next year, if the Mississippi Legislature approves guidelines to start school on the fourth Monday in August and end in May.

A new coalition of parents, teachers and community members plans to petition the Mississippi Legislature in January and push for a later start date to save on school utility costs and avoid blazing August temperatures.

The group - Save Mississippi Summers - is one of many nationwide, state partnerships with the Coalition For A Traditional School Calendar, a nonprofit school organization based in San Antonio, Texas.

Tina Bruno, the coalition's executive director, said Save Mississippi Summers has united more than 500 people who are preparing to ask the Legislature for a state law to govern school start dates.

"We're hoping to give a lot of oomph to the requests of parents and superintendents who want school to start later," Bruno said. "Our goal is to get a uniform start date for all the state's public schools."

In Mississippi, school boards set the beginning and ending dates for school, but are required to be in session 180 days.

State board policy mandates the school year must begin no earlier than Aug. 1 and end no later than June 15.

Annie Wimbish, superintendent of Hattiesburg schools, said about 20 years ago when communities were based on agriculture, school started in September because children were needed for labor.

Over the years as communities shifted away from agriculture, Wimbish said there was less need to delay the start of school. That, combined with the introduction of state tests, has pushed the start of school to early August, she said.

This year, Hattiesburg and Lamar County schools began August 7; Forrest County and Forrest County Agricultural schools, August 8; and Petal schools, August 11.

Sen. Joey Fillingane, R-Sumrall, hasn't heard of Save Mississippi Summers but has heard complaints about school starting too early. He's also heard gripes of school districts increasing taxes to pay higher utility bills while holding school in the year's hottest month.

"I'm certainly not opposed, in theory, to what they're proposing," Fillingane said.

"I think they may be on to something, if for no other reason than energy costs.

" They would just have to make sure what they want to do wouldn't have any detrimental effects on education."

According to Save Mississippi Summers, 11 states have laws governing school start dates including Texas, Florida and Arkansas.

Bruno said last year the Dallas Independent School District saved more than \$2 million in electric costs after a new state law required schools to start in late August.

But pushing back the start of school isn't a simple feat.

Bruno said the coalition's problem is dates for state tests that would have to be pushed back so students would have time to prepare.

"We're up against a rock and a hard place with state testing," she said.

"But if all the schools started and tested at the same time, it would increase fairness because everyone had the same amount of time to study."

But that would be a costly change.

Caron Blanton, communications director for the Mississippi Department of Education, said it would cost the state \$2.1 million to add additional testing dates for districts who start school later.

Though many public school superintendents in the Pine Belt support a later start date, they know it's almost impossible without a change in state testing dates.

"If state testing is not moved back, we can't start much, if any, earlier," said Ben Burnett, superintendent of Lamar County schools. "I plan on doing everything in my power to move us to a little later starting date this next year."

Elizabeth Yankay, superintendent of Forrest County Agricultural High School, said she believes a later start date would cut costs.

"Research has shown that utility costs can be cut by having a later start date," she said.

"The heat seems to be a problem while our students are on buses, especially in the afternoons."

Brian Freeman, deputy superintendent for Forrest County schools, said a late-August start date shouldn't push back the end of school.

"We would support starting at a later date, but we would also like to allow parents to offer suggestions and comments," he said.

"One concern of some parents is not to go into the month of June."

Wimbish said she would support the early start date but is concerned that it would cut out extra holidays.

"I'm concerned about cutting out breaks that our students, and especially our teachers, work so hard to enjoy," she said.

Jack Linton, assistant superintendent for Petal schools, could not be reached for comment.