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This House, as a Connecticut public school district, would implement year-round schooling.

What would year-round school look like in Connecticut? One district is testing it

Connecticut Insider, By Natasha Sokoloff, Updated Aug 11, 2025 11:54 a.m.

Most Connecticut schools are preparing to welcome students back into the classroom after summer vacation, but for some students, school is still in session.

In fact, school is in session every month of the year for students partaking in the New London school district's year-round schooling model.

The district set out to challenge the long-existing, traditional 180-day school year model a few years ago, and has expanded its typical calendar to offer classroom instruction all year long, by replacing a long summer vacation with shorter, more frequent breaks. And New London Superintendent Cynthia Ritchie thinks other schools should follow their lead.

"I do believe we need to modernize," she said. "Instead of having empty buildings in the summer, we could continue learning with real school."

So, could other Connecticut schools follow suit?

It's possible that other districts could transition to a year-round model, but the main question is whether they should, said Kristin Simmers, a student researcher with the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education's Center for Education Policy Analysis, Research and Evaluation.

"Like so many things in education, there's not a clear yes or no. The answer is, it depends, and the context matters," she said. Simmers' recent research brief looks into this idea, and the costs and benefits of year-round education that redistributes the standard 180 school days throughout the year, incorporating more short breaks across the calendar. Proponents argue that year-round education can increase academic achievement by reducing summer learning loss and ease school overcrowding when groups of students are on different schedules, but such a major schedule change doesn't come without its complications, according to the brief.

Based on her research, Simmers said it seemed like there could be a surge in interest in this year-round model now, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and as districts are still dealing with its impacts. "I think, from an academic perspective, people might be looking for ways to really boost achievement. And so they're wondering if year-round schooling could be an option," she said.

In New London, the COVID-19 pandemic was indeed the catalyst for year-round schooling discussions and how to optimize student learning and success into the future, Ritchie said.

"We did a lot of brainstorming about hopes and dreams, about what works in the current education system, which is really 200 years old, and if we were able to redesign parts of it," she said.

The New London magnet district uses a custom designed model that offers both the traditional school calendar and year-round instruction, taking various goals and community needs into consideration. "So when parents register now, they are asked which choice they would like," Ritchie said.

There is the typical school year, and then there is the year-round, session-based schooling model divided into six-week sessions and two-week breaks. The year-round model also combines two grades into one, with transitional kindergarten/kindergarten classrooms, grade one/two classrooms, grade three/four classrooms and grade five/six classrooms.

"It's modernizing an old system," Ritchie said. "It's offering choice, and it's actually offering more instructional minutes beyond what's required in the classroom, in that students are being exposed to enrichment experiences that they may or may not have had the opportunity to."

In the two weeks between learning sessions, the program offers free child care and partners with community organizations to offer academic enrichment opportunities, including marine science, sailing lessons and swim lessons, she said. "So children can still come to the school during break sessions," Ritchie said. "It's more like a camp-like enrichment on our two week breaks."

And so far, their model showed extreme promise, with more students hitting math and reading goals, less chronic absenteeism and more engagement in schools, she said. "It's been really fabulous. Academically, students are outpacing their peers. They're doing great."

But district success with year-round education doesn't necessarily appear to be due to a schedule change alone, research shows. "Is it the calendar change that made the difference, or is it the additional enrichment, the co-teaching, the smaller class sizes?" Simmers said.

In New London, Ritchie said it was a combination of things, including the blend of academic time and mental health breaks, new enrichment opportunities, more parent engagement, individualized educational plans and small group instruction.

"We have seen better outcomes for students in this model. So it's not just looking at one test score... it's everything," she said. "Learning occurs all over the place, in different times and spaces, and it doesn't just happen from eight to three in a traditional school day."

Still, questions remain regarding whether year-round schooling could actually become the norm across Connecticut. "You know, we're the Land of Steady Habits... I doubt it would become widespread," said Patrice McCarthy, executive director of the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education. "There are multiple factors that are necessary to change it, particularly if you're going to change it on more than a voluntary basis, then that's when those obstacles really become, in many cases, insurmountable."

Based on some of the other districts across the country that have transitioned to this model, a number of challenges tend to pop up, from parent work schedules, child care, sports, summer jobs, extracurricular activities and staffing, the research brief notes.

"It just has a lot of effects on the broader community," Simmers said. "You want to think about families and students and all of the different ripple effects that changing the schedule can have on their lives and their routines." Even seemingly minor logistical factors could create major complications.

"Air conditioning, believe it or not, is a huge obstacle -- we have buildings that can't be retrofitted to make them air conditioned," McCarthy said. "It's hard enough in June and September... July and August can really be tough." There were also new costs associated with the year-round model, intersessions, contract adjustments and operations, according to the research brief.

"There would be a significant increase in costs for salaries, for all staff, for transportation, etc.," McCarthy said. The fiscal aspect, combined with the fact that many Connecticut districts have been struggling to fill teacher and paraprofessional positions, would prove challenging for many districts already dealing with budget constraints, she said.

"I think if you can account for all those variables, if you are confident that you have the funding needed to support the change, and you're confident that the majority of the community would support this, I think it's definitely possible," Simmers said.

In New London, the district has managed to avoid many of the common complications, Ritchie said.

For example, the district aligned the year-round model with regular summer schools for bussing to avoid extra transportation costs, and many staff already worked year-round. She said she had also heard from many families and staff that they actually preferred having breaks throughout the year, and the free childcare offering helped avoid issues with parents and work schedules.

"When you take a chance and try something new, you have to expect, you know, small adjustments," Ritchie said. "I wouldn't say there's many challenges at all. It's just an adjustment."

For McCarthy, the important thing about the New London model, and why she believed it worked so well, was that it is completely voluntary. "They did not force families or staff to go into that model," she said. "Staff has volunteered and parents have elected this option."

And with their success so far, Ritchie said she believed there were be growing interest in other communities, and she hoped to spread the word and expand programming to more grade levels in the district, too.

"Change is hard, but I also really worry about the future of education. I feel the time is now that we have to innovate and design a model," she said. "Because, I mean, just look at the headlines across not only Connecticut, but everywhere... the budgets are getting tighter, the work is piling up on teachers, families need more help. And I think the solution is put our heads together and find a way to work together."

The Pros and Cons of Year-Round School Calendars

US News, By Andrew Warner, March 15, 2023

A balanced calendar replaces summer with shorter, more frequent breaks.

For most children in the United States, the word "summer" evokes images of a carefree two- to three-month-long escape from the classroom.

But that summer break looks different for those on year-round school calendars, also known as balanced school calendars.

What Is Year-Round Schooling?

School districts using a year-round or balanced calendar redistribute the standard 180 days of classroom instruction more evenly over the course of a year.

Although students at a school with a balanced calendar might only get four or five weeks off in the summer, they'll also get two weeks or so off in the fall, winter and spring. Some schools on this calendar also use a multi-track system, meaning that students are assigned to different groups, each with its own vacation schedule.

Though the vast majority of schools using a year-round calendar feature 180 days of instruction, some districts have tried extended year-round calendars, which add on extra school days in an effort to increase student achievement. Experts note, however, that these are fairly rare in the United States.

There are many different ways to divide up the balanced calendar, but a common model is the 45/15 version, wherein students attend school for a 45-day period, followed by a 15-day vacation. This cycle repeats four times throughout the school year, taking into account holidays that take place throughout the year (students on a balanced calendar still receive three days off around Thanksgiving, for example).

How Year-Round Schooling Got Started

Though longer, year-round school calendars were fairly common in the early days of American schooling, the traditional nine-month calendar prevailed as the norm by the beginning of the 20th century.

The year-round calendar as we know it today was introduced in the 1970s, as school districts looked for a way to deal with rapidly increasing student populations. By scheduling students on different tracks with staggered vacations, administrators could expand the capacity of existing school buildings. However, the number of public schools using this calendar declined from 6% in 1999 to just 3% in 2018, according to an analysis published in EducationNext. Many districts that do year-round schooling are in the South and West.

But since the COVID-19 pandemic, a few states and districts are looking at balanced calendars as a way to combat the learning loss that occurred following the shift to remote and hybrid learning in 2020. For example in Washington, the state superintendent's office used some of its emergency pandemic funding to introduce the Balanced Calendar Initiative, which has provided grants to more than 40 school districts to study the balanced calendar's potential for their district.

And in South Carolina, about a quarter of the state's school districts have switched over to the balanced calendar in the past three years, according to local news reports, with even more planning to make the change.

"The COVID-19 pandemic really gave school districts a reason to look at how we organize when teaching and learning happens," says Latoya Dixon, assistant superintendent of academic innovation and professional learning at York School District 1 in South Carolina, which will be transitioning to a balanced calendar for the 2023-2024 school year.

Here are some of the pros and cons of year-round calendar systems.

Pros of Year-Round School

More Frequent, Evenly Spaced Breaks

One of the advantages of a balanced calendar is that students get more frequent breaks throughout the year, which proponents of the model say can help reduce burnout among teachers and students.

Daniel Jones, a public high school teacher and doctoral student in educational leadership at St. Louis University, says he suspects that longer breaks during the school year could have a positive effect on students' mental health, particularly in a post-pandemic world.

Dixon also notes that in her state, students on the traditional calendar have a slightly longer semester in the spring than they do in the fall.

"In terms of instruction, a student who takes Algebra I first semester receives 87 days of instruction, versus a student who takes Algebra I second semester gets 93 days," she says, noting that the balanced calendar levels out this difference by creating more even periods of instruction.

Intercession Instruction

Year-round education allows for additional enrichment opportunities during the short breaks or "intercessions" that occur throughout the school year, allowing students to either catch up or get ahead in their studies.

Jones and Dixon agree that the year-round calendar can create some challenges for working parents who need to coordinate childcare during the added breaks throughout the year. To make up for that, many schools on balanced calendar systems offer additional instruction during those breaks.

"Some people have a misconception that year-round schools just let the kids go," Jones says. "But they understand a lot of parents are working, so a lot of those schools will offer programming or enrichment opportunities during those intercessions."

Less Summer Learning Loss

Advocates of year-round calendar systems often cite reduced summer learning loss as a reason to shift away from the traditional calendar.

The logic here seems sound – since students have shorter summer breaks, there's less time to forget what they learned during the school year.

That said, a study by Paul von Hippel, associate dean for research at the University of Texas—Austin's School of Public Affairs, found that while the year-round approach did increase summer learning, learning decreased during other times of the year, ultimately evening out the amount of learning loss between both calendars.

Cons of Year-Round School

Little Evidence of Academic Benefits

Von Hippel notes that much of the research cited in favor of the year-round calendar falls flat upon further scrutiny, as studies showing significant academic benefits tend to look at a fairly small sample size, and are often not even peer-reviewed.

He says studies that analyze data from several school districts show little in the way of significant educational improvements when schools switched to a year-round calendar – and some even see slight declines in academic performance.

“This is really what policymakers should be looking at,” von Hippel says.

Childcare Difficulties

Year-round education can pose a challenge for working parents who need to arrange childcare during breaks that don't align with their work schedules. When her district was voting on whether or not to adopt the balanced calendar system, Dixon says this was the most frequent complaint that skeptics of the calendar brought up.

Though childcare may be hard enough to figure out during the summer, it can be even more challenging to schedule ways to keep your child safe and occupied during those additional breaks, when most full-day camps and recreation programs are not available. This challenge might even discourage some parents from staying in the workforce altogether – von Hippel cites a 2013 study that found mothers in districts on the year-round calendar were less likely to enter the workforce when their children started kindergarten.

Shorter Summers

It's no secret that the summer is a popular time for families to take time off. Shortening the season can make it harder for families to find the time for traditional summer vacations like hiking, camping or spending time at a nearby beach.

A briefer summer break also makes it harder for kids to attend a sleepaway camp or for teens to work a summer job or internship.

For families with multiple children, planning a vacation on the year-round calendar can be especially tricky. This is particularly difficult on a multi-track system, where one child might be on break while another child is in class, von Hippel says.

And given the fact that families often plan vacations well in advance, the transition from a traditional calendar to a balanced one can also be challenging. In addition to childcare troubles, Dixon says some parents in her district voted against the switch because they'd already scheduled their summer vacations and would have to go through the trouble of rescheduling to accommodate the new calendar.

Year-round school: Difference-maker or waste of time?

The Conversation, by Nicole Miller and Hannah Robinson August 30, 2023

Contrary to how it sounds, “year-round” school usually doesn’t mean students going to school throughout the year – or for more days than other students. Often it just means switching up the calendar so that there’s not such a long summer break. Below, two education experts – [Nicole Miller](#) and [Daniel H. Robinson](#) – answer five questions about the modified school calendars known as year-round school.

What kinds of year-round schools exist?

The first is the “[single-track](#)” modified calendar, also known as a “balanced calendar.” The second is the “[multi-track calendar](#).” Neither one is typically an extended year. Instead, both calendars involve moving the 180 school days around so that there are multiple short breaks as opposed to the typical long summer break.

Single-track calendars have all students following the same schedule. This balanced calendar often includes intersessions that provide additional opportunities for learning rather than “summer school.” With a multiple-track calendar, usually created to alleviate school overcrowding, some students are on campus while others are on break. Balanced calendars often take the form of 45 school days followed by 15 days of break, or 60 school days followed by 20 days of break. Other kinds of modified calendars with shorter intersessions exist in states like [Mississippi](#) and [South Carolina](#).

How prevalent is year-round school?

Federal data shows year-round school has been [fading in popularity over the past decade or so](#). In the 2007-2008 school year, 4.4% of schools were on a year-round cycle. By the 2017-2018 school year, that figure had dropped to 2.5%.

However, since the pandemic, there have been signs of renewed interest in single-track year-round calendars, at least in the Southeast.

For instance, in 2020, Louisiana modified its school statute to [allow for more flexible calendars](#). In Mississippi, a [significant number of schools shifted](#) to a modified year-round calendar, with 29 of 137 districts using such a calendar in the 2023-2024 school year. In [South Carolina](#), as of 2022, [a quarter of school districts had shifted](#) to a modified year-round calendar. These modified calendars typically consist of nine weeks of school with a 5-to-8-day intersession, followed by another nine weeks of school each semester.

Is there any evidence that it works?

That depends on what you mean by “works.” If it means saving money by avoiding having to add buildings, then it is possible for a school that normally serves 750 students to serve 1,000 when going to a year-round, multiple-track schedule. This is because the schedule has different students taking breaks at different times.

But if “works” means an improvement in student achievement, then there is insufficient data to answer that question, especially for single-track calendars. One review found modestly higher student achievement for year-round compared with traditional calendar schooling, but it was also plagued with what we believe were poor studies on which to base conclusions.

What are the potential drawbacks?

There are several challenges involved with switching to a year-round calendar. One is changing child care systems to work with the new calendar. Another is securing funding to provide meaningful learning experiences over the various breaks. Also, problems can arise if a family has children on different calendars.

There are also concerns about how high school students have less time for summer jobs and for students to participate in traditional summer activities such as summer camps.

Then there’s the issue of standardized tests. If schools take longer breaks, it could mean fewer days in school prior to test day.

Depending on the type of year-round calendar, changes can affect sports, particularly practice schedules and game schedules. It can also be a problem if members of the same team are on different tracks.

Also, some schools may not have adequate air conditioning to be open in the hot summer months.

Multi-track calendars might also negatively affect efforts to keep teachers from leaving the job.

What are the potential gains?

Based on prior research investigating learning schedules, a schedule that distributes instruction and practice more evenly over the calendar year should result in better learning.

By having shorter breaks, there could be less learning loss from the extended break over the summers.

Finally, some school districts are hoping for a reduction in teacher turnover by having more frequent breaks. There is some, but not extensive, evidence that modified year-round school does a better job of giving teachers a chance to recharge and come back to the classroom after each break feeling refreshed.

One study found that teachers perceived that they had greater motivation to teach and that student achievement was also positively impacted when teaching in schools with modified year-round schedules.

Cleveland Ends Year-Round Schooling Citing No Meaningful Gains After 15 Years

The 74, By Patrick O’Donnell May 7, 2025

Note: The74 is a non-profit news source focused on K-12 education

Other states and school districts are still using the strategy, which aims to stop the ‘summer slide.’

The Cleveland school district is ending its 15-year attempt to use year-round classes to improve student learning in some schools, deciding last week to drop what the district and some experts once viewed as the best way for students to avoid the so-called “summer slide.”

Year-round schooling, which gained popularity in the 1970s, avoids long summer vacations in which students can forget much of what they learned during the school year. Under the plan, students attend classes as part of a normal grading period most of the summer. Their school years aren’t much longer than with a traditional schedule, just spread out differently, with their lost summer vacation days added to other breaks during the school year.

Cleveland’s move comes as some states like South Carolina and Florida have recently embraced or are trying out the approach, along with districts hoping to address pandemic learning loss. The number of schools using year-round schedules nationally fell from about 6% in the 1970s to under 3% before the pandemic, researchers report.

In Cleveland, previous district leaders once considered year-round school a promising way to turn around the struggling district. But it caught on in just six of Cleveland’s high schools, and new school leaders now want all district schools on the same calendar and curriculum so students aren’t lost if they change schools.

Leaders also aren’t convinced year-round school is helping. A district study this year with researchers from Cleveland State University and the American Institutes for Research showed the city’s year-round schools often have higher math and English scores than other high schools, but mostly because the schools have more gifted students and students who would do well with any schedule. Research nationally is also mixed.

District CEO Warren Morgan decided gains were not enough to justify the additional \$2.6 million in teacher salaries year-round classes cost.

“There was no evidence that there was substantial, meaningful difference in the academic outcomes in our different calendar types,” Morgan said before the school board vote last week. “We also recognize and value the excellence of our many different schools ...but there’s also other variables...that make them great.”

David Hornak, executive director of the National Association for Year Round Education, said the pandemic renewed interest in year-round school as a possible way to tackle COVID learning loss, as well as increasing interest in related strategies, like adding summer learning programs or extra school days to the start or end of the school year. Hornak estimates about 4% of schools now have a year-round schedule, but the association has scaled back over the years and has no staff to track it.

He said students are less likely to forget lessons over a shorter summer vacation. Longer breaks during the year, often about three weeks long, give schools a chance to give struggling students targeted help catching up, rather than waiting until July for a summer school that feels like a punishment.

“I would love school leaders to consider summer as just another academic block of time,” he said.

Paul Von Hippel, a professor of public affairs at the University of Texas and prominent skeptic of year-round school, said he sees no difference in learning from just scheduling the same number of school days in different ways. “Instead of having one long break where students forget a lot, you have a bunch of short breaks where students forget a little,” Von Hippel said. “The amount of forgetting adds up to be about the same.”

He added that though the pandemic prompted districts to consider year-round classes, he sees no evidence that they have caught on in a meaningful way.

Teachers, parents and students of Cleveland’s six year-round schools, however, fought the district CEO and implored the district school board at two hearings to keep a schedule they say made their schools unique and offered students chances they wouldn’t have with a standard school year.

Students from one year-round school even protested the change outside district headquarters last month.

Xavier Avery, a junior at Davis Aerospace and Maritime High School who organized the protest, reminded the school board right before its vote April 29 that his school has received state awards and has better test scores than the district average. He also said that students spend part of school days in warmer months on boats and planes, both learning to operate them and studying Lake Erie as part of the school’s specialized focus.

“Our year-round calendar plays a huge role in this success,” he said. “It’s what makes our programs, internships and hands-on learning possible.”

Cleveland also cut other non-traditional schedules as part of its push to put all schools on the same schedule.

Morgan and the school board also axed extended school years, which added extra days at 17 other schools, as well as extended days, running 30 minutes longer each day at six schools. Those cuts drew more fire from parents, who said that being able to choose schools that offer extra time keeps them in the district, rather than selling their homes and moving to suburban districts.

Year-round schools started gaining national attention in the 1970s, experts say, for two major reasons. In some cases, most notably fast-growing California where schools were too small to handle exploding enrollment, schools spread classes out over the whole year so they could stagger student schedules to accommodate all of them.

The other major draw, the one that appealed to Cleveland, was limiting “summer learning loss” or “summer slide,” where students forget much of what they learned during long vacations.

A 2019 summary of year-round schooling studies found mixed results, with Black, Hispanic and low-income students more likely to see gains and the staggered schedules in California more likely to show losses.

California stopped using that strategy after building new schools for all its students.

The total also fell as cities like Salt Lake City and Chicago dropped the approach several years ago after not seeing big academic gains. Post-pandemic data was not readily available.

Educators still see promise in the approach. A quarter of South Carolina schools and three school districts in Florida are now testing year-round classes for several years.

Other school districts in Dallas and Philadelphia are trying a related, though different, approach: simply adding voluntary days to the year to reduce summer slide and to help students who are behind catch up, whether from the pandemic or just needing more class time. Richmond, Virginia, has also added extra mandatory days to the school year at a few struggling schools, though parent complaints squashed attempts to do that for the whole district.

Cleveland’s experiment with year-round school started in 2009 at a specialized STEM school created as a magnet for the city’s top students. Former Cleveland school district CEO Eric Gordon soon after considered moving the entire district to year-round schedules.

In launching a district turnaround plan in 2012, he jokingly dismissed the traditional school year as an “agrarian calendar we currently use so that all of my students are free to bring in the harvest every summer.”

Gordon said the district could close half the gap between his students and higher-performing suburban students by eliminating the accumulation of 12 years of summer slides before graduation.

But attempts to use a year-round calendar at one large neighborhood high school failed after parents objected to students losing summer breaks and its effect on family vacations, summer jobs and school schedules of siblings on regular schedules.

A lack of air conditioning in some old schools and parent objections to a much-smaller change — starting the school year earlier in August than before — put plans to use the schedule at more schools on hold.

The year-round schedule ended up at no neighborhood schools and just six schools the district created with alternative class styles — a school based in a hospital or one focused on learning through digital art projects — that families could pick, but not be assigned to.

School's Out. Should You Worry about the 'Summer Slide'?

Scientific American, By Stephanie Pappas, July 10, 2023

Kids don't typically advance academically during the summer, but the research isn't clear on whether they forget what they've already learned

If you have school-age kids, you may have heard of the "summer slide," a phenomenon in which students lose some of the learning they achieved in the previous school year over the summer break.

The good news is that the summer slide is often overstated. In fact, evidence is decidedly mixed on whether it really exists, and education researchers say that summer is an opportunity. Whether or not kids lose learning during the summer, they very rarely gain it—but the hot days out of school can be a golden window for kids who are struggling to catch up, especially in the context of pandemic learning loss.

"COVID definitely exacerbated differences we see in achievement by income and race, so making good use of the summer is all the more important now," says Catherine Augustine, a senior policy researcher in education at the RAND Corporation. But, Augustine says, it's also important to give young people—no matter their academic standing—balance. "It's an equity issue," she says. "You don't want low-income kids or kids of color to not experience the same fun that other kids are experiencing in the summer."

Private summer programs often use the fear of the summer slide to sell their services, says Paul von Hippel, a professor of public affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. In reality, it's not clear whether the summer slide exists at all, at least on a widespread basis. Some early studies suggested that kids lose weeks or months of learning progress in the summer, with low-income students or those from racial minority backgrounds suffering the most. But those findings don't replicate across studies. In fact, von Hippel and his colleagues have found that even modern investigations return vastly different results when it comes to whether kids lose academic gains in the summer.

In a recent paper published in the journal *Sociological Science*, the researchers find that different standardized tests can give wildly different answers on this question. Scores from the widely used NWEA assessment show that kids forget much of what they've learned, up to three months' worth, during the summer. But studies based on another common standardized test, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Studies–Kindergarten series, show basically no loss. A third test, the Renaissance Learning assessment, shows mild losses in reading and big losses in mathematics. Meanwhile results about who loses the most learning, whether by race or socioeconomic status or grade level, are all over the place.

Despite popular concerns that Black students might lose more learning over the summer than white students, David Quinn, an education researcher at the University of Minnesota, and his colleagues are currently analyzing data that suggest the opposite—that Black kids lag behind white ones during the school year, perhaps because of discrimination they experience within school, whereas they lose less learning during the summer, perhaps because they tend to engage in more formal summer programs.*

It might seem simple to test kids' knowledge over time, but there are a lot of methodological issues, von Hippel says. Standardized tests are run by private entities, so researchers don't often have insight into the specific questions asked or skills tested. Kids don't typically take tests on the last and first days of school, and students in different districts tend to get tested at different times. There are even variations in how researchers measure variables such as socioeconomic status across studies, which makes comparison difficult. "It's kind of mystifying," von Hippel says. "There are a couple of things that are consistent in the literature. Unfortunately, they're kind of obvious. One is that kids don't learn reading and math skills during summer vacation as they do during the school year. So, they either go sideways or lose skills."

For kids who are behind, research suggests that summer programs do help. A recent analysis of studies of summer math programs in the journal *Review of Educational Research* showed that formal programs improved math skills in kids who attended versus those who didn't. "For keeping up math skills, participating in a formal summer program that incorporates some math, whether via hands-on, STEM-related activities or more traditional formats such as tutoring, is certainly one promising approach," says study researcher Kathleen Lynch, an educational psychologist at the University of Connecticut. "At the same time, there are many less formal ways that parents and caregivers can support kids' math skills and foster a love of math during the summer. Talking about math in everyday activities, such as sports, shopping and cooking, and playing board games, card games and puzzles that involve math can all be interesting and enjoyable to kids while also reinforcing math concepts."

For summer learning, there is far less research on at-home programs than there is on formal ones, Quinn says. But much of what has been done suggests that at-home learning does help kids maintain and gain skills, just at a slower rate than formal programs. Quinn and Harvard University literacy researcher James Kim have found that summer reading programs, even home programs, boost reading skills in all kids, and the benefits are greatest for those from low-income families.

To avoid punishing kids for struggling academically, Augustine supports programs that mix academics with opportunities for play, exercise and enrichment activities. The availability of high-quality programs differs based on school district and state funding, she says. And COVID recovery funding has helped support programs around the country but is set to expire in 2024. “Our research has found that kids benefit when they attend these kinds of programs for consecutive summers,” Augustine says. “One summer will definitely help, but two summers are better, so finding a way to continue that funding would be ideal.”

Parents can also consider pushing the private camps that many rely on for summer childcare to set up scholarship funds to allow more low-income students to attend, Augustine says. Private efforts won’t solve every problem, she says, but they can help close the access gap. “There is certainly a lot of unmet need,” she says.

*Editor’s Note (7/13/23): This paragraph was edited after posting to correct the description of research comparing learning loss among Black and white students during the school year and the summer.

Long summer holidays are bad for children, especially the poor

By The Economist 08/09/2018

Many parents also find them a struggle

THE summer holidays have just begun, but it is a busy morning at Cadoxton Primary School, in Barry, an industrial town in Wales. It runs a summer programme for hard-up children, providing meals and activities over the holidays. As youngsters run laughing and screaming into the school cafeteria for breakfast, their parents saunter out, some visibly relieved. Just three days into the six-week school holidays one beleaguered mother says her nine-year-old daughter has already asked five times to go bowling. Without the school’s help, she says, “it would be a long and expensive six weeks”.

In the popular imagination, school summer holidays conjure up a picture of carefree youthful exploration. But many parents rely on the term-time services that schools give their offspring, such as supervision and meals. Come the holidays, they can suddenly find their schedules and budgets stretched. Researchers also say that the long break often sets back children’s learning, and that children from poorer backgrounds are disproportionately affected.

The vast majority of the world’s school calendars include summer holidays. Their length ranges from three weeks in South Korea to three months in America, Italy and Latvia. The holidays’ 19th-century origins are hazy. It is popularly believed that they are a hangover from the West’s agrarian past, when families needed their children’s help in the fields during the summer; but many historians think the evidence for this is thin.

Experts talk of “summer learning loss”, in which children return to school having forgotten some of what was taught the year before. “It is pretty clear that kids forget things over the summer,” says Harris Cooper of Duke University in North Carolina. A study, using test-score data from students aged seven to 15 in an unnamed state in America’s South in 2008-12, found that on average children lost more than a quarter of their school-year learning over the summer. Evidence from other countries is scarce. But studies have found that children regress over the summer even in Belgium, Britain, Canada, Germany and Malawi, all of which have much shorter summer breaks than America’s.

Losing it

The impact appears to vary by socioeconomic class. Many poor children fall behind their wealthier peers over the holidays. “Summer is the most unequal time of the year,” says Matthew Boulay of the National Summer Learning Association, an American NGO. Well-off parents can fill the gap left by school, keeping their children stimulated with summer camps, trips abroad or private tuition (see article). Poorer families, obviously, find this harder. Demand for subsidised “enrichment” activities often outstrips supply. Mr Boulay recalls meeting a mother in Oregon who queued for four hours to enroll for free swimming lessons for her son.

Holidays can be a financial strain, too. In countries where some children receive free school meals, summer means bigger grocery bills for hard-up families. Households where both parents work have to pay for extra child care, too. The Family and Childcare Trust, a charity, says that in Britain, where out-of-pocket child-care costs are the highest in the OECD, a club of mostly rich countries, parents will spend an average of £133 (\$172) per child, per week on child care this summer.

Natasha Cockram, who runs the summer programme at Cadoxton Primary School, worries that many children in Barry will spend most of the summer indoors, glued to their screens, because parents are both unable to afford child care or activities and also loth to let them roam unsupervised. “I get very bored at home,” complains one six-year-old taking part in the summer programme. “There’s nothing to do except sit on the sofa and watch TV.” Older children, too, may have less to keep them busy. Data from the Pew Research Centre suggest that the number of 16- to 19-year-olds in America with paid summer jobs has fallen from over a half in 2000 to roughly a third last year—though this is partly because more are taking on unpaid internships.

A study in 2007 in Baltimore, Maryland, claimed that summer learning loss could account for up to two-thirds of the “achievement gap” between rich and poor children by the age of 14-15. More recent American research, however, argues that early-childhood development might play a bigger role.

Benjamin Piper, of RTI International, an American research institute, suspects that the scale of summer learning loss may be worse in the developing world, where it has largely gone unnoticed and unstudied. In rural areas in particular, reading material can be hard to come by and some children still spend their holidays helping their

families in the fields. A study Mr Piper co-authored in 2017, on Malawian children taking part in an American-funded literacy programme, may be the only one on summer learning loss in sub-Saharan Africa. It found that the loss was almost as big as the gains the literacy programme generated during the school year. Mr Piper says that international donors, who spent \$1.4bn on basic education aid in Africa in 2015, risk “losing what they invested”. Experts suggest three types of solutions to the problems posed by the long summer holidays: extending school years; spreading holidays to other times of the year; and more state-provided summer-holiday activities. South Korea is an extreme test-case for the first approach. It has the world’s longest school year and shortest summer break. For many students, even the short holidays offer little respite, since most are enrolled in private tuition, often in a hagwon (crammer). Three in ten parents surveyed last month said they planned to increase the number of hagwon classes their children will have to attend this summer.

Sure enough, South Korean students score brilliantly on comparative measures such as the OECD’s PISA test of maths, science and reading skills. But there is a cost. They also have a miserable time cramming for high-stakes exams, and higher incidence of mental-health problems than children in other rich countries.

Another objection to lengthening the school year is that it would strain public-education budgets. Teachers, who cherish their long breaks, would doubtless object unless they were paid more.

A second approach is to shorten the summer break but spread the holidays more evenly through the year. Janet Hayward, the head teacher at Cadoxton, wants the six-week British summer holiday reduced to four weeks, with half-term breaks lengthened. Professor Cooper says America’s three-month break may be outdated, and that a shorter one would be “more compatible with modern American life.”

But Mr Boulay doubts that campaigns to change the school calendar will have much effect. He says there is little public support anywhere for abolishing the summer break entirely. The holiday is deeply ingrained in tradition across the world, and (albeit limited) evidence on year-round schooling remains inconclusive about its effects on academic performance. Instead, Mr Boulay suggests that taxpayers or philanthropists should subsidise summer activities. He thinks children should be encouraged to develop skills not emphasised in the school curriculum. He also wants to see summer courses used as a laboratory for innovative education techniques. “We need more learning but not necessarily more schooling.”

Summer learning need not be expensive. David Quinn of the University of Southern California says that even simple interventions like posting reading materials to homes, or sending parents text messages reminding them to make sure their children are reading, can reduce summer learning loss. Lenore Skenazy, founder of the Free-Range Kids movement (which campaigns for children to have more time unsupervised), says that letting children play on their own in parks teaches them important skills. She laments that parents wildly overestimate the risks their children face outdoors (such as being kidnapped by strangers, which is vanishingly unlikely) and so prevent them from exploring. Some governments are keen to help families that struggle with the summer. Britain’s Department for Education recently announced £2m of funding for programmes providing children with summer activities and meals. Hungary, too, expanded its food aid to children over the holidays, and American campaigners thwarted a government attempt to cut all federal funding for summer activities from this year’s budget. But elsewhere, even data on the effects of the summer holiday are scanty. Chloë Hughes, a youth-worker in Barry, contrasts fond memories of her own childhood summers with the predicament many families face at holiday-time today. “I think a lot of people dread it,” she says.
