

Posted on Mon, Jul. 28, 2008

Obstacles abound for delaying schools' start

By MELISSA M. SCALLAN
mmscallan@sunherald.com

GULFPORT -- For years, tourism officials and some educators wanted school to start after Labor Day to help businesses keep their workers longer and let students have an extended summer.

Now, with fuel and utility costs rising practically every month, there may be another reason to do it.

Some school superintendents believe that if school started in September, it would save money on utility bills because August is one of the hottest months of the year. Most districts in South Mississippi begin class the first week of August.

"It's too early and it's too hot," said Henry Arledge, superintendent of the Harrison County School District, about starting school in August. "I've always been a big proponent of starting school after Labor Day."

But Arledge pointed out that because of state and federal tests and the number of required instruction days, every district in Mississippi would have to start school at the same time for it to work.

Now, each district sets its own schedule for the year.

"I wish the Legislature would set the starting date after Labor Day for every school district so everybody would start at the same time," he said.

State tests are given each spring, and school officials want students to get the same amount of instructional days in the fall and spring. If school starts after Labor Day, there would be fewer days of instruction in the fall.

"With the instruction time that you would lose, you can't afford to do it by yourself," he said.

Arledge added it would cost the state more than \$2 million to change the testing days.

Paul Tisdale, superintendent of the Biloxi School District, said if school started after Labor Day, some holidays would have to be cut so students wouldn't be going to class through June.

"Nobody wants to give up any holidays so that we could start after Labor Day," he said.

Tisdale and Glen East, superintendent in Gulfport, said they aren't sure there is enough of a temperature change from August to September to make a difference in utility bills.

Still, most districts are implementing cost-cutting measures to save money on fuel and utility bills.

Biloxi has a "no idle" policy with its school buses, said Sam Bailey, transportation supervisor for the district. Also, routes have been streamlined so bus drivers can use the most direct route possible to save gas.

The Gulfport and Harrison County school districts are turning off lights and air conditioners at all schools once everyone leaves.

"We're going dark in all of our campuses in the evenings," said Tom Hardaway, chief operators officer for Gulfport, adding that he is analyzing the district's power bills to see where else they can save money.