

Summer Vacation: How Can We Use It

It's Not About Farming

There is a common misconception that summer vacation is a relic of the agrarian past when kids would be let out of school in the summer to help with the farming duties. While there is some truth to the notion that kids in rural communities took time off from school to help, this happened in the spring and fall when planting and harvesting occurred. Winter and summer were when many schools in agrarian societies met since that is when the kids had more free time.

So where did the summer break come from? Escaping the heat. Before the school calendars were nationally synchronized, many schools were open year-round and students showed up whenever they could or chose to. The extreme heat of the East Coast summers caused many urban residents to escape to cooler environments and attendance at school was lowest in the summer. So that became the time for the big vacation.

Summer Slide Is Real

As any teacher will tell you, the “summer slide”, the loss of academic knowledge and functioning that occurs over summer break, is real, especially in low-income communities. Some research has found that the loss can be as much as a month. The questions then are: is the slide a problem and if so, how do we fight it.

Should We Worry?

So our first response as educators and parents is...YES! But let's examine this more carefully. Sports have off-seasons. We all sleep. Performers don't go year-round. Rest is an important part of healthy growth since it is where we can recover and solidify our gains. And while the summer slide leads to a loss of learning, the information is permanently lost, it just shifts away from the most readily available part of the brain. It often takes only a week to regain what we have “lost” over the summer.

The flip side is that losing our scholastic gains can be a problem. Students work very hard to learn, score and achieve. To watch all of that wither away as our students play video games and sleep until 3:30 pm is difficult and scary. Plus, we have to wonder if our students would do even better if they gained instead of lost during the summer.

How to Fight the Slide

There are a myriad of ways to fight the summer slide, and there is no best way to do it. There is a consensus though: keep their minds working. This can involve science-based camps, strategy

games, summer school, year-round school, an hour of flashcards a day, etc... The point is not necessarily finding the optimal way to fight the slide but finding any way to fight the slide and make sure it happens. It's probably much more important that the fight happens than how you choose to fight it.

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