



"Ground Hog Day"

I suspect a number of you folks about the same age as I am will remember the movie "Ground Hog Day". It is the story of a "smarmy weatherman" (Bill Murray) who ventures out to cover Ground Hog Day and ends up reliving that day over and over again. He is condemned to this ill-fated boredom until he figures out what it means to really live.

Well I am a bit like the leading character with a small difference. I'm condemned to tell the story of our shrinking summers over and over again until enough political and educational folks around the state figure out the economic and educational importance of our summers.

Thus, if you recall some similarities between this column and a previous column don't be surprised.

For me the final scene of "my movie" will be the enforcement of the present Iowa Code which says schools will not start classes until the week in which September 1st occurs. Presently, as most of you know, the Iowa Department of Education flaunts our law by granting unconditional waivers

to any school applying for an exception. This is one more example of a state agency ignoring legislative intent.

Exceptions were ostensibly to be given for schools that would face hardships if forced to follow state code. Of course these “so called hardships” have more to do with the convenience of finishing the semester before Christmas and taking a spring vacation than any educational malaise that might ensue.

I read a considerable amount of educational research and there is no study that I am aware of that suggests following the present law would in anyway hamper student achievement. Schools are not adding school days; they are taking significantly longer to complete the 180-day requirement.

Ironically, there is evidence that following the traditional calendar produces better results because more students are in school when classes begin in the fall. Additionally, days are not lost to the August heat.

I listened to an announcement two weeks ago with disbelief. One of our area schools planned to dismiss early afternoon each week because of the heat. Well my thought (like yours I’m guessing) was, “why would you start school when you know valuable contact time with the kids, the most important component of learning, will be lost?”

Most of you I visit with are aware that Minnesota and Wisconsin, which have much less homogeneous student populations and are usually first and second in ACT scores, both start school after Labor Day. Consequently, I reject the notion that enforcing the present law creates any “educational hardship.”

It is also important to note; if we were interested in seamless transitions for students between schools during the school year and from secondary to post-secondary classes, it would be beneficial to have some consistency when high school and college’s classes start.

Tourism's Impact

Why does any of this matter? The simple fact is that tourism, by the numbers, is the third largest industry in the State of Iowa. It generates over seven billion dollars of revenue, employs thousands and generates millions in state and local tax dollars for schools. Unfortunately, the educational establishment is killing one of the “golden geese” in this state. Tourism is slowly being strangled by earlier and earlier school start dates.

Some schools are starting classes the second week of August, taking away at least two weeks of the travel season for families in those districts. One could liken this to dropping 14 days from the growing season for farmers. Or perhaps a weekend of Christmas shopping for retailers.

Two years ago Jennifer Grandholm, the newly elected Governor of Michigan, in her address to the Michigan legislature suggested an integral part of the restoration of the state’s economy would begin with the protection of the tourist industry. She asked the state to require all schools to start after Labor Day and she was successful.

I have reported before that Clay County ranks 13th in the State and Dickinson County 6th in revenue collected from travelers. Together tourist venues collect a startling \$250 million dollars annually from travelers.

However, one wonders how much longer many these venues can/will tolerate the double whammy of a reduced summer season and oppressive commercial property taxes.

I believe the tourist season is worth saving for another reason. Having the privilege of hiring 20 to 25 high school and college students each year I will tell you that they too are being shortchanged. They earn good summer paychecks and post-secondary schools are becoming increasingly expensive.

Historically, students and summer tourism jobs have been good for each other: A seasonal workforce for business and good paying jobs for kids who need cash for school.

I will also suggest to you that one of the most important parts of a student's education comes in the world of work; there teenagers learn and develop skills that will be important for a lifetime; discipline, communication, work ethic, honesty, and team work.

I will continue to press this issue in the Iowa Legislature until we get enough support to return to a traditional summer. I hope we are successful before bedrock businesses that have made the Iowa Great Lakes Area what it is today are lost to the shrinking summer.

As usual I would appreciate your feedback.

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