WHY OUR SCHOOLCHILDREN GET TO TAKE THREE MONTHS OFF

Juliet Lapidos

Most American school kids are about three weeks in to their three-month summer vacation. Yet working adults spend the better part of June, July, and August toiling away as usual. Why do kids enjoy such generous summer breaks?

Fiscal limitations, century-old developmental theories, and outdated medical concerns. The now-standard 180-day academic calendar with a long summer holiday didn't come about until the early 20th century. Previously, urban schools operated year-round with short breaks between quarters. In 1842, Detroit's academic year lasted approximately 260 days, New York's 245, and Chicago's 240. But since education wasn't mandatory in most states until the 1870s, attendance was low. Despite the official schedule, many kids ended up spending the same amount oftime in school back then as they do now. Brooklyn school officials, for example, reported in 1850 that more than half their students showed up just six months a year.

Poor attendance got some people wondering if such a long academic calendar was worthwhile. Why keep schools open year-round if most kids don't even go? Reformers also warned that goody-goodies who did show up every day might burn out. Many physicians at the time felt that students were too frail, both in mind and body, for so many days at their desk. Too much education, they argued, could impair a child's health.

City school officials began listening to reformers around the turn of the century. Gradually, they shortened the school year by about 60 days and eliminated the summer quarter. Reformers could have instituted a long break in winter, or spring, but they picked summer for three main reasons: (a) ooorly ventilated school buildings were nearly unbearable during heat waves; (b) Community leaders fretted that hot, crowded environments facilitated the spread of disease; and (c) wealthy urbanites traditionally vacationed during the hottest months, and middle-class school administrators were following in their footsteps.

Meanwhile, the school districts outside cities had quite different academic calendars. In the 19th century, rural kids spent just five or six months in school—two to three months in summer and the same in winter—and the rest of the year laboring on farms. So while urban educators worried that children were overtaxed by their busy schedule, officials in rural areas thought their students were mentally undertaxed. By the early 20th century, public-school officials in many farm states had lengthened the academic year and introduced a summer break to bring agrarian districts into line with urban ones.

Physicians no longer believe that children are too feeble for year-round instruction, and most school buildings now have effective ventilation systems. So why don't we go back to having school in the summertime? For one thing, it's expensive to keep schools open, just like it was in the late 1800s. But some nonprofit organizations argue that the long breaks hinder the learning process. According to the Johns Hopkins Center for Summer Learning, kids score worse on standardized tests in early September than in late June. Plus, students in other industrialized countries have more instructional time. The Israeli academic year lasts 216 days, and kids in Japan plug away for a whopping 243 days per annum.