March 8, 2017

Senate Bill 34

Proponent Testimony – Karen Burwinkel, Burwinkel Farms

Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chair Huffman , Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Senate Bill 34. This legislation would require schools to start classes after Labor Day, unless they go through a process specified in the legislation.

My name is Karen Burwinkel of Burwinkel Farms in Ross, OH. Burwinkel Farms, a small family farm in Southwest Ohio, is very much in support of Senate Bill 34, which would push the start of each school year to after Labor Day in Ohio.  The summer months are our peak time for business, when we sell corn and other fresh fruits and vegetables in several areas around Cincinnati. As a local business that relies on a mostly high school and college workforce during the summer, we believe a later start to the school year will be beneficial to small businesses like ours as well as our employees. The change in the Ohio schools schedule in the recent years has put an enormous extra stress upon our business, and as one of the small farms left in our area, we see Senate Bill 34 as an opportunity to challenge this hardship while restoring/expanding employment opportunities to many local young adults.

As a 3rd generation family farm, we are very proud to say that we hire many local high school and college students at our business, while many farms surrounding us have resorted to an immigrant labor force.  We would greatly like to continue our long-standing tradition of hiring from the local community and would have much more success doing so if we had a solid work force through the end of our busy growing season (marked typically by Labor Day). By losing most of our young adult employees during the last stretch of our season-a critical time in our business-we are feeling a hardship in continuing to hire mostly from this group of young adults.

With the school year beginning early to mid-August, we have resorted to shutting down our harvest season earlier than necessary. We have recently committed to growing less during the final third of our summer season, specifically as a result of the difficulty in finding employees for harvest. In late August, we literally go from having a daily list of 20+ eager employees available to only 2-3 young adults who might be available certain days, depending on their schedules. We cannot change the peak produce growing season to accommodate the change in school schedules—trust me, if we could, we would. As a consequence of limited available workforce and our subsequent decreased crop, we also shut down many of our neighborhood market sales locations prematurely. Our presence in the community with our fresh produce is beneficial on many levels and goes full circle. A healthy meal fuels a healthy mind—a healthy mind grows a healthy student. Normally, Labor Day marks our last hurrah—the end of our produce season—the end of summer. Passing Senate Bill 34 would push back the start of school to past labor day so that the holiday weekend can once again, unofficially, mark the end to summer—for both our produce season and summer vacation. It would mark the end of a working season for many local students and the start of a prosperous learning year.

A later start to the school year would also benefit our employees. Working on our farm is a great learning experience, where hard work and strong work ethics become a reality. These young adults don’t just show up to a job, they show up (at 6 a.m. daily, may I add) to a family and are part of a functioning team. In fact, many of our employees love to work at Burwinkel Farms and return year after year. Often times, deep friendships are developed among co-workers that last a lifetime (my husband and I are a case in point). In addition, in the more recent years, when the students have started back to school early, we often hear from them that they feel as if they are missing out and would rather be working than heading back to school. We don’t want that—we want these kids to want to go to school and be eager to learn—but it’s hard for them when they feel like their work is not finished. Aside from being part of our “family,” the students would benefit from the learning experience stemming from their participation in a seasonal business from start to finish—beginning to end. Finally, these students miss out on an opportunity to earn extra money, which may supplement their family income or be saved up for college. A 1/3 yearly loss in potential income for young adults could have a large impact financially.

Across America, there has been a recent movement to “support your local farmer,” and “know where your food comes from.” We have many loyal customers that have been supporting us for years, and for them, we are so grateful. Help give our small family farm a continued fighting chance to survive amid the large agribusiness that dominates our food production in today’s globalized economy. It’s sad to see that so many small, family farms have already disappeared from our local food supply. Somehow, with the help of the community, we have managed to survive. Now we need the State of Ohio’s help, by passing Senate Bill 34, to continue to provide the most delicious and nutritious food to our local community for the full length of our produce season. Pushing the school year back until after Labor Day would benefit seasonal businesses like ours, the local community, and the students trying to earn a few extra bucks.

Members of the committee, thank you for your time and consideration of our perspective. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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“The proper role of government, however, is that of partner with the farmer — never his master. By every possible means we must develop and promote that partnership — to the end that agriculture may continue to be a sound, enduring foundation for our economy and that farm living may be a profitable and satisfying experience.”  
**– President Dwight Eisenhower**