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Earlier school start files some parents

By CATHERINE BAUM
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Monday, July 27, 2009

NORTHAMPTON - Mindful of the late Labor Day this summer, city resident Stephanie Osiecki waited until the School Committee approved the school calendar in February to plan her family's summer vacation.

That's why she was especially upset when school officials a few weeks ago changed the school start date from Sept. 8 to Sept. 2, cutting into her family's well-planned vacation. Although she already arranged for time off from work and paid for a rental, Osiecki said the vacation is now up in the air because her son doesn't want to miss the first few days of middle school.

"It seems very unsettling to have a change like that so late in the year," Osiecki said. "It's better to honor the date that was given than it is to send people scrambling."

Other families welcome the calendar change, which they say will bring Northampton schools' schedule in line with most other schools. For years now, city schools have started later than other area schools, and consequently finished later in June, as well.

But the abrupt change this year with little notice to families is rubbing some parents the wrong way.

Osiecki said her son does not want to miss the beginning of school, crucial days when home rooms and lockers are assigned and team building takes place.

"Kids don't want to miss the first day," said Leda Mahmoodi, who also planned a vacation with her family that week and now has to cut it short. "It's a big deal to kids,"

Reasons behind the change

Superintendent Isabelina Rodriguez informed parents school will start Sept. 2 rather than Sept. 8 in a letter and automated phone message two weeks ago.

The news has received mixed reactions from city families. The original calendar approved in February had school beginning Sept. 8, the day after Labor Day, which would have meant the school year could end as late as June 28 with snow days.

Because city teachers agreed to give up two paid work days historically held before the school year starts, Rodriguez said, school officials and teachers at the negotiating table saw an opportunity to bring the district's calendar into line with surrounding schools.

That change, she said, would also give the district more breathing room in June if it needs to make up for snow days after school gets out June 16. She recommended the change to the School Committee. The old schedule frequently cut it close to June 30, the last day school can be held, according to law.

"I think it's great and I wished they had done it earlier," said Valle Dwight, whose son missed his last day at Northampton High School last year to attend an overnight summer camp in Vermont that had already started. "They've been getting out so late with snow days."

School officials say they regret inconveniencing families with such an abrupt change.

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"I am really truly sorry for the difficult decision that we've put (on) those families," said Stephanie Pick, vice chairwoman of the School Committee. "We gave seven weeks notice and that clearly is not sufficient for a lot of people."

But they say the late notice is tied to the fact that the calendar decision wasn't made until contract negotiations were complete, Pick said.

Contract negotiations a factor

The negotiating team and teachers union met nearly 10 times this year to brainstorm ways to reduce the budget gap. They finally came up with a couple of funding transfers and the union give-back in two furlough days, which saves the district \$144,000 and preserves 3.4 teaching jobs.

"It's unfortunate that we were not able to reach the ratification until July, but it was certainly an agreement that we were able to arrive to with teachers," said Rodriguez. She noted the teachers and negotiation team authorized the ratification as soon as it was agreed, July 9, rather than waiting for a formal ratification meeting.

"They recognized this was a change that needed to be publicized as soon as possible," Rodriguez said.

In her letter to parents announcing the calendar change, Rodriguez stated the school department was giving parents "early notification" so they could make other arrangements, and she acknowledged that this phrasing offended some parents who felt the notice was abrupt and late. All she meant by that statement, she said in an interview Thursday, was that the notification was being given to parents "as early as possible."

Some families are not directly impacted by the calendar change, but upset the decision was made in July.

"It's a case-by-case scenario, but the ultimate bottom line is the decision shouldn't have been an option on such short notice," said Mahmoodi, who is cutting short her vacation planned to Cape Cod for Labor Day week with her two children in elementary school. "People go away for the whole summer and they don't even know" about the change.

Meanwhile, Judy Averill, a teacher in Easthampton who has three children in Northampton schools, said she welcomed the change. She starts work in Easthampton Aug. 25, and with the change in Northampton, she only needs to arrange her children's supervision for two weeks rather than three.

Finding child care for Labor Day week also has been a challenge each fall for Valle Dwight, who has a disabled child in the school district.

"There's nothing happening that first week of September," Dwight said. "It's always been kind of a scramble. For us this decision is fantastic."

Some families question how and why the two-day furlough impacts the start date for students.

"I think sometimes too many decisions are made on behalf of the employees of the city rather than the taxpayers of the city - it's not a customer-oriented city," Mahmoodi said. "I think this was what the union wanted."

Rodriguez, meanwhile, said her goal in making the change was to preserve the continuity of the school year. She said back in February, students, staff and teachers raised concerns to the School Committee about the Sept. 8 start date. Many suggested adopting a calendar more like other schools, saying school in June was sometimes uncomfortably hot and getting out of school late interferes with summer camp schedules, Rodriguez said.

But the committee couldn't change the calendar start date back in February because that involved renegotiating the teachers' contract, which mandated teachers start after Sept. 1 and be paid for convocation and professional development days before school started.

She said it wasn't until after teachers agreed to give up those two paid days July 9 that the calendar could be revised.

"Not only weren't we in the position to share the information earlier, we didn't have the information earlier," Pick said of the calendar change.

About 14 additional jobs were preserved last month when Northampton voters approved a Proposition

2½ override that gave an additional \$1 million to city schools.

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Mon, 07/27/2009 - 12:50 — [bowler](#)

How about next year?

If the Sept. 8 school year was good enough in February when it was approved, why cause this disruption 7 weeks out? Make the change effective next year. Who's idea was it anyway to bring up changing the start date in July? If it was the Superintendent and school committee's, we need to know. If it was the teachers' union asking for concessions, that only adds to feelings of resentment many in this City have after supporting the Override to save jobs. I do wish the reporter had asked the Superintendent's secretary how many people have contacted them to express opposition to this plan - they do keep a log.

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Mon, 07/27/2009 - 11:31 — [zackarysmama](#)

Good Change

Personally, I would never plan a vacation for the last week of the summer. Kids need at least a week to prepare for school, physically and mentally. And most summer activities, including those in Northampton, start the third week of June and the school calendar was interfering. Then no activities were available for the first week of September. This change makes it easier for working families to cover the ten weeks of summer.

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Tue, 07/28/2009 - 10:52 — [dilly123](#)

Don't agree

I would never plan for a family vacation the first week of summer due to the fact that the end of the school year is always in flux and dependent on snow days. Although I have never planned a vacation the last week of summer, this year I took advantage of the late school start date of Sept. 8th and secured a rental that was tied in to "off-peak" summer rates; a rental that would not be affordable otherwise. This rental was paid for weeks ago. My children would return from vacation on Saturday the 5th, plenty of time to "physically and mentally prepare" for school on the 8th. An abrupt calendar change like this with no plan in place for accommodations for families who are unable to cancel or modify plans is unacceptable. I would welcome an earlier school start and end date for the 2010-2011 calendar but am still in the dark as to why any change was necessary for this year.

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