

It's Time To Cut Short Summer Vacation

Todd Huffman, M.D. for the Eugene *Register-Guard*

Somewhere along the last century, a romantic notion of summer vacation became lodged in our national psyche. Summer vacation has come to be regarded by many as much a part of being a kid as eating candy and jumping rope.

But the summer vacation rhapsodized about is largely a sentimental myth. Perhaps in days of yore American kids spent lazy Huck Finn summers animalizing clouds, diving idyllic swimming holes, and climbing backyard trees. Or perhaps we just read fictions in school, in winter, and were warmed by them well into our adulthood.

Across America this and every turn of June, give or take, about fifty million kids are let loose from the bonds of education. No more pencils, no more books. Not a teacher's dirty look for another three months.

For some kids, summer vacation will mean a dizzying array of chores and sports, camps and sitters. For others, vacation means sitting camped out in front of a television ten hours a day, their toughest chore deciding which channel to watch or video game sport to play.

For others still, the aimless and adolescent in particular, summer vacation means loitering in parking lots and shopping malls, cruising questionable websites, and perhaps experimenting with drugs or alcohol, and getting into trouble. Countless children at loose ends for hours a day months at a time cannot be an unadventurous thing.

Summer vacation is a massive headache for today's families. Seven in ten American children live in households where two parents work, or with a single working parent. That long summer vacation means jury-rigging daylong childcare for up to five days a week, for ten to twelve weeks. For most parents, summer vacation is more an obstacle than a break.

And it's an expensive vacation, at that. Weeklong camps aren't cheap. Neither is child care. The typical family with school-aged children spends about eight percent of their summertime earnings on childcare, an additional financial burden less easily handled by the less well-off. Meanwhile, expensive schools facilities, computers, texts, and transportation sit idle.

Not to seem the childhood Scrooge, but it's time to take a fresh look at the traditional summer break. Most every other industrialized nation has longer school years than we do. Students in Japan attend school an average of 243 days, in Israel 216 days, in Thailand 200 days, and in England 192 days. Other modernized countries offer no more than seven consecutive weeks of summer vacation. Meanwhile, American school districts offer up to twelve.

In the long-gone world of plentiful jobs requiring little education, such comparisons mattered less. Summer vacation may once have made good sense, back when the economy was brawn-based, more rural, and more self-contained, and when academic achievement was of lower import.

In the 21st century, however, our children will someday find themselves competing with young adults from Europe, China, and India for the brain-based jobs that are an ever-increasing percentage of the global economy. While the long summer break never once had a rational basis in educational policy, in today's world it is simply irrational that an advanced nation would elect to have its children fall educationally behind their global peers.

Summer vacation is not ordained by nature. Summer, yes; summer vacation, no. The now-standard 180-day academic calendar with a long summer holiday is not built into the molecular structure of the universe. Rather, it took shape in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Previously, urban schools were open year-round, with short breaks between quarters. But since primary school education wasn't mandatory in most states until the 1870s, attendance was low.

Poor attendance got some people wondering whether such a long academic calendar was worthwhile. Physicians wondered whether students were too frail in mind and body for so many days spent indoors, at a desk. Teachers wondered the same about their own health.

And community leaders worried about summertime disease transmission in the poorly ventilated and unbearably hot and humid crowded school classrooms. Air conditioning, it must be remembered, is a relatively recent human invention.

City officials back then began listening to these concerns, and gradually they began shortening the school year, and eliminated the summer quarter. Educators justified the change by opining that placid summers spent with mom at home or with relatives out in the countryside would be more beneficial to the child's development than time spent in the humid cesspools called schools.

And it didn't hurt that the initiation of summer vacation fulfilled a timeless middle-class desire to mimic the summertime habits of wealthy urbanites who traditionally vacationed during the hottest months.

Thus a century has passed. Physicians no longer believe children too feeble for year-round instruction. Most school buildings now have effective ventilation systems. Medical concerns of contagion are outdated. And educators now consider the overlong recess detrimental, even disastrous, for the academic success of children from less well-off families.

The biggest problem with summer vacation today may be its impact on the academic achievement of low-income kids. It has long been established that achievement gaps between such children and their more well-off peers widen further during the summer months, while learning gains across social lines are nearly equivalent during the school year.

Kids lose a lot of momentum over the course of a summer vacation, poor children most of all. Call it vacation deflation, if you will. Students of all family incomes routinely score lower on standardized tests in September than in April, and grade school teachers routinely spend the first month or more of each new school year reviewing the previous year's work. It's not easy to retain information for three months without reinforcement, especially when science and math have to compete with television.

In particular, as researchers at Johns Hopkins University recently confirmed, economically disadvantaged children lose significant academic ground in the summer time, while their more advantaged peers – those more likely to read or to be shuttled from one edifying and expensive activity to another – do not. The long summer vacation just exacerbates the inequities that already exist beyond the schoolhouse doors.

By high school, that widening gap translates into academic skills in deficit by three grade levels or more. This then later translates into lower graduation rates, university admissions, and employment opportunities. All of which would be bearable were there some trump-card reason why summer vacation benefited children. But there isn't.

No one is arguing for the abolition of summer break. Summer vacations can be a grand thing, a time for sports and nature and travels with family. But in the 21st-century, the 19th-century academic calendar with its long summer break and folksy justifications is an anachronism, a poor fit for the modern household and economy, and crippling to the economically disadvantaged child besides.

The thing to do – as 3000 schools in 46 states, as well as the state of Hawaii have already done – is to modify the academic calendar to bolster the number of instructional days, and redistribute vacation time over the course of the year. Doing so will minimize academic inequity, reduce backsliding, and allow teachers to unhurriedly complete their textbooks and curriculum.

Additional schooling would allow the inclusion of more physical education and arts education throughout the year, and give teachers more time to create and conduct rich and imaginative lessons. Intersession periods could be filled with optional art and music courses, athletic camps, and even project-based or vocational workshops. And with more short breaks throughout the year, families would have more flexibility to plan travel adventures.

Of course, the magic solution is not just more days of school. More days of just warehousing kids in oversized classrooms with overworked and underpaid teachers is not the answer to all our nation's educational ills. The issue is both quantity and quality.

More of a bad thing is still a bad thing. We must increase the days of schooling all the while increasing the quality of that schooling.

And of course this will all take money, scarce enough in these economically fragile times. Every additional day of school nationwide is estimated to cost up to \$1.5 billion. Who is going to pay for that? And yet if more school and better school results in more educated children and then young adults, then it'll pay for itself and pay back dividends, eventually.

Again, all those summer camps and all that summer child care is not free. Not to mention all that remedial education, and all those costs to society of drug addiction, juvenile delinquency, and of millions of low-skill, academically delayed young adults unqualified for but the most menial employment.

Additional school should not be an invitation to more drudgery or an attack on childhood. To suggest more school and shorter breaks should not be misunderstood as being callous and cold-hearted. The current system is simply antiquated, ill-suited to the 21st-century family and economy, and deeply unfair for its substantial and lasting consequences for less privileged youth. It is time to think anew.

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