



PROGRAM EVALUATION DIVISION

NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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No Modification to North Carolina's School Calendar Law Satisfies Multiple Competing Interests

Summary

The 2015–17 Work Plan of the Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee directed the Program Evaluation Division to examine the effects of the state law designating when public schools in North Carolina start and end the school year. North Carolina is 1 of 14 states that currently prescribe when public schools begin the school year. The start dates for these 14 states range from August 1 to after Labor Day.

Opinions differ on when North Carolina public schools should start and end the school year, and no modification to the State's school calendar law satisfies multiple competing interests. This issue attracts diverse stakeholders including organizations representing state government, education, parents and citizens, and travel and tourism. The timing of summer break during August is an important concern. The school calendar law currently satisfies the travel and tourism industry preference for a summer break that includes most of August, which is why these stakeholders prefer the current law be maintained. Organizations representing education interests want more school calendar flexibility and prefer that summer break ends in early August because this schedule would allow high school exams to be scheduled before winter break and also allows alignment with the community college calendar. Public opinion favors local control of the school calendar.

Allowing school calendar flexibility as a mechanism for low-performing schools to address summer learning loss provides an opportunity to increase student performance. Peer-reviewed literature demonstrates that low-income students disproportionately suffer from summer learning loss in comparison to their middle and higher income peers. The literature shows low-income students could benefit from a modified school calendar with shorter breaks throughout the school year and targeted intervention during the breaks.

The disagreement among stakeholders regarding when North Carolina should start and end the school year cannot be reconciled. Any decision will be perceived as favoring the interests of some stakeholders over others. As a result, this report makes no recommendation for changing the school calendar law. To address the needs of low-performing schools the General Assembly should

- provide school calendar flexibility for schools and districts identified as low-performing by the State Board of Education, and
- direct the Department of Public Instruction to evaluate whether a modified school calendar increases student performance in low-performing schools and districts.