

Downers Grove schools mull early start date

BY ANNEMARIE
MANNION
Chicago Tribune

Whether to change Downers Grove Community High School District 99's calendar to an earlier start in August could come down to a matter of air conditioning.

Some of the schools in feeder districts are not air-conditioned, causing concern for the impact the heat in August could have on learning. Many of the feeder districts are considering aligning with District 99's calendar.

"District 58 understands that the late-August heat negatively impacts student learning, and we believe that starting the school year even earlier in August would cause an even greater impact," said Megan Hewitt, a district spokeswoman.

District 99, which includes Downers Grove North and Downers Grove

South high schools, is considering starting school in mid-August rather than late August. The main reason is to finish the semester before the start of the holiday break, which would keep finals from looming over students during the holidays. Some parents have said that situation is stressful for their children.

Under the current calendar, school starts in late August and the semester is continued after the break for the holidays. Classes for the 2016-17 school year could start as early as Aug. 17 if the district adopts what it calls an early-start calendar. Or, it could stick with the calendar that starts classes Aug. 29.

The board of Downers Grove Grade School District 58 has concerns about starting in mid-August, including the lack of air conditioning in some classrooms.

Only about 25 percent of the district's classrooms are



ANNEMARIE MANNION/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

A lack of air-conditioned classrooms is one reason why District 58 might not to start school in mid-August.

air-conditioned. Belle Aire and El Sierra elementary schools are fully air-conditioned, Puffer Elementary School is partially air-conditioned and the other 10 schools have only one or two classrooms each and some public spaces that are cooled.

At the same time, Hewitt said the district under-

stands the importance of aligning District 58's schedule with District 99's because many families have students in both districts.

Almost all of District 58's students — about 500 a year — go on to District 99, Hewitt said.

Even though air conditioning would not be a factor in Woodridge Dis-

trict 68 — all of its schools are cooled — it does share a bus contract with District 99 and District 58.

"We are waiting to hear what District 99 does before finalizing our calendar," said Amy Melinder, director of community engagement for District 68.

Tim Arnold, superintendent of Center Cass School District 66, which sends about 150 students a year to District 99, said it will follow the same calendar as District 99, whatever it decides.

District 66 is fully air-conditioned, Arnold noted.

School District 99 expects to make a decision on its calendar in early February, as does District 58. It is not yet known if starting school in mid-August would increase costs.

"We are still in the process of evaluating a number of variables associated with starting school earlier, including transportation

costs," said Jill Browning, a district spokeswoman. "We have not yet determined if changing the calendar poses additional costs, and if so, if they are significant enough to influence our decision."

District 99 officials have acknowledged that deciding to start school two weeks earlier is a complex decision with a lot of moving parts that will affect many students, parents and teachers.

"There are a lot of layers to it. I confess it's a lot more layered than I anticipated," board member Mike Davenport said at a recent meeting.

Officials from other feeder schools, Darien School District 61 and Gower School District 62, which has schools in Willowbrook and Burr Ridge, were not immediately available for comment.

amannion@tribune.com