

Summer Break Is Important to Students and Families

Year-Round Schools, 2008

Joe Matthews is a staff writer for the Los Angeles Times.

Many urban school districts began to move to year-round calendars during the 1980s as a response to school overcrowding. Over 200 schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District now have a year-round calendar. Having students attend school year-round may not be a good thing, however. The nation's long summer break is not only a cherished American tradition but is necessary for the mental and physical well-being of the child. Some psychologists believe that too much study is detrimental to a child's mental health and children need time away from the regimentation of school. Scholars such as the education reformer Horace Mann argued on behalf of a long summer vacation. Mann wanted teachers to have time off to better prepare themselves in their chosen profession. The freedom from study and lack of schedules associated with summer vacation is good for students and their families and is good social policy too.

Ashley Sturgeon sat outside El Segundo High School on a hot August day, chatting with her sister and dreading the end of summer vacation.

Ashley and her sister Amber, who is starting seventh grade, have been told that the summer break is a tradition born in rural society.

But they see simpler reasons for the respite. "It's a good idea, whether you live in the city or on a farm," said Ashley, who will be in 11th grade. "Without the summer off, we might go insane."

The Sturgeons unwittingly have a better sense of the summer vacation's origins than most modern educators—or so suggests a book set to be published next year.

The book, "School's In: The History of Summer Education in American Public Schools," argues that the notion of summer vacation as an artifact of agrarian life is pure myth.

The history's author, City University of New York scholar Kenneth M. Gold, is running against a tide of public contentions to the contrary.

Summer vacation marked a conscious recognition of the value of rest ...

The Value of Rest

In recent months, school superintendents in California, New Mexico, New York, Alabama and Arkansas have cited the vacation's rural origins in scrapping what they see as an outdated break and moving to year-round calendars.

Gov. Gray Davis and members of his administration made references to the vacation's supposed agrarian origins earlier this year when they proposed to shorten it for middle-school students. In writing about extended school years, dozens of newspapers—their writers far removed from the spring planting and fall harvest seasons of the farm—routinely perpetuate the theory. Earlier this year, the Los Angeles Times reported that the traditional calendar "is rooted in an agrarian lifestyle that has all but disappeared."

Gold argues, however, that summer vacation marked a conscious recognition of the value of rest, not a vestige of the farm labor cycle. As such, its misunderstood history holds lessons for modern educators in resolving questions

that go beyond how to make use of July and August.

The 19th century Americans who created the modern school calendar were mostly city dwellers who wrestled with familiar issues, Gold contends. They wanted to increase attendance, prevent dropouts and provide as much schooling as possible—without breaking school budgets.

As a result, the first urban schools did not take the summer off, Gold writes. The charity system that was the forerunner of New York City's public schools operated year-round. By the 1840s, New York, Baltimore and Philadelphia all had about 11 months of school. In rural areas, school let out so students could work in the fields—but those breaks came in the spring and fall. School was in session in winter and summer.

What changed? Urbanization was one factor. City elites could afford to leave town for cooler climes. School officials, battling absenteeism, saw little advantage in opening schools on summer days or on holidays when many students wouldn't show up. Political pressures to standardize the school calendar across cities often led campuses to "the lowest common denominator"—in other words, less school.

A century of summer vacations has created a culture of summer ...

Educational scholars also played their part. The influential 19th century psychiatrist Amariah Brigham, who closely studied children, wrote that too much schooling was contributing to a "growing tide of insanity" among the young. The poor quality of school buildings—and the heat of summer—fueled concerns about the physical health of students. Horace Mann was among those reformers who wanted to professionalize teaching. He saw the summer vacation as a good time for professional development that would further that goal.

By the turn of the century, the reformers had won. With a few exceptions, Gold writes, a September-to-June school year was the standard.

The Move to Year-Round Schedule vs. a Culture of Summer

So standard that the summer break's origins were forgotten when urban crowding caused districts to begin moving to year-round schedules in the 1980s. By 1992, more than 1 million American kids were in year-round public schools. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, 224 schools now have the year-round calendar.

The theory of the summer break's agrarian origins has proved to be a handy argument: We're not adding school—we're reversing an anachronism.

That is how the Paramount Unified School District, for instance, explains its switch a few years back to year-round elementary and middle schools. "The traditional calendar was instituted decades and decades ago when it was a more agrarian society," Supt. Jay Wilbur said. "People needed summer breaks to work in the fields. We don't need that now."

Gold is a historian of education, not a theorist, but he wonders about the effect of the year-round changes. A century of summer vacations has created a culture of summer, of freedom and romance and personal growth held deeply from New York to El Segundo. That culture may be worth preserving.

"Increasing summer school may be a good educational policy for raising standardized test scores," he writes, "but is it good social policy to tamper with the season during which many families and friends forge their most enduring

bonds and memories?"

Just ask the students. Without summer, they might go insane.

Further Readings

Books

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