

A Brief History of Save Our Summers-NC (through 7/04)

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In 2002-03, certain NC tourism groups failed in their attempts to pass a bill prohibiting schools from starting prior to Labor Day. In the fall of 2003, a handful of parents started their own grassroots movement, Save Our Summers – North Carolina (SOS-NC), hoping to bring back the option of sending children to a school with a more traditional calendar. After years of having their pleas for help ignored by local school boards, SOS-NC supporters felt they had no choice but to take the matter to the General Assembly.

One of the first steps was to hold a meeting with key players in the tourism's effort the previous year. The reason for this meeting was so that parents could ask these representatives to "stay back." The tourism efforts had suffered an early defeat, and parents, whose passion was more family-driven than economy-driven, wanted their turn at bat. That is exactly what came to pass. Only after SOS-NC held a legislative press conference (some five months later) announcing their initiative and producing petition-signatures from over 3,000 concerned citizens, did individuals under the tourism heading sit up and take notice. And why not? After all, such a law would bring in badly-needed revenue to the state of North Carolina. SOS-NC's stand did not change – it was on a mission which focused on children and families, and time after time turned down offers of cash from "special interest groups."

SOS-NC volunteers, sharing their vision predominantly by word of mouth, continued to collect thousands of names and comments on petitions. Legislators began to pay attention.

SOS-NC asked for help because of a genuine concern for the children of our state. Supporters cited a long list of reasons why an adequate summer break was needed by their families. Many saw chances for educational activities outside of a classroom and opportunities for coveted family time dwindling away. Others were in dire financial straits and depended on working youth to help support their families. Daycare expenses were lower over one long extended break, especially for those who qualified for special scholarships to camps, music lessons, etc. Some cited health hazards involving athletes who practice in intense July heat and children who ride buses or sit in classrooms that bake in the sun. The reasons are too numerous to list here, but all stay true to the SOS-NC principle of putting children and families first.

So-called "negative" aspects of this proposal were also noted and researched by SOS-NC volunteers. Issues such as exam schedules, block scheduling, impact on disadvantaged and special-needs children, summer forgetfulness and local control were all taken into consideration by SOS-NC organizers. They listened as parents and teachers alike expressed views on these and other matters. Such conversations produced a wide range of opinions, many of which pointed to the calendar change as having a positive effect on some of these issues. They also asked for proof to back up assertions that a later start date would cause lower test scores, etc., but such claims could never be substantiated.

Even though SOS-NC did not take a position on teacher workdays, that issue became a major point of debate as the bill progressed. It is important to note that the average number of teacher workdays nationwide is six. The current law cut the number of workdays in N.C. from 20 to 15. This means that teachers in our state still have nine more workdays than the national average. At a time when education leaders across our state have declared a crisis in regards to teacher retention and recruitment, eliminating five teacher workdays will only bring N.C. more up to par with the rest of the country. The NC Association of Educators, which had always lobbied extensively against school calendar bills, had to reverse its stance after conducting a poll which revealed that approximately 68% of its members supported the current law.

As for claims that the calendar change itself will harm education, my question is this: “How do you define education?” If you define it solely in terms of a series of numbers on a piece of paper at the end of the year, then research reveals that North Carolina is not near the top. In fact, in a nationwide study based on factors such as NAEP scores, ACT and SAT scores, expenditures per pupil, and average teacher salary, N.C. ranked 32nd . In all 31 states that ranked above N.C., school started the last week of August or the first week of September.

For SOS-NC supporters, a child’s education doesn’t end after EOG or EOC tests are over. Education is an ongoing process that includes opportunities for children to apply knowledge in their everyday lives. Educational trips and jobs provide young people with “hands-on” opportunities that often lead to lifetime interests or occupations. All students need time to be with family and friends in informal settings where social skills can be honed. Children are our heritage, and their future largely depends on the decisions that we, as adults, make for their lives. I shudder to think of a future where children have been given little opportunity to develop inventive minds, to explore and make decisions, and to allow their creative juices to flow.

The Save Our Summers – NC story is not one of money, power, and politics. To attribute passage of this bill to those factors alone is to ignore the unique nature of what really happened. Yes, eventually it took the efforts of many groups, for various reasons, uniting under a common goal to get a new law passed. The role of each should never be downplayed. But the uniqueness of what transpired lies within the hearts and souls of ordinary folks across our state. All racial, social, political, economical, lifestyle, and gender biases were put aside as citizens from all walks of life joined together to “do the impossible.” They kept legislators busy reading thousands of letters filled with personal concerns and well-researched facts. Against all odds, they volunteered time and money to keep a bill alive in the face of harsh opposition by state education leaders and lobbyists.

Towards the end, SOS-NC volunteers couldn’t even keep up with the volume of names pouring in. We do know that the voices of over 20,000 supporters were heard by legislators. The public deserves to know their side of the story.