

A Position Statement On Proposed Legislation Banning Schools Opening Before Labor Day

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**NC Association of School Administrators
NC School Boards Association
NC Association of Educators
NC Business Committee for Education
Public School Forum**

Is It Going to Be Real Estate Commissions Over Schools For North Carolina?

Several years ago the General Assembly of Virginia passed what was called the “Kings Dominion” bill, a measure that banned the state’s schools from opening before Labor Day or extending beyond Memorial Day in the spring, except in certain circumstances. Kings Dominion, a large amusement park located on I-95 near Richmond, was credited with leading the charge.

North Carolina now has three versions of a Kings Dominion bill introduced in both houses, but the impetus for it seems to be coming largely from realtors in coastal communities who contend that early school opening dates are crimping the economy of tourist-dependent areas. Their argument, of course, is framed in regional economic terms; there is nary a mention of lower real estate commissions or less income for families that can afford second homes on the beach.

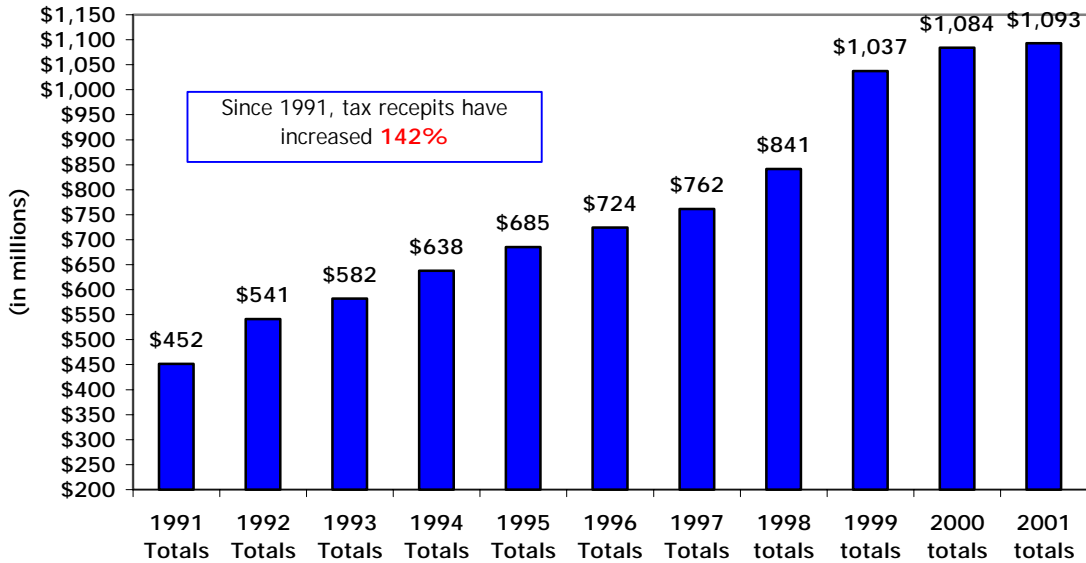
Before North Carolina has the dubious distinction of joining with the handful of states that have enacted similar legislation in the name of economic development, five education and business organizations believe it would be instructive to examine the issue in a variety of ways.

North Carolina’s Tourism Industry is Growing

While the nation’s sagging economy has been mirrored in virtually all aspects of North Carolina’s economy, tourism is one of the few bright spots in the state’s economy. Over the last decade, tourism spending has grown an amazing 69.8% at the same time more school starting dates have crept into August. According to North Carolina Department of Commerce figures, tourism is one of the more robust aspects of the state’s economy, as the following charts demonstrate:

This first chart demonstrates the dramatic growth in tax revenue generated by North Carolina's tourism industry over the past decade. Tourism remains one of the growth industries in the state of North Carolina.

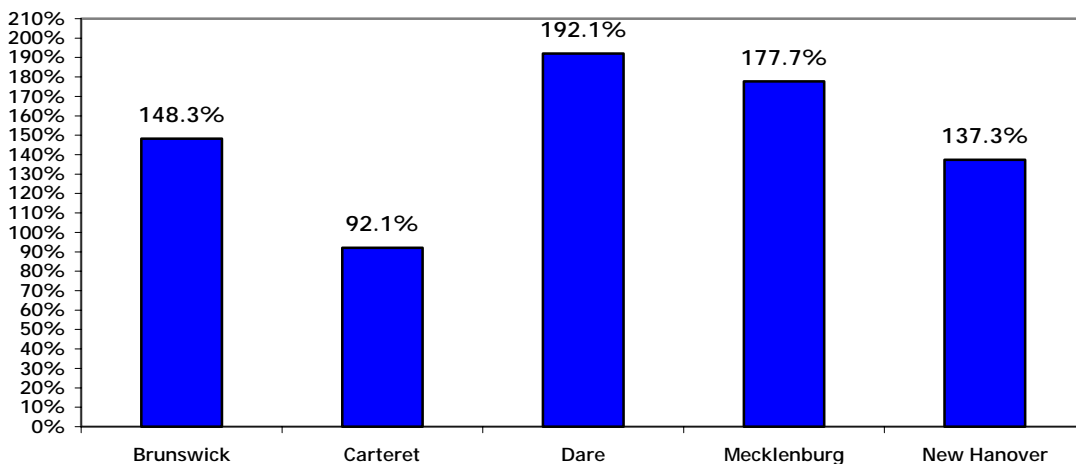
Total Tax Receipts from Tourism
1991-2001



Source: based upon data from the NC Department of Commerce

This next chart shows how selected coastal counties have seen an unparalleled growth in tourism revenue over the last decade -- growth, by the way, that has been accompanied by schools opening their doors before the Labor Day weekend.

Growth in Tax Receipts from Tourism
1991-2001



Source: based upon data from the NC Department of Commerce

If Beach Rentals in 2003 are Off, Blame Code Orange, Asian Virus, September 11 and War in Iraq . . . Not August School Openings

Recently there has been a flurry of articles about summer tourist rentals being off at North Carolina's beaches for the summer of 2003. Most of the articles, however, perceptively put the finger of blame on issues that are effecting the travel industry worldwide – threats of terrorism, the aftermath of September 11, the issuing and re-issuing of Orange and Red alerts from the Homeland Security office and, more recently, war in Iraq and the rapid spread of SARS, a mysterious virus that apparently originated in Hong Kong. American Airlines is teetering on bankruptcy; cruise lines are seeing summer reservations cancelled in large numbers and resort areas around the world are feeling the impact of worldwide uncertainty in uncertain times. To presume post-Labor Day opening of schools will give realtors the shot in the arm they need in the summer of 2003 is to turn a blind eye toward twenty-four hour coverage of a world at war, terrorist threats and contagion that is spreading around the globe.

Missing in the Discussion: Education

Thus far, the education merits of a Kings Dominion bill have been missing in the discussion. While lawmakers are quick to share in the credit for North Carolina's remarkable educational progress in recent years, they are less quick to look at changes in schools that have contributed to the progress. Among the changes:

- * Efforts to shorten the extended break in schooling over the summer months reflecting research findings that show students slip backward when they are away from schooling for extended periods of time.
- * Block scheduling in high schools that enables students to be exposed to more material in more depth over the course of a school year – scheduling that would become difficult, if not impossible, if schools were bounded by Kings Dominion legislation.
- * Scheduling that enables schools to squeeze in more instructional days in front of the increasingly-important state testing dates, dates that will become even more important next year when the impact of the No Child Left Behind legislation is felt.

Taking the “C” Out of the ABCs

Ironically, the Kings Dominion bill is being considered by the same bodies that enacted the ABCs accountability plan – a plan that promised to return the “C,” or local control to local school boards and officials, in recognition that previous General Assemblies had intruded more and more into local decision making. If enacted, the Kings Dominion bill would remove local flexibility on starting dates for school calendars.

Western North Carolina Would Bear the Brunt of Kings Dominion Law

For decades schools in Western North Carolina have routinely opened their doors in August to give them adequate calendar time to make up snow days. If the Kings Dominion bill is enacted, schools in Western Carolina could easily be confronted with schools running through mid-June or late-June. Thus, a bill aimed at helping realtors in Eastern North Carolina could end up preventing families in Western North Carolina from planning vacations in June – a classic example of how “one size fits all” thinking frequently solves one problem while creating another.

The Current School Calendar Was Dictated by the Needs of Farmers; Is a New Calendar Going to Be Dictated by the Needs of Realtors?

Why does North Carolina, and most of the states in the nation, have the shortest instructional year in the industrial world? When public schools were established most of the nation remained rooted in an agrarian economy. Young people were needed to help on the farm during harvest time. Long after the state’s economy has shifted farther and farther away from agricultural reliance, the tradition of long summer breaks has become institutionalized.

More and more, there is a growing realization that our young people are very unlikely to be competitive with other countries when we “spot” young people in nations like Japan and Germany 4 and 1/3 years of additional schooling over their K-12 years. Yet, annually we bemoan the fact that our students who have taken courses like Algebra for only 180 days underperform their counterparts in Japan who have taken Algebra for 240 days.

The proposed Kings Dominion legislation would replace the shackles of an agrarian tradition with the shackles of coastal realtors who fear a loss of business in the month of August. If enacted, it is less likely than ever before that efforts to give North Carolina young people more of a competitive edge through lengthening the existing school year would pass.

A Kings Dominion Bill for North Carolina? A Bad Idea With Potentially Negative Long-Term Effects

The five statewide organizations, representing education and business interests across the state, urge the General Assembly to exercise extreme caution with a North Carolina version of a Kings Dominion bill. In the short term, the bill will require schools to rethink different calendar strategies that have been paying education dividends. In the long term, it will make it even more difficult to consider giving North Carolina young people the competitive edge of more time for school. In either event, it makes the “C” in the ABCs accountability program ring hollow. Last, the new requirements of the federal government’s No Child Left Behind legislation is going to require schools to use every weapon in their education arsenal – including time – to meet the new accountability demands.