

Why and How Communities Should Focus on Summer Learning

BY RON FAIRCHILD

Public schools in the United States typically operate on a standard 180-day school calendar that has remained virtually unchanged for the past hundred years. While many education reformers rightly critique the public school calendar as a remnant from a bygone agricultural era, relatively few have succeeded in systemically changing when and for how long children attend public schools each year. The central thesis of this article is that in order to successfully address the need to expand the amount and quality of time for learning, one must understand the origins of the school calendar and the broader relationships between summer and U.S. popular culture, business interests, and politics.

Specifically, this article analyzes the origins of the U.S. school calendars, why efforts to change school calendars have failed, what risks young people face during the summer months, and how to expand time for learning during the summer months cost effectively with widespread public support. Rather than fighting battles over the school calendar, it is possible for communities to extend choices and opportunities to low-income students over the summer in order to counteract well-documented setbacks. The article concludes with recommendations for education policy makers, elected officials, and nongovernmental organizations that seek practical solutions and strategies for how to use the summer months to help close achievement gaps based on socioeconomic status and accelerate learning for all young people.

Origins of the U.S. Public School Calendar

If you were to ask most Americans where the current school calendar comes from, they generally would respond that the reason kids have long summer breaks from public schools is because they were once needed to help with agricultural work. The typical explanation is that school calendars were created during an era when most of the U.S. population lived on farms and children were given a long summer

“vacation” ostensibly so that they could provide free labor and assist their families. In a recent book, Dr. Kenneth Gold, a historian at the City University of New York, argues that this popular folklore on the origins of the school calendar is not entirely accurate.

While it is certainly the case that children were needed as a source of agricultural labor, many schools in rural communities prior to 1900 regularly closed during the spring for planting and the fall for harvesting. Rather than close schools for the entire growing season, these rural schools frequently offered a “summer session.” Conversely, in large urban areas, particularly in the northeastern United States, it was common for schools to close for a prolonged break every summer. At the turn of the twentieth century, there was a growing desire, particularly among the more affluent members of society, to flee cities during the summer months. The heat, threat of communicable diseases, and poor municipal sanitation during the early 1900s helped drive residents out of cities during the summer months, and city school calendars generally accommodated the needs and desires of wealthy families.

As compulsory public education grew, state and county officials gradually began to standardize the school calendar to a 180-day, nine-month school year that remains prevalent to this day. Although each state took a slightly different path, they all generally arrived at the same destination: a 180-day school calendar that met the needs of an increasingly urban and mobile population. Rural districts gradually gave up their summer sessions and typically added days to their calendars in order to provide children with a continuous 180 days of school. Urban districts generally continued the practice of having one long summer break. Arguably, the urban elite and city dwellers had as much, if not more, impact on the development of the current U.S. school calendar as rural farmers did.

This abbreviated history of the school calendar offers a number of useful insights for modern education reformers and municipal officials interested in addressing the need for summer learning. First and fundamentally, the school calendar should be properly understood as a long-standing political construct that was created intentionally to meet the needs of particular families during a particular historical era. The school calendar is not merely an accidental leftover from the agrarian era. Simply put, the school calendar was not designed to meet the needs of farmers who needed childhood labor through the growing season.

Nor was the calendar designed to meet the needs of large numbers of factory workers in America's growing cities. Ironically, the standardization of the school calendar began at precisely the same time when the child care needs of factory workers during the summer months were the greatest. The passage of the first child labor laws in 1916 gave children freedom from work during the summer but also left them with little else to do during their vacations. In response, community leaders pushed for the development of "vacation schools" in cities during the early twentieth century. These vacation schools frequently were run by churches, charity organizations, and women's groups in major cities in the Northeast and Midwest. As these programs grew, they increasingly became financed and administered by public education officials transforming them into credit-bearing summer school programs that continue in many large urban school systems to this day.

Why Is the School Calendar So Difficult to Change?

Socioeconomic and cultural forces clearly played an important role in the standardization of the school calendar at the turn of the twentieth century. Different expressions of those same forces continue to provide a compelling explanation for why the 180-day calendar remains intractable, despite decades of research about the deleterious effects of a prolonged break from school for children, particularly those living in poverty.

First and foremost, there are substantial business interests that align with the current school calendar. Most notably, the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions supports

lobbying efforts to perpetuate the traditional school calendar. This association has opposed legislation at the state level that would modify school calendars. In the past decade, it has been successful in restricting the official start date of the school year to September in over a dozen states. It has funded research on the relationship between September start dates and increased profits within its industry and increased state revenues from taxes on travel and tourism-related businesses. The association also funds the Coalition for the Traditional School Calendar, which fosters grassroots opposition to calendar change by middle- and upper-income families, who often view such efforts as government encroachment on family time. From beach communities to the travel industry, some businesses depend on children being on vacation during the summer months in order to earn third-quarter profits.

In addition to opposition from business interests, deeply rooted cultural forces reinforce summer as an idyllic time for rest, relaxation, and vacation for children. Popular music and advertising reinforces summer as a time for freedom from the strictures of the school year routine. Most Americans have an image of summer as carefree, happy time when "kids can be kids" and enjoy experiences like taking vacations, relaxing at the pool, and spending time with family. Efforts to change the school calendar that are framed as "taking vacations away from children and families" run counter to this cultural norm and often engender popular opposition. Parent groups have organized advocacy campaigns to "save our summers" that have largely succeeded in keeping the traditional school calendar intact.

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Last, and perhaps most important, the sheer cost involved in adding a significant number of instructional days to the calendar has been a major barrier for districts that are inclined to pursue such a course of action. The expenses associated with adding 30 days to the calendar as some advocates

suggest would be staggering. For example, the average per-pupil expenditure for an entire 180 days of school in Boston in 2009–2010 was \$16,666. Using that figure as a basis for analysis, the addition of six weeks of school in the summer would cost taxpayers an additional \$2,778 per student. With more than 56,000 students in the district, such an effort would cost more than \$155 million in total. In a time of shrinking state and local education budgets, it is unrealistic to expect local school districts to add days to the school calendar at this cost.

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As a result of these factors, no major school district in the United States has significantly added instructional days to the standard 180-day calendar in the past thirty years, according to the National Educational Commission on Time and Learning. In some states, there have been modifications to the school calendar, but such efforts typically involve merely the redistribution of school days rather than the addition of more time for learning. So-called modified school calendars or year-round schooling is especially popular in districts where there is a great need for additional school space and classrooms because it can increase the number of students a particular school facility can accommodate. In the school year 2004–2005, over 2.28 million students in forty-seven states attended over 3,200 schools that operated on such schedules. The states with the largest number of students in modified calendar schools were Arizona, California, Hawaii, Kentucky, and Nevada—states that were also experiencing the largest population growth rates in the country.

One thing that is abundantly clear from the analysis of the origins of the school calendar is that the economic and political needs of adults rather than the educational needs of children drove the construction of the standardized 180-day calendar. It is hard to imagine that anyone designing a new education system from scratch would use the current

U.S. school calendar to schedule when teaching and learning would occur. Yet the school calendar persists and continues to contribute to a host of negative outcomes for U.S. schoolchildren, particularly those who face the greatest risks.

Risks Young People Face During the Summer

The reality of what millions of children in the United States encounter during the summer months is vastly different from our popular mythology about the joy of summer. Whereas wealthier children and youth typically access a wide variety of resources that help them grow both academically and developmentally over the summer, poor children often lack access to similar types of experiences. When the school doors close, many youth across the United States enter an environment lacking educational opportunities, healthy meals, and adequate supervision from caring adults. From a resources perspective, summer break in the United States has traditionally been a time when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Research spanning a hundred years has proven that students lose ground academically when they are out of school for the summer. The problem is particularly acute among low-income students, who lose an average of more than two months in reading achievement each summer from kindergarten to third grade. These setbacks slow progress toward reaching the goal of reading at the proficient level by the third grade, a leading predictor of later educational success. Summer learning loss exacerbates the achievement gap because middle-class students, who are more likely to be in enrichment programs or reading at home, actually make slight gains over the summer. In fact, Johns Hopkins University researchers Karl Alexander, Doris Entwistle, and Linda Olson attribute as much as two-thirds of the achievement gap in reading to unequal summer learning opportunities in the elementary school years. By the end of fifth grade, disadvantaged children are nearly three grade equivalents behind their more affluent peers in reading. This ultimately can affect whether the student will earn a high school diploma or go to college.

In the mid-1990s, Harris Cooper, Barbara Nye, Kelly Charlton, James Lindsey, and Scott Greathouse synthesized research on the effects of

summer vacation on student achievement. On average, achievement test scores of children were about one month lower when they returned to school in fall than when they left in the spring, and summer loss was more profound for math computation skills and spelling than for other tested skill areas. All students, regardless of family economics, lost roughly equal amounts of math skills over the summer, but differences in summer learning loss for reading were related to resources in the home. While students from middle-socioeconomic-status (SES) backgrounds actually showed gains in reading achievement over summer, children from low-SES families showed losses.

Longitudinal data from the Beginning School Study, collected by Karl Alexander and his colleagues at Johns Hopkins University, suggest that summer learning deficits of low-SES children accumulate over the elementary school years. By middle school, these summer reading differences plus a relatively small initial achievement gap at the beginning of first grade produced a cumulative gap of two years in reading achievement. Because the data also suggest that lower- and higher-SES children learned at essentially the same rate while in school, the widening of the gaps is explained almost entirely by the compounded deficits that results from these SES-based summer learning differences.

Beyond substantial academic setbacks, lower-SES youth are also at risk of experiencing setbacks in their overall health and nutrition over the summer months, and these setbacks can influence learning as well as overall well-being. Food scarcity during the summer months is a significant health issue for low-SES children in the United States. The Food Research and Action Center found that only one in seven children who participated in federally subsidized meals during the 2010 school year also participated in such programs over the summer months. In addition, during the summer when many children typically lack access to a nutrition program similar to the one they participated in during the regular school year, they tend to regress on measure of health, such as percent of body fat and body mass index (BMI). Paul T. von Hippel and collaborators reported in the *American Journal of Public Health* that the BMI of children grew faster and more variably during summer vacation than during the kindergarten and first-grade

school years. Furthermore, the difference between school and summer growth rates was especially large for three at-risk subgroups: African American children, Hispanic children, and children who were already overweight at the beginning of kindergarten. This research suggests that while schools' diet and exercise policies may be less than ideal, summer vacation may play more of a role than school environments in contributing to early childhood obesity.

Viable, Research-Based Solutions

Summer School

Although keeping children and adolescents off the street provided the initial impetus for summer school, by the 1950s, educators began to realize that summer school could furnish opportunities to remediate learning deficits. Because the wealthy were able to hire tutors for their children or send them to camp, the educational summer programs made available through schools largely served students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Such programs were often framed in punitive terms and designed as remedial in focus.

Using reports published from 1963 to 1995, Harris Cooper, Jeffrey Valentine, Kelly Charleton, and April Melson found that summer school programs that focused on lessening or removing learning deficiencies had a positive impact on the knowledge and skills of participants. Overall, students completing remedial summer programs were shown to have scored about one-fifth of a standard deviation higher than the control group on outcome measures. Cooper and his collaborators also found that programs focusing on acceleration of learning or on nonremedial goals had a positive impact roughly equal to programs that focused on remediation; that programs with larger effects typically served middle-SES students in smaller communities or school districts with class sizes no larger than twenty students; and that programs focused on the early grades and those that underwent careful scrutiny for treatment fidelity had larger effects than unmonitored programs.

The major findings from this study were later confirmed by Geoffrey Borman and Maritza Dowling, who conducted a three-year study on the success of a multiyear summer school program, Teach

Baltimore, in preventing losses and promoting longitudinal achievement growth. Their results suggest that when such summer learning programs are begun early, before disadvantaged students have had the opportunity to fall so far behind, they can help prevent the anticipated growth in the achievement gap attributable to summer.

One notable aspect of the Teach Baltimore program was that it involved a partnership between the Baltimore City Public School System and Johns Hopkins University operating as an alternative to the traditional model of summer school in the city. In the past ten years in the United States, there has been significant growth in the number and quality of such summer learning programs that involve partnerships among school districts, universities, and other community-based organizations.

Summer Learning Programs

Increasingly, quality summer learning programs offered by nonprofit, community-based organizations are combining elements of academic learning with enrichment activities that traditionally take place at summer camps. In response to such innovations, many major school districts such as Pittsburgh, Detroit, Baltimore, and Cincinnati are revamping summer school programs and pursuing a great degree of collaboration between and among public agencies and nongovernmental organizations. Brief descriptions of the most notable and largest-scale examples of this approach in the United States are presented next.

Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL, www.experiencebell.org) operates summer learning programs for low-income kindergarten to sixth-grade children in partnership with school districts in Baltimore, Boston, New York City, Springfield (Massachusetts), and Detroit. A recent study of the BELL summer program by Duncan Chaplin and Jeffrey Capizzano found that children in the BELL treatment group gained about a month's worth of reading skills more than their counterparts in the comparison group during the summer. The study also reported positive impact on the degree to which parents encouraged their children to read.

Summer Advantage USA (www.summeradvantage.org) operates summer learning programs for over

four thousand low-income young people throughout the state of Indiana and in the city of Chicago. The program focuses on academics and enrichment. Summer Advantage aims to provide children access to a well-rounded summer program that helps them succeed in school, stimulates their dreams for the future, and helps them develop as leaders in their communities. On average, students who participate in the program experience academic gains of more than two months in reading performance. In addition, the program has shown impact on the statewide achievement test, the ISTEP, for third-graders at Lynwood Elementary, the poorest school in Decatur Township, Indiana. Test scores improved sixteen percentage points in language arts and nearly twelve percentage points in math from 2009 to this year. Don Stinson, the superintendent of schools, attributes much of that improvement to the presence of Summer Advantage in the district.

Horizons National (www.horizonsnational.org) offers a six-week, full-day educational enrichment summer session for low-income K–8 public school students with a broad range of academic abilities. Horizons National blends high-quality academics with arts, sports, cultural enrichment, and confidence-building activities. All Horizons students learn to swim, which leads to enormous gains in self-confidence that spill over into the classroom. Highlights of an evaluation of the program conducted in 2007 included:

- Students performing below grade level during the school year gained an average of four months of reading skills during the six-week summer program. Many gained as much as a full year.
- Horizons provides an opportunity for children to maintain and often advance their academic and nonacademic skill set in ways that will ultimately increase a child's likelihood of lifetime success.
- Horizons Affiliate Programs maintain fidelity to the original model while allowing for local flexibility in implementation.

These examples of quality summer learning programs demonstrate the efficacy of adding time for learning in nontraditional ways and from sources other than just public schools. It should be noted that these programs cost far less than the estimate quoted earlier of \$2,778 per pupil for adding thirty

instructional days to the school calendar in a major U.S. city. The programs just cited range in cost from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per pupil. They each involve significant public-private partnerships between public schools and private funders, such as foundations, corporations, and individual contributors.

In a time of tight school budgets, districts often are able to stretch their summer school dollars farther by working in partnership with organizations such as those just described. In cases where districts have funding only for a three-hour, four-week remedial summer school program, they can use those dollars in combination with private funds secured by such organizations to offer longer, more comprehensive, and higher-quality summer programs.

Alternatives to the Traditional School Calendar

Two forms of calendar change could serve as solutions to the summer learning loss problem: extending and modifying the school calendar. Extending the school year, while costly, would produce noticeable changes in student achievement if substantially more days were added. In their report, “Cost

Effectiveness of Alternative Year Schooling,” Jared Hazelton, Craig Blakely, and Jon Denton suggest that approximately thirty-five extra days would be needed to produce significant achievement gains. By contrast, adding only five or six days to the current calendar would increase the actual task time available to students and teachers only marginally and have little impact on predictable summer learning losses. One of the nation’s leading advocates for expanding learning time, the National Educational Commission on Time and Learning, suggests that only the combination of both increased time and a focus on how time actually gets spent would dramatically improve student performance.

Merely modifying the school calendar by redistributing the current vacation and eliminating the long summer break has not produced significant achievement gains for districts. The cumulative effects of modified school calendars or so-called year-round schools on academic achievement are very small, according to the 2003 research synthesis by Harris Cooper and his collaborators. Such calendar modifications also tend to produce significant opposition from groups mentioned earlier in this article. Thus, many have concluded that such a strategy is not worth the fight if significant achievement gains are not the likely result.

How Should Education Policy Makers Proceed?

These findings have a number of implications for education policy makers. First, those policy makers who make decisions about the structure of public schools in the United States may choose to continue to accept summer learning loss as a necessary, albeit unfortunate, by-product of the nation’s education system. Rather than focusing on expanding time for learning, such policy makers could continue efforts to improve the quality of instruction during the standard 180 days. In recent years, there have been innumerable attempts to reform the way time is actually used in schools. Education policy makers have experimented with new pedagogical approaches, curricula, school governance models, facility arrangements, school leadership, staffing patterns, age configurations, and technology. In short, reformers have sought to change nearly every possible variable in the educational process with the exception of time.



Those who continue to accept the current school calendar as a given and favor further tinkering within the standard school day and year face a considerable challenge in providing a compelling rationale and justification for such efforts. Arguably, no other enterprise on earth expected to deliver consistent, year-over-year results would be structured like U.S. public schools—with all expenditures and operations being limited to nine months and with everyone completely ignoring the other three months. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine any athlete, musician, or artist systematically taking off three months each year and expecting to maintain a professional level of performance.

Moreover, there is mounting evidence to demonstrate that the current school calendar actually creates systemic, preventable inequities in the U.S. public education. Policy makers may soon be in the position of having to legally justify a school calendar that is disproportionately harmful to low-income students. If there are cost-effective means of expanding learning opportunities during the summer months, districts should dedicate funds to make them available to low-SES families during those months. There is a compelling need for compensatory, equity-focused federal funding streams, such as Title I, to be dedicated to expanding summer learning opportunities.

There are also clear implications for those who direct and fund various types of summer learning programs based on the just-described analysis of the school calendar, its impact on student achievement, and the research on various solutions to these problems. Specifically, this article recommends the next principles to guide the future development of summer learning programs:

Serve students from low-SES families in the early grades first.

Underscore the need for comprehensive, quality programming for a minimum of six weeks.

Motivate and offer incentives for students and parents to participate.

Mobilize community partnerships and support beyond public schools.

Emphasize the prevention of losses in reading performance, not retrospective remediation.

Reimagine traditional approaches to teaching and learning.

Sustain investments over time.

This examination of the origins of the school calendar and its effects on achievement suggests that strategic investments in quality summer learning programs are necessary to address the problem of educational inequity in the United States. Rather than simply adding days to the school calendar, reformers should carefully examine how to build popular support for targeted programs that offer low-SES children similar choices and opportunities as those available to their more affluent peers. The models presented—BELL, Summer Advantage, and Horizons—provide the type of fun, enriching summer that every child should have. They also meet the critical academic needs of children who otherwise would not have access to learning experiences during the summer. The research on the impact of these programs provides the footnotes for common sense: Children who participate in such programs return to school with advantages rather than deficits. This is precisely the impact desired for more low-income young people in communities across the United States.

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Ron Fairchild is president and chief executive officer of Smarter Learning Group and senior consultant to the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.
