

Leave those kids alone: the case for long summer vacations

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LABOUR DAY IS three weeks away. If you're a school-aged kid, that means there's still plenty of time left to enjoy the pleasures of summer vacation. And yet, a surprising number of Canadian children are already back in the classroom, having traded a long summer break for more time off throughout the year. Is year-round schooling the smarter choice for everyone?

According to recent statistics, 27,000 Canadian students are enrolled in year-round schooling, predominately in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario. One of the largest and highest-profile year-round schools is Roberta Bondar Public School in Brampton, Ont. Its 900 students went back to class on Aug. 3. In October, they'll take a two-week break, plus two weeks at Christmas, a week in February and two weeks in March. It's a movement with momentum. A school board on Vancouver Island is currently considering a move to year-round schooling. Calgary already has 20 such schools.

Advocates of year-round schooling view the traditional school year as a relic of an agrarian society that required children for farm work during the summer months. Rearranging the school year to balance out the breaks corrects this anachronism and may provide some significant academic advantages.

U.S. research shows taking two months off in the summer can reduce the academic performance of some children, particularly those from low-income families; these students must spend the first few weeks of school trying to relearn last years' lessons. This "summer slide" builds up over the years and "contributes to the perpetuation of family advantage and disadvantage across generations," according to a 2007 study in the *American Sociological Review*. If school is society's great equalizer, summer holidays may be undoing that process.

It's also the case that some families appreciate the flexibility provided by year-round schooling, as it can be easier (and cheaper) to plan vacations during off-peak times.

These benefits appear enticing. Yet summer vacation should have the right to respond to charges that it's outdated, inconvenient and unfair.

It is true that the traditional school year has its roots in farming culture. In fact, some parts of New Brunswick used to begin school in early August so students could have three weeks off in September to pick potatoes. But there remain many good reasons for shutting schools during the summer--the weather for one. The Saskatoon Catholic school board tried and abandoned year-round schooling in 2000 after discovering how hot classrooms without air conditioning can get in August.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

As for the summer slide, it should be recognized that the modern summer vacation has changed quite a bit from the unstructured days of lazy indulgence immortalized in such classics as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Who Has Seen the Wind?*

For many kids, summer has become a kind of occupational testing ground. Week-long specialty camps--covering everything from music to science to horseback riding to archaeology to sports--have made summer a time for opportunities unavailable during the school year. Interested in computer programming? Spend a week at computer camp to see if you really like it, before you even enter high school!

This proliferation of summer camps has created an equivalent demand for counsellors to staff them, which means a variety of interesting summer jobs for high school and university students. Abandoning the universal two-month summer holiday would dramatically reduce these opportunities.

It's also true that the best time to enjoy a vacation in Canada is not October or March, but the warm summer months. More broadly, dismantling the deep-seated synchronization of school, child care, summer jobs, tourism and vacation planning can have far-reaching consequences. In 2000, Texas found the economic costs of starting school in early August totalled US\$370 million in lost summer employment, lowered tourism spending and additional air conditioning costs.

So, despite its age and provenance, the two-month summer vacation still has a lot going for it. It is a once-a-year chance for children to spend more time with their family, try new things, travel or just kick back. Why cut that short? Not all learning happens in the classroom.

The summer slide, where it exists, is a product of income disparities and not the season itself. Rather than dismantling everyone's summer to cure this phenomenon, we should seek out new ways to help less-fortunate families have a more productive summertime. The ultimate goal should be a pleasant, rewarding--and lengthy--summer break for all.

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