

Is Summer Break Necessary?

For many school children, summer break is the best time of the year. They are free from classes, free from waking up to an alarm clock every morning and free from homework. As the old rhyme says, “No more pencils; no more books. No more teachers’ dirty looks!”

But is summer break good for students? Or would they be better off if school continued throughout the year?

Many schools in the United States have an academic calendar with 180 days of school and a long summer break. This schedule was first used in the early 1900’s. Before that, the school calendar looked much different. In the 1840’s, the largest cities in the country had 240-260 days of school each year. There were four quarters held year-round with short breaks between each. However, children were not required to go to school. Many students only showed up for school part of the year, so they actually spent fewer days in class than students today.



At that time, some doctors felt that spending too much time in school could be detrimental to a child’s health. They believed children were too physically and mentally weak to spend so much time sitting in a classroom.

By the turn of the century, the school year had been shortened by sixty days, and the summer quarter was eliminated. Summer was chosen as the break time for several reasons. Hot summer temperatures made the heat in the school buildings unbearable in many places. There was a belief that spending time in hot, crowded places spread disease. Also, wealthy families often took vacations to escape the summer heat, and middle-class families were starting to do the same.

School in the rural areas away from the cities was different. Children there spent two or three months of school in the winter and two or three more months in the summer. During the spring and fall, they worked on their family farms. As the population grew, and the distance between the cities and the rural areas got smaller, those working in the schools worried that the rural students weren’t getting enough time in the classroom. They extended the school year and switched to a summer break to be more like the city schools.

More than one hundred years later, for many schools the schedule hasn’t changed. Brain research has taught us a great deal about how children learn, and we know that students are not too weak to attend school year round. Air conditioning makes it possible to live and work comfortably year-round even in the hottest parts of the country.

So why do students in the United States still get a summer break?

Long-standing traditions are hard to change. For many families, summer break is a time for vacations and activities that they don't have time for during the school year. Summer break also provides an opportunity for students to take additional classes to get ahead or to retake classes they struggled with previously. For other students, summer is a chance to get a part-time job to earn money, to attend a camp or focus on a skill or passion such as music or sports.

Schools benefit from the summer break as well. During the summer break, schools save money by not having to provide transportation, meals and other services. Teachers and administrators often use the summer break to take classes required for their school jobs or to take on additional work to supplement their income.

Recent research indicates, however, that summer break creates problems for students as well. Several studies have shown that students' scores on standardized tests drop over the summer. Many teachers spend several weeks at the beginning of each school year reviewing material from the previous year. Is this class time being wasted? Would students learn and remember better if there was not such a long break between the end of one grade and the start of another?

Schools in many other countries have a longer school day and a longer school year. In Australia, students attend school 200 days a year, in four quarters with short breaks between each. In China, students are in school from early September until mid-July; their school day starts at 7:30am and ends at 5pm, with a two hour break for lunch. The school year in Japan starts in April and ends the following March. Their schedule is divided into

three terms with short breaks between each. Japanese students are in school for 243 days a year.

Officials are concerned that less time in school means that students in the United States learn less than those in other countries. In particular, students in the U.S. consistently have lower test scores in math and science than students in many Asian countries, where students are in school longer during the day as well as for more days each year.

Some officials and teachers believe that more time in school won't solve the problem. They believe that instead, the current schedule should be changed so that time is used more effectively. They feel that spending less time in electives such as art and music classes and more time in math and science would give students the extra instruction they need without adding days to the school year. Others believe that elective classes are necessary to give students a well-rounded education and to give them increased interest and belonging in school. Research indicates that involvement in activities such as band and choir increases school attendance and decreases the drop-out rate.

In some areas, schools are experimenting with ways to adjust the schedule. Some schools are using an extended year calendar which spreads the school days out throughout the year, with bigger breaks between each quarter and a shorter summer. Other schools are trying schedules that have a longer school year but have half days of school once or twice a week to allow students to have regular time for jobs, sports and other activities.

So, is summer break necessary? The answer probably depends on who you ask.