

**Superintendents want to add 5 weeks to school year**

**Steve Brandt and Dan Wascoe, Star Tribune**

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Minnesota's school superintendents urged Wednesday that the school year be extended by five weeks -- a move that would be phased in over four years. The proposal, which was intended to bolster competitiveness, also is likely to revive lots of debate.

Previous efforts to lengthen the number of days students spend in class have drawn fire from resort owners and businesses that rely on student workers. The Legislature passed one such proposal in the early 1990s only to back off before it took effect.

This proposal is for a 200-day school year, compared with the current range of 170 to 175 days.

It is part of the legislative platform approved by the 20-member board of the Minnesota Association of School Administrators. The proposal also calls for a longer work year for teachers -- 230 days, which is intended to allow for more on-the-job training.

Teachers currently work about 185 days.

"If we're going to stay globally competitive, we need to have our kids in school more," said Charlie Kyte, executive director of the School Administrators Association. He said that school years in other nations range as high as 230 days in China.

Education Commissioner Alice Seagren, a former legislator, said the idea merits serious attention, although she appeared surprised by the five-week extension.

Gov. Tim Pawlenty likes the concept, according to spokesman Brian McClung, although he hasn't seen the specific plan.

"He supports a variety of measures that will increase student achievement and believes this is a useful tool," McClung said. "It would really make Minnesota nation-leading in yet another aspect of our education system."

The proposal faces financial, labor relations and familial hurdles. The superintendents said their proposal would add 12 to 14 percent to the cost of school funding. Seagren anticipates significant pushback on that issue.

The superintendents propose to buffer the budget shock with the four-year phase-in, but ultimately the extra cost is the price of staying competitive with the rest of the world, Kyte said.

Tom Day, a lobbyist for the trade group Hospitality Minnesota, said he's skeptical that a longer school year improves learning and that his group would probably oppose the idea. The hospitality industry recently prevailed in getting the Legislature to delay the start of school until after Labor Day, starting next fall.

**A longer work year, too**

Teachers often go back to college in the summer, which enables them to move up their salary scale faster. Kyte said he's confident that if teachers have more on-the-job time for training, colleges would hustle to offer them opportunities at their schools to gain credits.

School years are set in teacher labor contracts, meaning that new agreements might have to be written unless the state preempts local boards in this area.

### **Other efforts came to naught**

Seagren praised superintendents for raising the issue. Students "do need to be in school longer, she said. "We can't keep cramming information" into the current school calendar.

But some previous efforts have come to naught. Seagren recalled a pilot project in Bloomington that tried to alternate 45 days in class with 15 days off. It did not attract enough support to survive, she said. A year-round school established by Minneapolis schools failed to produce hoped-for results and ended by 2003.

Seagren also said some teachers might not favor the idea of a longer year. But the proposal might be crafted to offer some short breaks during the school year.

Judy Schaubach, president of Education Minnesota, said the state teachers union needs more time to study the proposal. But it got thumbs-up from Minneapolis teacher union chief Louise Sundin. She said it will reduce summer learning dropoff for kids while providing teachers with extra training, and higher salaries to gain parity with comparable professions.

Stan Mack, superintendent of the Robbinsdale School District, said he endorses the idea despite substantial obstacles. Asked whether a longer school year would cut into students' ability to earn money for college, he said it makes better economic sense to do well in school and earn scholarships.

As for traditional objections from businesses that draw on student labor, Mack said he hears cynical comments from school officials around the country that Minnesota, a reputed brainpower state, allows "the State Fair and the hospitality industry to determine when school should start."

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