



Testimony

Department of Public Instruction

SS 001-24 Scope Statement

Ch. PI 27

Revisions to rules governing the commencement of the school term prior to September 1

The Wisconsin Restaurant Association (WRA) represents over 7,000 restaurant locations statewide and represents all segments of the restaurant and hospitality industry. Our membership includes food establishments of all types and sizes, such as seasonal drive-ins, supper clubs, diners, bars, locally owned franchisees, fine-dining, and hotels/resorts. Over 75 percent of our membership is independent restaurants or restaurant groups. Regardless of ownership type, all restaurants are the cornerstones of their neighborhoods and communities. Restaurants not only provide great food, drink, and hospitality, they support schools, teams, charities and churches with fundraising and donations. They provide meeting places to celebrate, mourn and organize, or just provide a safe, tasty meal for a busy family.

The Wisconsin Restaurant Association, in partnership with other organizations representing Wisconsin's small businesses that rely on tourism for their livelihood, advocated for the current September 1 K-12 school start date. This advocacy effort began in the mid 1990's and culminated in 2000 when the current statute mandating a September 1 start date went into effect. The September 1 date was a compromise between the tourism industry and the legislature.

Wisconsin's two major tourism competitors - Minnesota and Michigan – at the time the statute went into effect and still today have mandated school start dates after Labor Day. Wisconsin's September 1 date at least keeps Wisconsin competitive with our neighbors.

Agreed upon statute further gives parameters of when a school district can commence the school term prior to September 1 for *extraordinary* reasons. This section of statute was intended to give some leeway for issues out of the school districts control that would interfere with a September 1 start. The resulting rule promulgated by the Department of Public Instruction gives districts the ability to plan for or deal with these extraordinary circumstances that occasionally occur. All the rules have one important thing in common – they apply to circumstances that effect all the children in the school district, or in the case if an international baccalaureate program, the large majority of the entire high school, but not the rest of the school district.

Current administrative rule gives local school boards and districts great flexibility in setting their school calendar. Selecting the number and frequency of breaks, staff development days, inclement weather makeup days, and the last day of school are all under the control of school boards. Wisconsin no longer requires 180 days of instruction, giving districts even more

flexibility on length of school days, allowing them to adjust schedules to accommodate bussing and other circumstances that come up throughout the school year.

Currently school boards and districts have every tool necessary to change the length of their summer breaks or to add more frequent breaks throughout the school year. The date the school year ends is under their control. In addition, should there be circumstances where high school juniors and seniors need to attend dual-credit classes offered by post-secondary institutions, those students can begin their courses early. It is not a valid reason to have the entire school population attend school prior to September 1. Since the Universities of Wisconsin must begin their classes after September 1, the dual-credit enrollment mostly affects courses within the Wisconsin Technical College System. It is our understanding the colleges willingly work with many high schools in their districts to address this issue already.

There are two major reasons why a September 1 school start date is important to restaurants and all the other small businesses that rely on tourism visitors:

- Families want to visit Wisconsin when the weather is consistently warm. Our thousands of lakes and other water attractions are best suited to July and August use and are too cold to enjoy in June. We not only want folks from out of state to vacation in Wisconsin, but for our own families to stay instate and enjoy all that is offered by the warmer months. Wisconsin families who vacation in June, tend to go to warmer states, such as Florida. Additionally, many families wait until mid to late August to vacation once summer sports leagues and summer school has ended. It is a reality of modern family life that the last two weeks of August may present the one-and only opportunity for families to spend quality time together during a planned for getaway. In fact, many teachers have told us the end of August is the only time they are able to get away prior to the start of new school year
- Many high school students get summer jobs to earn money for post-secondary education or other financial reasons. Many businesses do not hire their summer employees until late June, since the tourism season really starts booming closer to July 4. A September 1 start date has allowed students who wish to work, more time to earn and save. Over one in three workers in Wisconsin had their first job in a restaurant. Restaurants provide students with invaluable opportunities to learn basic life skills such as how to work and communicate with others, how to manage their earnings and what it means to be responsible for themselves and the quality of work they do

Restaurants are the cornerstones of their communities. They not only provide food - they supports jobs and provide revenue in the form of local taxes and fees. In most parts of the state, they rely on summer tourism to keep their businesses viable. Without tourism traffic, they do not have the wherewithal to support their communities, including schools, and remain in business.

In closing, school districts and boards currently have the ability to design a school calendar to meet the needs of their students and staff. Accommodation for students with special circumstances can be provided, without requiring the entire student body to return to school early. Changes to PI 27 are not necessary at this time to address local district needs.

The Wisconsin Restaurant Association is also disappointed the Department issued a scope statement to drastically change current administrative rule, without at a minimum requesting

input from organizations that represent tourism businesses. The Department is fully aware of the impact that the September 1 school start date has on the tourism businesses in school districts throughout the state. The fact that tourism businesses were not listed as an entity that is impacted by this rule change is a deliberate oversight by the Department. It is obvious that other stakeholders with interest in this rule had input into the proposed rule change. We should have had the same courtesy, which other state agencies do on a regular basis when rule changes are proposed.