

Vail School District  
10<sup>th</sup> Grade  
Writing Benchmark #1  
Informational

**DIRECTIONS:** Read the information and writing prompt below. Then use scratch paper for your prewriting/planning and your draft.

**Arizona School calendar: House bill would change start date**

By Howard Fischer, Capitol Media Services Posted: Friday, January 30, 2015

PHOENIX — Claiming it's too hot in August, a state legislator wants to block public and charter schools from opening their doors each year until at least Labor Day, no matter what local voters want.

HB 2303 would make it illegal to start a regular school year and spells out that the first day of instruction cannot be before the first Monday in September. And the year must wrap up no later than June 30.

Only special programs like year-round schools could operate during the forbidden times. Rep. Eddie Farnsworth, R-Gilbert, said it's a simple matter of degree — or degrees.

“It makes no sense to me to have a school year in the hottest part of the year where we have (heat) advisory days, the kids can't go outside,” he said. And he said there are safety issues involved, with staffers needing to go outside when kids are picked up and the mercury is topping 115 degrees.

Farnsworth, who is executive director of Benjamin Franklin Charter Schools, conceded his concerns go beyond the students and the staff.

He said there has been an “encroachment into the summer” by some schools with earlier starts to the year. What that means is that other schools which might prefer the more traditional September-through-June schedule that exists in some parts of the country can't make that move without fear of losing students.

So the only solution, he said, is a statewide edict making everyone live with pretty much the same calendar.

The proposal has produced a buzz-saw of opposition.

More than two dozen people signed up to oppose the legislation Wednesday when it was scheduled to be heard by the House Education Committee, some representing school boards and educators and some weighing in on their own behalf. Only one person, a former legislator, was in support.

And even the lobbyist for state School Superintendent Diane Douglas said she “advocates for local control in this situation.”

District 8 Rep. T.J. Shope, R-Coolidge, said he thinks the bill is probably worth some discussion. Farnsworth agreed to pull the measure from committee consideration — but only for the moment.

There is a weather-related basis for Farnsworth’s preference for sending kids to school in June instead of August. But it appears to be a minor one at best.

Jon Skindlov, a meteorologist for Salt River Project, a Phoenix area electricity and irrigation provider, said recent historical records show that the normal high temperature for June is 103.9 degrees, versus 104.4 in August.

But Skindlov said that daytime temperatures are “about a draw.” What makes average August temperatures higher is the humidity that traps the daytime heat and results in warmer nights. Shope said he’d want to talk to electric utility personnel to determine if there could be genuine savings if school schedules changed before he’d support the bill.

In that case, he said, hopefully any savings a district had would then be “pushed back into the classroom.”

“It’s an interesting idea,” Shope said. “I’ve often wondered why we start school so early.” Weather is not on the minds of the foes of what Farnsworth is trying to do. Instead they see it as lawmakers infringing on an issue they believe is best left for the more than 200 locally elected school boards around the state.

Chuck Essigs, lobbyist for the Arizona Association of School Business Officials, said it’s one thing for the state to mandate that schools be in session at least 180 days a year. State funding to schools is based on that minimum.

This is something else.

“The school calendar has historically, in Arizona and across the country, been decided by the local community, what works in their community,” Essigs said.

In the Tucson Unified School District, for example, students started July 31; next year’s calendar calls for an Aug. 6 start date.

“Our calendar is the best fit for our district,” said Adelita Grijalva, the school board president. She also said changes would have unanticipated impacts on everything from the time teachers have to prepare students for high-stakes assessment tests to the time seniors have to get a head start for college.

District Superintendent H.T. Sanchez said a later start date means running the school year into June, adding an additional paid holiday that would add \$1.2 million in expenses. Sanchez made

no secret of his feelings about the legislation.

“It’s always interesting when you have a Republican-dominated Legislature that says it supports local control and acts contrary to that,” he said.

Daniel Hernandez Jr., Grijalva’s counterpart at Tucson Sunnyside Unified School District, echoed that sentiment.

“This is yet another time the state Legislature is taking control away from local school districts,” said Hernandez, whose new school year will begin July 29.

He said that date creates mid-semester breaks that gives teachers a chance to “step back and see who needs help.” And he said the calendar is built around cultural events like the rodeo. Janice Palmer, lobbyist for the Arizona School Boards Association, said Farnsworth’s bill ignores the attention that locally elected officials pay to the issue.

“There’s nothing more local than setting the calendar, getting community input, making sure that calendar makes sense to those in that district,” she said. “You can rest assured if the calendar doesn’t make sense, the governing boards hear about it and it quickly gets addressed.”

Erin Dunsey, spokeswoman for the Peoria Unified School District, said that’s what happens there. “Parents serve on our district’s calendar committee and develop our calendar models using a survey that gathers data from all school communities,” she said. Dunsey said while the final decision is made by the governing board, it is “based upon the calendar committee’s recommendation.”

Jim Dean, assistant superintendent in the Northwest Valley’s Dysart Unified School District, said the same situation occurs there, with a committee formed specifically to look at the calendar and make recommendations to the board.

Mindy Blake, director of community relations for the Tucson Amphitheater Unified School District, said there is no reason for state intervention without an option for local discretion. “We believe that a one-size-fits-all calendar is not in the best interests of the learning community,” she said.

## **Summer Vacation and the Agrarian Calendar**

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Daniel Lattier | August 17, 2012

As harvest season begins and Minnesota children prepare to return to school, we are reminded of our school calendar’s roots in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century agrarian society. The long summer break gave children time to help out with extra work on the family farm. At the completion of the harvest, the children would return to school until their services were once again required.

Revised 8/1/19

Or so I thought.

It turns out that the belief that America has an agrarian-based school calendar contains some truth, but mostly myth. In 19<sup>th</sup>-century rural America, it was true that time in school was largely determined by the agricultural seasons. But summer was not when students' labor was most needed. For most regions of America, children were needed in the spring and fall, during the planting and *actual* harvest season. School would therefore meet during the summer and winter months.

It was a different story in the cities, where children would attend school year-round (for about 240 days per year) with interspersed breaks.

In his 2008 Time article ("A Brief History Of: Summer Vacation"), Alex Altman points out that educational reformers such as Horace Mann began to push for a unified school calendar for both cities and rural areas in the 1840s. In the following decades, states increasingly took control of education and made it compulsory, and coordinated in mandating the current 180-day school calendar for all.

It's unclear exactly why summer was chosen as vacation time. Dartmouth economist William Fischel nicely summarizes several of the theories that float around: the desire to avoid making children swelter in school buildings without AC; the need to give children a mental break; and his own thesis that summer was the best time for industrialized workers to move to new jobs.

Whatever the reason behind summer vacation, evidence suggests that the needs of rural America were not the primary concern.

Some of those today who advocate for a longer school year continue to invoke the commonly-held assumption that our school calendar is a remnant of a more agrarian America, and point to the long summer vacation as evidence. They argue that most children are bored and listless during the summer, and on average forget about 1-3 months of material learned the previous school year, depending on the subject.

The truth is, then, that though school calendars past have been formed around the agrarian pattern of life, the present American school calendar is not one of them. So whether you're nostalgic about the rural life, are a progressive technophile, or are somewhere in between, you may legitimately question the pattern and length of the current school year and, of course, its summer vacation.

**PROMPT:** There is currently a bill in the Arizona legislature that would prevent schools from starting before the first Monday in September and mandating a finishing date of June 30. In the Vail School District, we start mid-July and end the school year at the end of May. Write an expository essay describing the advantages and disadvantages of this change, and describe what effects it would have on the Vail School District.

Your essay should include:

- An introduction, body, and conclusion.
- Specific details appropriate to the audience.
- Evidence from the text

Remember to edit for spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization.

**DIRECTIONS:**

Now write your final copy on the following pages.

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