

How to Stop the Summer Learning Loss

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Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of the effect of the three month summer break on students' learning. Research is incorporated to back up the idea that students do not learn most efficiently when they have a long summer break and do not attend any summer programs that support academia. Alternative solutions such as alternate school schedule, summer programs and ways for teachers and parents to promote learning during the summer months are discussed throughout.

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As the school year comes to a close, children anxiously await the carefree days of summer. Children of all ages cannot wait for a break from learning; unfortunately, though, these children do not realize that they will lose a portion of what they learned over the past nine months. The aforementioned children attend a school that carries the traditional school year schedule, with a three-month break and no summer programs. In following this schedule, students do not learn as efficiently as they could with other schedules. Studies have shown that a typical student loses at least one month's worth of knowledge over the three-month summer vacation, and some lose as much as three months' worth. Three options for preventing this learning loss include the traditional school year with effective summer programs, year round school, or parent/teacher cooperation in planning and implementing summer activities. Some summer programs help to not only keep the learning gap from expanding but have also been proven to shrink the gap. Year round school programs prevent the learning loss from happening initially. In the absence of summer programs or a school with a year round schedule, involved parents and teachers can work with their children and students to minimize learning loss.

Summer programs have become a great way to keep children on track for the upcoming school year, but only if students attend the right ones. Approximately eleven million children go to some form of summer camp every year, but not all programs actually promote or improve on their already established school knowledge or implement low enough prices for all children needing assistance to attend. Studies show that students of lower socioeconomic status, or SES, often have a larger summer learning gap than students of higher SES because they attend a lower number of summer programs than their higher SES peers (Helf, Konrad, Algozzine, 2008; David, 2010). High school remedial programs usually require families to pay a student fee that lower income families simply cannot afford (Sundius, 2007). J.L. David suggests asking local

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businesses or civic leaders to start scholarships or raise funds for underprivileged students to attend some of the summer programs available that cost too much for certain families to attend. Teachers should consider promoting the idea of taking advantage of free programs at the local library or YMCA (David, 2010). One affordable summer program that has been proven to effective was open to children of color and low SES starting the summer after their first grade year. “The daylong program combined two hours of literacy activities with traditional summer camp activities, such as art, music and sports.” This program produced positive results; the students who attended the summer program showed improved reading and comprehension skills that still persisted even half a year later. Worthy summer programs exhibit features like opportunities for one on one attention, clear instructional goals, well trained teachers, and small class sizes all in a program that lasts several weeks to a month. Programs like the ones described above have been proven to attract students of lower income families. One of the main goals of any respectable summer program includes connecting with the individuals in attendance and their families (David, 2010).

By not reviewing what they have already learned or getting ahead in their schoolwork, students lose much of the knowledge they gained during the previous school year. This becomes particularly true of math and spelling. “The effect [of the long summer break]...is more detrimental to math than reading, most detrimental for math computation and spelling.” (Kerry & Davies, 1998). Students already having difficulty with math and spelling remain at a serious disadvantage when they go back to school, because they often have to relearn what they were taught the previous school year. Every year teachers spend an excessive amount of time reviewing what students should already know. Therefore, the further along a student becomes in school, if they struggle in the classroom, the likelihood of them growing further behind

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increases. Some students, specifically special needs students, not only do not gain additional knowledge, but regress and can actually lose knowledge over the summer months. For some students, the review helps to remember previous knowledge. Others, however, actually learn the information for the first time. Many options exist to halt or slow the summer learning loss.

According to Trevor Kerry and Brent Davies (1998), students have learning loss due to the three months of summer vacation in the traditional school schedule. Leaving the school environment creates a lengthy break. Many students do not participate in any educational or school related activities over the summer.

Year round school schedules exhibit multiple variations. Three options include the 45-10, the 45-15, and the modified concept 6, just to name a few. The 45-10 schedule, to put it simply, has forty-five days of school followed by ten days of break. Similar to the 45-10, the 45-15 schedule contains the same amount of school days, but students enjoy fifteen days of break instead of ten. Increasing the number of days of break creates two extra weeks, often used for something called intersessions. Similar to a January term or May-mester, during an intersession, students still go to class, but in their classes they discuss things that one would not typically see on the syllabus or in the core curriculum. In the last schedule, the modified concept 6 schedule, students attend school for eight weeks, and have four weeks of break, leaving time for a two week intersession and a two week winter break. Many more year round schedules have been implemented across the country. Schools adapt these and other schedules to fit their liking and their individual needs as a corporation (Kerry & Davies, 1998). Some of the schools even incorporate what people call a multi-track year round schedule. Multi-track schedules allow the school to enroll more students than their building can hold at one time. Schools assign all teachers and students to one of five tracks. Only four of the tracks have a presence in the

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building at a time. Track five, or the remaining track, enjoys their vacation at that time. The tracks rotate in intervals so every track has an equal opportunity to be on vacation. Multi-track schedules prove helpful for smaller school districts with a large amount of students in the area. Smaller buildings can enroll more students using this scheduling technique (St. Gerard, 2007).

Year round school gives children shorter breaks, but the same number of days in school per year. More than two million students at over three thousand schools were on a year round school schedule in 2005-2006. More and more schools change their schedules in hopes of impeding the learning loss (St. Gerard, 2007). One school in particular, located in Texas, changed to a 45-10 calendar, a variation of the year round school year. A 45-10 calendar means that students will go to school for forty-five days, or nine weeks, and then take ten days, or two weeks, off for break. In the overall scheme of things the students still go to school for one hundred eighty days, but they take shorter breaks. Shorter breaks allow students, and teachers, to take a much needed break from school, all the while not forgetting everything they have learned before the break (Kerry & Davies, 1998). It eliminates the need for extensive review when students return to school after break. Furthermore, this allows teachers to cover much more information in a school year because they do not have to spend the first couple of weeks after summer break reviewing information from the previous year. A principal in California, whose school operates on a year round school calendar, suggests that this plan can reduce the stress on the students and teachers, help further staff development, expand extracurricular activities, and pick up school attendance and students attitudes towards learning (Kerry & Davies, 1998). Students and teachers often feel less stressed on this plan because fewer days on break means fewer chances to forget prior knowledge. Thus, teachers can continue to teach at a steady pace rather than taking extra time to review. The end of the schools terms coincide with vacations so

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teachers do not have to review when the students' return for break in order to be ready for the exam over that term. Along with that, while going to school year round, students become less worried about their grades or forgetting any important information (St. Gerard, 2007). School employees enjoy more opportunities to grow and develop because they interact with the students or perform their jobs year round. Teachers also forget information over long breaks, so when they work year round they stay consistent with their schedule and/or syllabus.

Teachers and parents should work together to keep children's minds engaged during the summer. Teachers could make a list of all of the summer programs available locally with their prices, if any. Additionally, they could also organize a summer learning fair at the end of the school year so that parents can meet with representatives of the summer programs. Teachers can also set up a blog or forum for students to do logic problems or write a review over a book they have read or a movie they have seen recently. Other teacher led options include sending home reading lists, fun worksheets, and ideas for practicing recently learned skills. Parents can encourage students to take advantage of teachers' suggestions and can take their children to places such as the library, the zoo, and/or local museums. They can also talk to teachers at the next grade level to find out how best to prepare their child/children for their upcoming grade level. Children can practice math with their parents by measuring objects around the house, cooking, monitoring the temperature inside and outside of the house, or by keeping track of costs while shopping. Parents should encourage their children to play outside and limit television and video game use (Jehlen, 2008).

The traditional nine month school year followed by three months of summer vacation leads to significant learning loss, particularly in mathematics and spelling. Summer programs or year round schooling programs minimize or prevent this loss. Effective summer programs focus

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on one-on-one attention, clear instructional goals, well trained teachers, and small class sizes.

Parents can and should support their child's learning at home in cooperation with teachers to minimize the learning gap. These three options, traditional school with a respectable summer program, year round school, and parent/ teacher cooperation can minimize or eliminate the summer learning loss.

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