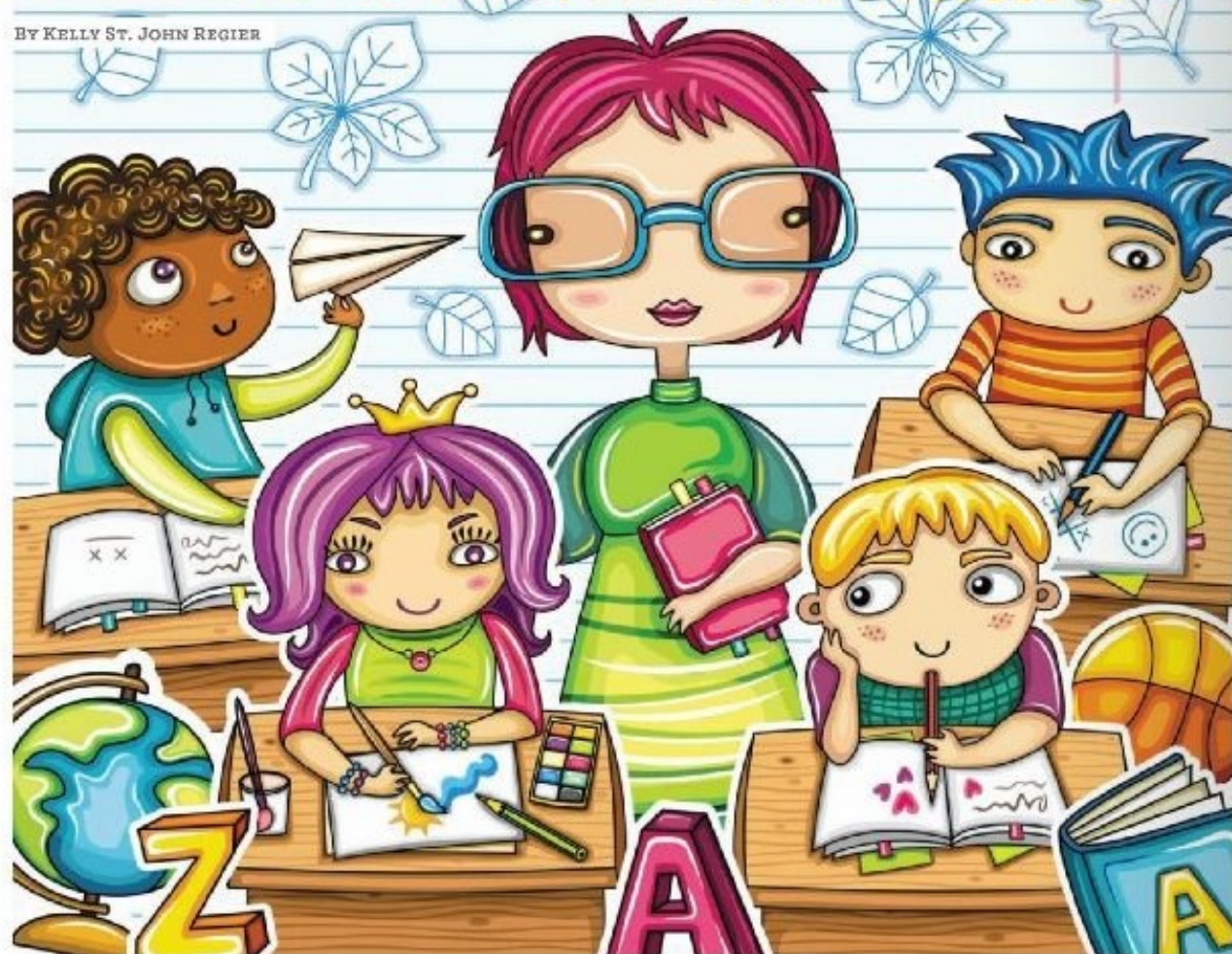


BY KELLY ST. JOHN REGIER



The sooner, the better?

A nationwide trend of moving the first day of school to mid-August is coming to Orange County.

For many Orange County children, the dog days of August mean lazy afternoons at the pool, beach barbecues and a last chance to sleep in before school starts after Labor Day. But that may change for some local children, as their school districts consider moving the first day of school to better accommodate testing and other academic considerations.

The trustees of the Fullerton Joint Union High School District (FJUHSD) and the four elementary school districts that send students to its high schools recently approved a school calendar for 2013-2014. The new school year will start on Aug. 12, two weeks earlier than usual;

summer break will commence two weeks earlier as well. About 48,000 children who attend Fullerton's K-12 schools will be affected.

"The genesis of this came from the belief that we need to give our students every advantage in terms of preparing for high-stakes examinations," says George Giokaris, FJUHSD superintendent. "Often instructional time is not used as efficiently as it should be in the latter part of the school year. We looked at the question of how much focused learning takes place following the state tests."

Moving the start of school will give teachers two extra weeks of instructional

time before Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exams, the California High School Exit Exam and California Standards tests.

In Orange County, the vast majority of public school districts start school either the last week of August or after Labor Day. Schools in Santa Ana and Orange start on Aug. 22 and 23, respectively. They also give students a three-week winter break and a two-week spring break because many travel at those times, says Wendy Benkert, assistant superintendent of business with the Orange County Department of Education.

"One of the most common questions that we get is, 'Why can't all districts have the same calendar?' The answer is the county doesn't have the authority," says Benker L.

School calendars are set individually by districts in negotiation with their unions, depending on their specific needs.

Nationwide, the trend has been moving away from Labor Day as the cut-off for the start of school. According to the education-analysis company Market Data Research, 75 percent of schools across the nation started before Sept. 1 in the 2011-12 school year. That compares to just 50 percent in the late 1980s.

The changing school dates have been controversial; some parents complain that their children are losing valuable family time and summer fun. In the southern U.S., where schools typically start in the first week of August, parents have organized groups called Save Our Summers to fight the idea that children should be sitting in classrooms during the hottest days of the year.

In California, the majority of schools opened their doors between Aug. 16 and Aug. 31 last year, according to Market Data Research. This year, the Capistrano, Newport Mesa, Placentia-Yorba Linda, Tustin, Saddleback Valley, Irvine and Foundation Valley school districts are among those that don't start school until after Labor Day weekend.

In Fullerton, Giokaris said, parents' No. 1 concern is that all of their children would have the same vacation schedule, regardless of their grade level. The district put together a year-long study group to look at the issue. The group almost universally agreed that the new calendar would help Fullerton's 15,000 high school students, but it was evenly split on whether it would benefit the 33,000 elementary and middle school students of Buena Park, Fullerton, La Habra City and Lowell Joint school districts, which feed into Fullerton high schools.

The five districts agreed on making the change but opted not to change the start date right away so that families and the community would have another year to plan for a new calendar and the one-time shorter summer break.

Ultimately, Giokaris says, he suspects that other Orange County districts may



follow Fullerton's lead; he says he has been contacted by officials from at least one other district.

The new calendar has the benefit of ending the first semester before winter break, so students will not have to worry about studying for finals during their family vacation, Giokaris says. At the same time, ending just after Memorial Day aligns better with the community-college calendar for summer classes.

The new start date also gives graduating seniors more time to prepare for community-college placement exams, which determine whether they must take remedial courses in college that don't count toward transfer credits, Giokaris says. The change is helping the school district to roll out a new program to help students prepare for the exams, which is a big deal to families.

"This could mean the difference in one year more of college if they don't do well on these placement exams," he says. **OCF**

A key resource

- Orange County is home to dozens of schools that provide top-notch learning experiences for your kids. You can find some of the best in the region – including preschools, kindergartens, middle schools, high schools and schools for special-needs children – by visiting OC Family's Education Directory.

For more information, go to ocfamily.com and click on the Education link.