As parents and as a teacher in Elyria, we are happy to speak in support of SB 34 to require Ohio’s schools to begin the school year after Labor Day. With an early start last fall, our son James, a 7th grader at Eastern Heights Middle School, was arriving home utterly spent from a school day in classrooms registering temperatures near 100 degrees. Through those first weeks of school, he reported good things about the kindness of his teachers and classes generally, but didn't really have a sense that much was being accomplished because it was so terribly hot. James also has asthma, like 10% of Ohio school kids, which is often made worse by the heat. In August, the heat was the norm and not the exception. Eastern Heights was built in 1951, opened in 1952, and has no modern cooling system. In the heat of late summer, students and teachers in most of Elyria’s schools are reliant upon a rare breeze through aging windows, the fortunate position of a box fan, or relief from drinking fountains that may or may not work. Through the Lorain County Parents advocacy group, parents across the county reported similar issues related to the heat. District leadership in the Elyria City Schools recommended revisiting our already established calendars, and the teacher’s union (Elyria Education Association) voted to change the calendar to start after Labor Day next year. It was the right thing to do for Elyria's kids, and SB 34 is the right move for all of Ohio’s students.

In his 1943 Theory of Motivation, Abraham Maslow established a hierarchy of needs that is generally accepted regarded human motivation. Unless basic needs are fulfilled on the lower levels of the hierarchy, a human simply cannot be motivated to accomplish at the higher levels. The lowest level of the hierarchy are the Physical Needs like food, water, rest, and warmth, or in the case of August in Ohio, a moderation of warmth. As humans we realize that if we are hungry or thirsty we cannot attend to other tasks properly. The same is true of the heat as many of our students experience it. Our son, and my students, cannot be expected to successfully pursue the mastery of academic concepts if the heat is oppressive, just as they cannot if hunger is present. If we move up Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, those students also need to feel a sense of safety and security in their lives, as well as a sense of belonging before they can reach the fourth stage of Esteem Needs which allow for the pursuit of achievement and mastery. While it is, of course, difficult (if not impossible) for the state and the schools to remediate all of these issues for all of our children in order to assure they arrive at school stage four ready to learn, we believe that SB 34 moves us a step in the right direction.

Those that criticize the proposal to begin school after Labor Day have legitimate concerns. Students at Elyria High School, where I teach American History, are in a difficult position as they attempt to score well within an assessment system that is excessive at best, and wildly inappropriate at worst. As we know, the current graduation requirement will prevent 30% of students from receiving a diploma, a percentage that will be far higher in urban areas like Elyria. The early start date in mid-August provided an increase in instruction time prior to high stakes assessments, which I would guess is the chief reason most schools adopted the move. As a teacher, I will work to adjust the pace of my course accordingly to assure student success. We also hope that the Superintendent’s Graduation Workgroup comes up with a solution to the graduation problem, a problem that has less to do with instruction time, and more to do with an invalid assessment system utterly mismanaged by the Ohio Department of Education for a graduation requirement not even required by federal law. We trust the solution will be equitable and seek to provide students with opportunities as opposed to doling out punishment.

Obviously, the issue goes beyond our high schools. Teachers and administrators at all levels concern themselves with assessment scores as they are the bulk of our professional evaluations and are used inappropriately by the ODE as the key measure of value on the state report card. In Ohio, we have placed all of our eggs in the assessment basket, and it often runs contrary to decision making that is in the best interest of students. To be fair, these issues could be solved as well. The Every Student Succeeds Act recommends diminishing the weight of assessments in the evaluation process, and provides flexibility to move to a more expressive report card that doesn't dismiss the complexity of education through an oversimplified and confusing A-F system. Furthermore, ESSA would allow Ohio to administer far fewer assessments, and generally require students to test less and learn more. Unfortunately, Superintendent DeMaria and the ODE have thus far completely ignored stakeholder input for Ohio’s ESSA plan that could have remedied these issues. Had they been addressed, we believe that there would be far less reluctance from districts regarding the later start as established in SB 34.

While we firmly believe that addressing the above systemic issues are necessary for the betterment of Ohio’s education system, SB 34 does provide for some flexibility in the opening of a school year through community input if a district chooses to start prior to Labor Day. The requirement to hold a meeting to allow the public to weigh in on district decision making with regard to the calendar at least 30 days prior to the decision assures true local control of the situation, and encourages the involvement of parents and community members in the process.

As advocates of education in the state of Ohio, we believe that SB 34 is a piece of legislation that does right by Ohio’s students. The issues associated with the state’s punitive assessment and evaluation systems need to be remedied, but are not significantly exacerbated by this law. The Elyria City Schools made the right move in adjusting our calendar to start the school year after Labor Day. Our son will return to classes at Eastern Heights Middle School as an 8th grader next year a little bit later, but in a far more hospitable environment. He and his peers will be that much closer to being at the right motivational stage in order to assure that they are prepared to achieve academically. The passage of SB 34 would help to put all of Ohio’s students in the same position.

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