March 8, 2017

Senate Bill 34

Proponent Testimony – Andrea Barlow

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 Andrea Barlow; I am the IT director at a small school in Westlake, OH, and I am a proud mother of 4 beautiful children, 3 of whom are active members in their 4H club, appropriately named “Another 4H Club.”  I am here today to ask you to support Senate Bill 34 for 2 reasons: (1) to allow students to experience fair week without unfortunate consequences of missing school and (2) because with pre-Labor Day temperatures in schools without air conditioning often exceed 85 degrees, making learning nearly impossible for young children.

4H and county fairs are no longer just for rural communities showing off their prize animals or the best vegetable out of their gardens.  People from all over, rural or otherwise, attend county fairs because of tradition, education, quality family time, and simply, just for fun.   More importantly it is a time when children give back to the community by demonstrating their knowledge in areas like arts and crafts, culinary arts, agriculture, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), the trades (such as woodworking, mechanics, electrical, etc.), crop and animal farming, and so much more.  It’s a week when Ohio’s youth shine, and selflessly donate their time and knowledge to better themselves, and others around them.  This important time of the year cannot go on without kids like mine, and the members of the Another 4H Club, but unfortunately, this opportunity is being dimmed by the school year starting earlier and earlier in August.

During fair week, kids practice important life skills that will help them grow into wonderful adults.  It is a time when they demonstrate their public speaking skills, experience hands-on life science, teach adults and children about the importance and necessity of agriculture in our everyday life,  they practice real-life responsibility and self-discipline, they refine their growing work-ethic, experience the healthy pressures of competition, and most importantly, their self-esteem is lifted by the recognition for all their months (often a full year’s worth) of hard work with trophies, ribbons, and even money when local businesses purchase their animals during auction.  Whether it be raising an animal, working on an art piece, growing a vegetable garden, constructing something, or proving a hypothesis with a science experiment. All are ways 4H kids take charge of their own learning and share it with others.  These are priceless life skills they will continue to build well into adulthood.

Unfortunately, with the school year starting so early in August, many students, who participate in the fair, miss that important school time when policies and procedures are being established within their classrooms and schools.   Also, having to do homework during fair week, on top of all the responsibilities they have at fair, is not productive, nor optimal for learning what is assigned by teachers.  It is discouraging and frustrating for my daughters, because they feel almost punished for doing something good for the community and themselves.  Starting school early in August also deprives many children, who are in school, of the opportunity to experience the hands-on learning that my kids, and so many others, have worked so hard on for their classmates and their community to see.  The purpose of education is for students to apply what they learn in class to real-life circumstances, and I feel fair week accommodates that purpose.

I must add, I fear starting school early will diminishes the importance of 4H clubs and fair week, which will then take away important first hand learning experiences.  Throughout the year kids learn the importance of democracy by having to nominate and elect their fellow club members for offices like club president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, etc. At every meeting club members are reminded to become good citizens when they recite the pledge to the American flag, and then the 4H pledge which states...”I pledge my head to clearer thinking, My heart to greater loyalty, My hands to larger service, My health to better living, For my club, my community, my country, and my world.”

Also, 4H projects help young people practice good administrative skills by having to keep expense records on how much they spend on feed, veterinary bills, production and overall maintenance of having their animals. My kids experience daily the importance of real world responsibility.  When most families are waking up an hour before school, mine are up at 5am every morning tending to their miniature horses and other animals.

So, as you can see, 4H is more than just bringing a project to a week-long event, and it would be devastating to see its importance diminished by forcing parents to choose between missed school days or missed fair days.

The second reason I ask for your support of S.B. 34 is because of the unbearable temperatures the August heat creates in older school buildings.  My daughter, Phoebe’s, school building gets so hot that school had to cancel this year because of it.  I worked at that school last year as their technology integration coach, and there were times when I wanted to help incorporate technology within their lessons, but found it difficult to engage students and hold my own focus when the temperatures in the building were high, and the air was unbearably humid.  Picking up my daughter from school this past August, with hair drenched in sweat, and rosy pink cheeks, was upsetting, and honestly made me want to just keep her home from school.   It is impossible for students to learn, and for teachers to teach, when they are sluggish and completely wasted of energy due to the unbelievably hot temperatures.  This then leads me to question, as a taxpayer, how much does it cost to cool the schools that do have air conditioning? Wouldn’t we save money by not having to cool such large buildings in August?

On behalf of my family, and the Another 4H club, I thank you so much for allowing me this opportunity to express my concerns.  My husband and I are proud to raise our 4 children in the state of Ohio, and this experience shows them, and other moms and educators, that our voice DOES matter.

Thank you members of the Education Committee, I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.