

Time to lead

Does year-round schooling make the grade?

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From Monday's Globe and Mail

Published Sunday, Jun. 12, 2011 10:26PM EDT

Last updated Sunday, Jun. 12, 2011 10:32PM EDT



Those first few days of summer vacation are bliss. The heat. The empty schedule. The no homework.

But as many kids embark on the biggest break in the school year in the coming weeks, the yawning nine-week gap raises timely questions: Could kids do with less? Do they really need all that time off?

Enter year-round schooling, an educational notion slowly gaining traction all over North America. In Canada, about 100 schools have modified calendars, shrinking the summer holiday to five weeks.

But it's a tough sell. A long, lazy summer is practically an institution in a country that spends so long in a deep freeze. There are precedents. Many European and Asian countries have much shorter breaks. And most Canadian kids used to get only two weeks off before a number of forces – a lot of them urban, not rural, as many of us might think – gradually expanded the summer stretch to the current length.

Here are five reasons why we might consider shortening the Great Canadian Summer.

Students do better

The learning loss that happens over the summer months has been well-documented since the 1970s. The idea that children retain more of what they learned is perhaps the most popular theory behind year-round schooling – especially for disadvantaged kids.

One well-respected Baltimore study tracked a group of 800 students starting in kindergarten and found that during the summer holidays, learning for all students slides, but disadvantaged students regress more than the average. The researchers found that after five years, the gap continues to widen.

So with less summer vacation, the slide should narrow, goes the thinking. In practice, the effects of a modified school year have proved difficult to measure compared with more traditional schools.

“The differences are usually fairly minor,” says Robert Brown, who has studied year-round schooling as a research co-ordinator with the Toronto District School Board. “Sometimes, the schools with more disadvantaged students do better. But slightly.”

Paul von Hippel, a research statistician in sociology at Ohio State University found few benefits in a 2007 study of reading and math test scores of children in kindergarten and first grade in 748 public schools and 244 private schools in the U.S.

Still, even those, like Prof. von Hippel, who can't find an overwhelming academic bonus don't consider themselves naysayers. He suggests that to truly see a difference, schools would have to increase the number of instructional days; currently most year-round schools simply redistribute the roughly 190 days of school all children attend.

At the same time, there is good news coming out of some small studies on specific schools. A four-year study was undertaken by the Peel Board of Education on students at Roberta Bondar Public School in Brampton, Ont. The study found that Grade 7 math scores in particular were positively affected when compared with a similar student demographic in a traditional school.

Parents are convinced, though.

“It’s a phenomenal concept of not letting kids forget everything they’ve learned throughout the year,” says Calgary mother Carla Mosca whose two daughters, 10 and 13, are in year-round schooling in the Calgary Catholic School Board.

Nine weeks of summer vacation is too long

Even for those who can afford summer camp, travel and time off, nine weeks is a long time to keep younger kids happy. For teens, the summer job market has been contracting across North America, too, while year-round part-time work has been on the rise.

“Most kids today pick up part-time jobs through the year and they’re working roughly 12 hours, 20 hours at the most [per week,]” says Joan Hamilton, the principal of the Roberta Bondar school. “They do that all year round. They may pick up some hours, but summer employment is not what it used to be.”