

School calendar bill gets House approval, heads to Senate

The State House, after two days of debate and votes this week, approved House Bill 359, Restore Flexibility to the School Calendar. The legislation has been sent to the Senate Committee on Education/Public Instruction for further debate, which Senate Leader Marc Basnight has indicated he will not prevent even though he personally opposes changing the school calendar law.

The House votes, which were 74-39 and 77-35, reflect the House's support for enabling local school districts to be exempted from the state-mandated school start date of Aug. 25, if the district has a valid academic reason for needing an earlier start. The bill would allow districts to ask the State Board of Education for a system-wide waiver from the start date for reasons such as aligning the school district's calendar with that of a college or university, adjust the examination schedule running a block schedule or allowing extra instructional time before Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exams. Currently, a school district may receive a waiver for only one school or program, thereby creating other scheduling problems and costs for the school district and the families it serves.

Many House members this week spoke in favor of restoring local flexibility to the school calendar as called for in H359, co-sponsored by Reps. Larry Bell, D-Sampson, and Marvin Lucas, D-Cumberland, and ultimately helped ensure the legislation's approval by the House. In addition, lobbyists for the North Carolina Association of School Administrators (NCASA), the North Carolina School Boards Association, the Public School Forum, the North Carolina Principals and Assistant Principals' Association, the Professional Educators of North Carolina and Union County Schools have worked together for several weeks to initiate this legislation and get it moving forward in the House. NCASA sends a special "thank you" to every member who made House contacts on this legislation, including those who participated in NCASA's March 29th Legislative Visit Day, when the bill received a favorable vote in the House Education Committee to move on to this week's floor debate.

Before approving H359, the House adopted an amendment offered by Rep. Lucas, which clarified that the new system-wide waivers must be for academic reasons and to require that all school districts appoint a school calendar committee that includes at least one county commissioner. Two other amendments failed. Those included a proposal by Rep. Bonner Stiller, R-Brunswick, to have the bill not become effective until the 2008-09 school year, and an effort by Rep. Pat McElraft, R-Carteret, to expand the list of individuals who would have to be included on the school district calendar committee.

The bill, if approved by the Senate and signed into law, would become effective with the 2007-08 school year. The legislation as amended by the House is available at the following link:
<http://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2007/Bills/House/HTML/H359v3.html>.

To see how your House members voted on this bill, view the following links:

- Second-reading (74-39):

<http://www.ncleg.net/gascripts/voteHistory/RollCallVoteTranscript.pl?sSession=2007&sChamber=H&RCS=128>

- Third reading (77-35):

<http://www.ncleg.net/gascripts/voteHistory/RollCallVoteTranscript.pl?sSession=2007&sChamber=H&RCS=141>

NCASA members and other supporters are to be commended for their hard work on this important legislation, which has passed two major hurdles in the last two weeks. Please note, however, that much work remains to be done before this legislation can become law to provide needed flexibility in the school calendar.

All NCASA members should contact your Senators as quickly as possible and urge them to support the bill and to work to ensure that the Senate schedules a committee debate on it soon! Contact information for all Senators is available at: <http://www.ncasa.net/associations/2410/files/2007%20SENATE.xls>.