

May 2005

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Recommended Citation

Christia, Jerome (2005) "Study of South Carolina Parents' Opinion on Public School Start Dates by Region," *The Coastal Business Journal*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/cbj/vol4/iss1/7>

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STUDY OF SOUTH CAROLINA PARENTS' OPINION ON PUBLIC SCHOOL START DATES BY REGION

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ABSTRACT

This study was developed to provide a detailed, descriptive, and analytical presentation of South Carolina parents' preferences for public school start dates and traditional school calendars vs. year-round school calendars. The paper presents the results of a direct-mail questionnaire, which garnered responses from 898 households in South Carolina. Overwhelmingly, 80% of the respondents prefer a later school start date. 72% prefer the traditional school calendar to the year-round school calendars. In addition, this study provides regional differences within the state regarding school schedule preferences. There are distinct differences in opinion between the coastal, midland, and upstate regions of South Carolina.

INTRODUCTION

In South Carolina, there is an ongoing debate on whether public schools should have a uniform start date after Labor Day. Presently, South Carolina public schools start in five different weeks throughout August (South Carolina Late School Start, 2005). Around the country, the argument over school calendars has created intense controversy. Residents in Texas (Texans for a Traditional School Year, 2005), Georgia (Georgians Need Summers, 2005), Alabama (Save Alabama Summers, 2005), and Oklahoma (Oklahomans for Saving Summer, 2005) have organized to delay school starts. The Coalition for a Traditional School Year (2005) argues that, "Starting early may hurt teacher continuing education efforts and deprive high school students from getting summer work experience. It makes it harder for families to plan vacations, and it leads to more breaks during the school year that are a hardship for single parent and two working parent families." Another critical component of the argument is the economic impact for the South Carolina. Reportedly, the State could generate an additional \$8 million in tourism revenue, if schools started later (Morse 2002).

According to the South Carolina Late School Start (2005) coalition, the key decision-makers on this issue are the South Carolina Board of Education, South Carolina Senate Education Committee, and the South Carolina House of Representatives Education Committee. However, parents of public school students are a crucial force in this matter and they should be recognized. This study presents an accurate and reliable measurement of South Carolina parents' views on public school start dates and year-round versus traditional school calendars. A succinct survey was designed to assess the opinions of parents of students in the 85 school districts of the South Carolina public school system. These issues affect the entire State of South Carolina, including families, institutions, and businesses. A 21-item mail questionnaire (Appendix A) was sent to 7500 randomly selected households to collect data on these very important and debatable topics. The form was converted to Scantron format before mailing to facilitate easier data entry.

The first research objective addressed South Carolina parents' views on public school start dates. The second research objective addressed South Carolina parents' views on year-round versus traditional school calendars. In addition, results are presented by region. Also, demographic information was collected on the respondents.

This study answers the questions of what parents think about public school start schedules and school calendars, while providing background information on the respondents. The evidence in this study has been statistically supported and should provide an effective representation of the views of South Carolina parents and their preferences on school calendars and start dates for their children.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to design and conduct a valid poll of South Carolina parents, using a statewide sampling addressing views on public school schedules with the following objectives:

1. To determine public opinion on school start dates.
2. To determine public opinion on year-round versus traditional school calendars.

A coalition of parents (Save SC Summers, 2005) argue against "calendar creep" and debate that schools should start later for several reasons. They insist that later start dates do not increase standardized test scores as expected, time is taken away from families, and there are higher utility costs. In addition, there are student employment and childcare concerns, and the issue of interference with continuing teacher education. From the research objectives, testable hypotheses were formulated.

- H1: The majority of South Carolina parents prefer school start dates after August 20th.
H2: The majority of South Carolina parents prefer traditional school calendars.

The survey was designed to achieve a minimum of 95% level of confidence with a maximum statistical error of +/- 4%. A 95% level of confidence is most common in marketing research. Furthermore, there is a tradeoff between cost, level of confidence, and accuracy (McDaniel and Gates, 2004, p307). Thus, an error rate of +/- 4% is acceptable accuracy sensitivity in these given conditions. The collected data were analyzed and results compiled and presented.

SURVEY DESIGN

This survey utilized a mailing list of the 667,676 students of South Carolina public schools. South Carolina parents with school-age children were contacted using a direct-mail questionnaire. Direct-mail was considered an attractive delivery method for the questionnaires due to relative convenience, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. According to McDaniel and Gates (2004, p113), mail questionnaires access hard-to-reach respondents, they can be centrally distributed and collected, and they eliminate the need to involve interviewers. More people

participate in mail surveys than any other type of survey research. The survey population consisted of the households that contained students ranging from four-year old kindergarteners (K-4) to twelfth graders encompassing 85 school districts in all 46 counties of South Carolina.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was methodically designed and developed to incorporate questions to directly address the research objectives. In addition, questions were inserted from parents, teachers, academic researchers, and industry personnel. A questionnaire consisting of 20 questions was created. The initial questionnaire contained six multiple-choice school related questions, ten demographic questions, and four open-ended response questions. The survey contained an introductory paragraph, indicating the purpose of the survey, and an assurance of privacy to the parents.

The one-page front and back survey was pre-tested in a mailing to 100 randomly selected households of South Carolina public school parents in northwestern South Carolina. Thirteen surveys were returned, corresponding to a thirteen percent response rate. Upon reading and analyzing the responses and comments to the questionnaire in the pre-test, the questionnaire was edited and revised.

The final questionnaire contained 21 questions. There were ten multiple-choice school related questions, followed by ten close-ended demographic questions, and one open-ended general comments question. Three open-ended questions from the pre-test were re-phrased as multiple-choice questions to facilitate a more efficient analysis. The questionnaire was composed of two sections, school opinion items and personal information. Demographic questions were asked for the purpose of compiling profiles of those who responded to the survey. Personal questions were positioned after the most vital research objectives in the event that respondents elected not to respond to questions that they were uncomfortable answering. The questionnaire was constructed with the intent of being concise, non-threatening, and easy to read, yet, robust, valid and reliable.

To address the research objectives, specifically, the first question asked of the sample group was “When do you think the school year should start?” There were three possible responses, “between August 2nd and August 20th”, “between August 20th and Labor Day”, or “after Labor Day”. Presently, South Carolina public schools start at different times in each of the five weeks in August.

To address the second component of the research objectives regarding year round versus traditional school calendars, the survey sample was asked the question “Which do you prefer?” The question offered two possible answers, “regular school schedule, with summers off” or “year-round school, with 9 weeks in each school term and a 4-week break between school terms”.

Another important issue for the state of South Carolina involves how many families would vacation within the state, if school started later. The follow-up question asked the respondents where would they vacation, in state or out-of-state.

Several demographic questions were posed to ascertain parent and student profiles of those responding. Questions were asked to attain area and county of residence information, as well as, grades and numbers of students in the homes. In addition, information was requested regarding head of household gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, education, and occupation. The final demographic question was for household income.

Based on a minimum of 95% level of confidence, with a maximum statistical error of +/- 4%, it was calculated that a sample size of approximately 600 responses was needed. To acquire a minimum of 600 respondents, 7500 questionnaires were mailed randomly to households of South Carolina public school parents, with an expectation of a ten percent response rate or 750 returns. Also, to ensure a representative sample of the public school parent population in the state, the mailing list was weighted proportionately by zip code. Stratified random sampling was chosen because it has greater efficiency than simple sampling (McDaniel and Gates, 2004, p282). Although this judgment of proportional allocation is not optimal in some cases, its effectiveness is sufficient for this study based on time and resource constraints. Each questionnaire was sent accompanied with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the survey. The questionnaire was addressed to the parents or guardians of the students. Each cover letter was printed on paper using official letterhead. As an incentive to encourage returning the questionnaire, a coupon was included for entry into a drawing for a week's stay at an oceanfront hotel in Myrtle Beach. The coupon was a separate card to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. Each questionnaire contained a pre-addressed, postage paid envelope to facilitate ease of returns by the parents.

ANALYSIS

A significant number of completed questionnaires were received. The minimum required number of 600 responses was exceeded by 298 replies. The parents completed 898 surveys, resulting in a response rate of 11.97%. The completed surveys produced a margin of error of 3%, which was 1% more accurate than the requirement. This error rate was determined from a formula that considers the sample size, the proportion of variance in responses, and the prescribed confidence interval. As a general rule, the larger the sample, the smaller the sampling error (McDaniel and Gates, 2004, p296). Descriptive statistics were applied to analyze the collected data for geographical insight. Responses were grouped into three regions: Coast, Midlands, and Upstate. The results were acquired using frequency analysis and cross-tabulations in SPSS for Windows.

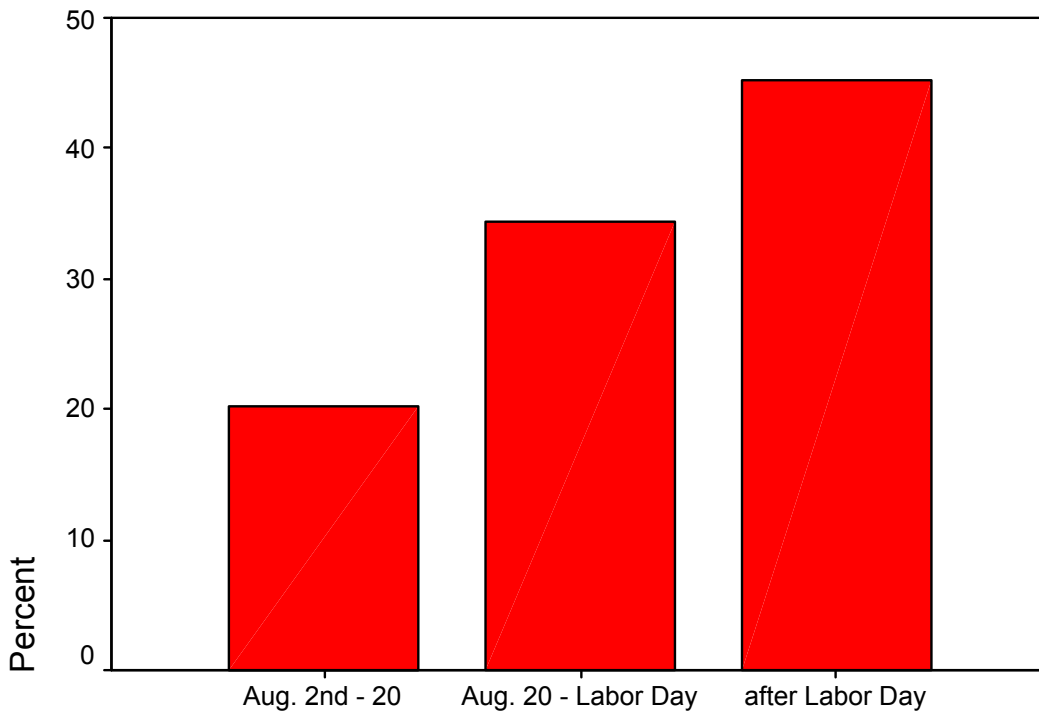
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In answering the first research objective, 80% prefer a start date after August 20th. Therefore, hypothesis one is accepted. The largest proportion of those responding, 45.3%, selected a school start date after Labor Day (Exhibit 1). The leading response was followed by

34.6% selecting a start date between August 20th and Labor Day. According to the parents that returned the questionnaire, the least favorable choice was a school start date between August 2nd and August 20th, 20.1% of the respondents. Regionally, 49.6% of the Coastal population prefer an after Labor Day start, compared to 43.6% for the Midland and Upstate regions (Table 1). This difference is possibly due to higher student employment at tourism areas in this region and an attempt to avoid summer traffic congestion.

EXHIBIT 1

Desired School Start



Desired School Start

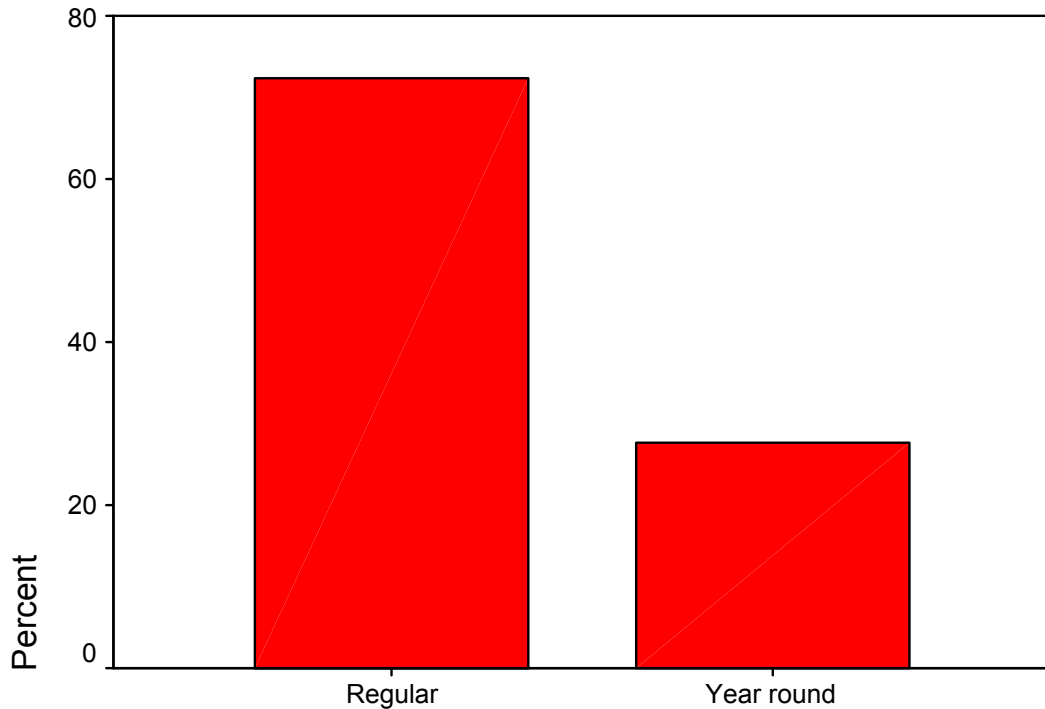
TABLE 1
SC Region * Desired School Start Crosstabulation

			Desired School Start		
			Aug. 2nd - 20	Aug. 20 - Labor Day	after Labor Day
SC Region	Coast	% within Region	18.3%	32.2%	49.6%
	Midlands	% within Region	23.4%	33.0%	43.6%
	Upstate	% within Region	18.4%	38.1%	43.6%

In answering the second research objective, the majority of those responding, 72.1%, preferred the traditional school terms of regular fall through spring school schedules with summers off, while 27.9% preferred a year-round school system (Exhibit 2), with nine-week school terms and four week breaks between terms. Therefore, there is evidence to support hypothesis two. Regionally, the Upstate area has the strongest preference for the traditional calendar, 75.5% (Table 2).

EXHIBIT 2

School Schedule Preference



School Schedule Preference

TABLE 2
SC Region * School Schedule Preference Crosstabulation

			School Schedule Preference	
			Regular	Year round
SC Region	Coast	% within SC Region	68.7%	31.3%
	Midlands	% within SC Region	69.9%	30.1%
	Upstate	% within SC Region	75.5%	24.5%

When the households were asked whether they would vacation within the extra time, if school started after Labor Day, 43.7% of the respondents answered “Yes”. Of those responding, 11.7% said “No”. The largest group answered, “Maybe”, which accounted for 44.6% of the responses. Regionally, the Midlands were the leader in the “Yes” response, with 47% (Table 3). When asked where they would vacation, if school started after Labor Day, most respondents, 52.3 %, selected South Carolina for travel. Secondly, 36.2% of respondents responding indicated out-of-state travel. Thirdly, 11.5% of the replies indicated both destinations. Notably, the Upstate region had the strongest preference for in state travel, 61.3% (Table 4).

TABLE 3
SC Region * Labor Day Travel Crosstabulation

		Labor Day Travel			
			Yes	No	Maybe
SC Region	Coast	% within SC Region	40.7%	14.3%	45.0%
	Midlands	% within SC Region	47.0%	10.2%	42.8%
	Upstate	% within SC Region	43.1%	11.1%	45.8%

TABLE 4
SC Region * Labor Day Travel Location Crosstabulation

		Labor Day Travel Location			
			In SC	Out of state	both
SC Region	Coast	% within SC Region	35.6%	55.9%	8.5%
	Midlands	% within SC Region	52.3%	33.5%	14.2%
	Upstate	% within SC Region	61.3%	27.3%	11.3%

Other responses in the survey yielded insight on school day length. Within each of the three regions, the majority supports no change in the present school day length (Table 5). The second choice was, 20 minute longer days, for 10 less school days per year.

TABLE 5
SC Region * School Day Length Crosstabulation

		School Day Length				
			No change	10 minutes longer/5days shorter	15 minutes longer/7.5 days shorter	20 minutes longer/10 days shorter
SC Region	Coast	% within SC Region	56.1%	13.9%	6.1%	23.9%
	Midlands	% within SC Region	53.7%	13.7%	5.6%	27.0%
	Upstate	% within SC Region	53.0%	17.1%	5.4%	24.5%

The data collected in this survey reveals that the 898 households that responded contain 1,985 students, which is an average of 2.2 students per household. The proportion of school-age children who work a summer job is 26.7%. Demographic data collected from the respondents revealed nearly 70 different occupations. Information was collected on county of residence, area of residence, grade levels of students and the number of students in each grade per household. In addition, head of household information was collected for gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, and educational level. Also, information was gathered on household income.

Among the households who recorded head of household information, the largest group of respondents lives in a rural environment (46.2%), white (70.8%), aged 41-50 (46%), married (73.3%), with some college (35.1%), a professional/technical occupation (19.4%), with a household income of \$21,001-40,000 (27.1%). The analysis reveals that the Upstate region is the most prosperous section of the State, with 43.5% of households earning greater than \$100,000, compared to 33.7% and 22.8% for the Midlands and Coast, respectively (Table 6). All reported demographic information is reflective of the U.S. Census Statistics (2000). There were no significant correlations between the demographic categories and the research questions.

TABLE 6
Total HH Income * SC Region Crosstabulation

		SC Region			
		Coast	Midlands	Upstate	
Total HH Income	<20,000	% within Total HH Income	28.0%	37.4%	34.6%
	21,001-40k	% within Total HH Income	30.6%	29.3%	40.1%
	40,001-60k	% within Total HH Income	22.5%	34.8%	42.8%
	60,001-80k	% within Total HH Income	22.4%	29.9%	47.8%
	80,001-100k	% within Total HH Income	24.8%	29.7%	45.5%
	>100,000	% within Total HH Income	22.8%	33.7%	43.5%

CONCLUSION

This study met its research objectives to design and conduct a valid poll of South Carolina residents with school-age children, using a statewide sampling addressing views on public school schedules. By region, the study evaluated public opinion on school start dates and year-round versus traditional school calendars. It is imperative that parents have a platform to voice concerns over the destiny of their children. A summary of parents' comments on school calendar issues are in Appendix B. A random proportionate sample was selected from the SC household public school population. In addition, the survey was designed to achieve a minimum of 95% level of confidence, with a maximum statistical error of +/- 4%. Those goals were met, also. The data were methodically collected, statistically analyzed, and detailed empirical results were compiled and tabulated. This study revealed that the largest group of South Carolina households with public school students, 45.3%, prefers a school start date after Labor Day. Also,

most South Carolina households, 72.1%, prefer the traditional school terms of regular fall, winter, and spring school schedules with summers off. The data collected in this survey were supported by demographic information, as well as, a qualitative assessment of South Carolina households' views on public school issues. This statistically significant study provides a valid and reliable assessment of South Carolina public school parents and their views on public school calendars and start dates. The findings from this study were used in support of legislation for the South Carolina State Senate "to require all primary and secondary public schools to begin the school year no earlier than August 25th" (South Carolina General Assembly, 2005-2006).

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APPENDIX B

Please give any general comments on this survey.

- You should ask us what we think of the school we're in and how we rate it.
- Generally, I think the schools start back too early. And I don't want year round schooling at all.
- School should start later in the morning to allow for traffic problems.
- We need our summers! My husband works on the weekends and holidays. It's difficult for a teenager to get a summer job with a short summer. We have to plan around band camps, boy scouts, vacations, family visits, etc.
- I really enjoyed doing this survey. Very interesting question.
- Doesn't make sense to start school and within two weeks have a holiday. Just start after – let them enjoy a fun summer.
- I think it is a good idea to get peoples opinions on the school year.
- I favor traditional summer of Memorial Day through Labor Day. I favor the current length of the school day, and no longer. There is ample time in the current school day, if used wisely.
- This is a very good survey. And I hope it will help to stop school from starting so early. We use to start after Labor Day and still get out in plenty time for the summer.
- I believe the school system should take less teacher work days and some holidays and follow the school system of private schools such as Bob Jones Academy. They start later, take less vacation/nonsense days, a longer Christmas break and yet get out almost 4 weeks before the public school system. Check into this. Give less homework.
- We need more concerned teachers. If they were paid more they would care about the kids. I know some parents aren't concerned but I am, and I have the hardest time communicating with them about our children's progress. This issue should be the main focus.
- I think the school year should begin after Labor Day and end by early June. I feel if time is used properly, this should be plenty of time to teach the students their courses. It was done in the past and is still being done in some areas. I feel students do better with the extra time off for summer.
- The school year starts too soon in August. Nothing is accomplished at school after PACT testing. There are too many ½ days with little done. Too many miscellaneous days in school year where kids are out, if these were better managed summer could be longer.
- I am a kindergarten teacher in Charleston County. I feel that children lose so much of what they have learned over the summer. Many children and teachers suffer burn out during the school year. I think these frequent four week breaks would help this problem.
- Thank you for this survey! As a single parent, it is difficult and costly for appropriate and full day activities for my children in the summer. A full summer off seems to make kids' brains slow down. I think year round school with breaks would be less stressful for kids and teachers.
- Thanks for asking a working family with children what they think.
- I feel school should start after Labor Day. Why send the kids back to school at the beginning of August when this is the hottest month of the year.
- Uniforms should be worn at school. Bus drivers should come around 6:50 a.m., to pick up students in the morning time.
- I believe the school year needs to be longer, children have to learn a lot in a short period of time.
- Thanks for asking.
- More safety precautions in school.
- Some kids ride the bus home and get home late. Too long of a ride on bus sometimes.
- We are a military family and it would make life easier if school was year round with 4 week breaks! Thanks for including us in the survey!