Mileah Kromer: The Way It Always Was and Other Resident Reflections on Letting Summer Be Summer

By: Mileah Kromer

Last fall, the Goucher Poll found that 71% of Maryland residents supported an after-Labor Day start date for Maryland schools. Our new poll shows Marylanders have not changed their opinions on the proposition-turned-introduced-legislation (SB 455), colloquially known as “Let Summer Be Summer”—72% of residents say they support Comptroller Peter Franchot’s push for the post-Labor Day start. The results of our last two surveys provide an indication of what Marylanders think, but our most recent survey also sheds light on why they think it. On our current survey, we asked residents to tell us why they supported or opposed the initiative; a summary of the results are found below:

Next, as you may have heard, there is a proposal to move the official start date of Maryland public schools to after Labor Day weekend. Do you [support or oppose] this proposal?

• * Oppose: 19%
• * Support: 72%
• * Don’t Know/Refused: 9%

Top Reasons for Support:

• * 20 percent say starting school before Labor Day is disruptive or “doesn’t make sense.”
• * 18 percent say it benefits students.
• * 18 percent say it benefits families.
• * 15 percent say that a post-Labor day start is “the way it always was.”
• * 10 percent say economic reasons.
• * 8 percent specify vacation-related reasons.

Top Reasons for Opposition:

• * 27 percent think it will push the end of the school year too far into June.
• * 20 percent think it will hurt students.
• * 13 percent think the mandated change is not needed or would be disruptive.
• * 13 percent think “more school is better,” or summer would be too long.

While Comptroller Franchot and his allies have touted “Let Summer Be Summer” as a mechanism for economic development—particularly for the tourist hubs of Ocean City and Deep Creek Lake—most residents view the benefits of an after-Labor Day start in personal, rather than economic, terms. The results of the Goucher Poll suggest Marylanders conceptualize the proposed mandate as common-sense policy that mitigates disruption for students and families and allows scheduling flexibility for late-summer vacations, all with a bonus dash of nostalgia for the days of long childhood summers.

More specifically, when asked about their reason for support, around 20% of residents vacillated somewhere between viewing sending students back to school before Labor Day as disruptive to just plain “silly.” Some specified that going back for a few days and then having off for Labor Day “just didn’t make sense.” One such respondent told an interviewer she supported the post-Labor Day start simply because “it’s stupid to not have it this way.”

Top 36% of respondents noted that a post-Labor Day start was a benefit to students (18%) and families (18%). Many of these respondents noted some variation of “start, stopping, and starting school” was stressful and inconvenient for the students and their families. Some others said students do not get much out of the school days before Labor Day, so that late-August time would be better spent with their families. Another 8% of respondents specifically mentioned that a post-Labor Day start would give families more time to go on a summer vacation.

Even with the added support from Governor Larry Hogan, key legislators, and representatives of the Maryland tourism industry, Franchot’s estimations of economic benefits are simply not the primary reason for resident support—only 10% of respondents offered economic explanations as the main motives for their backing.

I can imagine the team that painstakingly researched the viability of Franchot’s proposal is at least slightly let down that nostalgia outweighs their economic and market-based evidence in the minds of most Marylanders. Then again, the triumph of the personal over economic reasoning is clearly not lost on the Comptroller’s Office, which has recently put together a clever promotion in which Maryland residents are asked to submit a short video about what “Let Summer Be Summer” means to them. On the other hand, 19% of residents oppose the after-Labor Day start. Twenty-seven percent of those who oppose said a mandated post-Labor Day start would push the end date of schools too far into June. Another 20% say it would hurt students, with another 13% specifying that a law/mandate for the post-Labor Day start is unnecessary. Other residents opposed to the legislation said summer is too long, and “more school is better.” Less than 10% of those opposed to the post-Labor Day start note it will cause child care issues or hurt teachers.

The Maryland State Education Association, the Public School Superintendents Association of Maryland, and the Maryland Association of Boards of Education have all expressed their opposition to mandating a post-Labor Day start. However, the results of our survey suggest that Franchot’s characterization of the opposition as being composed of “the elite folks of the educational establishment” is at least somewhat accurate because high levels of opposition are simply not present in the general public.

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