

Time to lead

## The case for staying out of school all summer

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Hands off my summer vacation. While there are many other sticking points in the debate about the benefits of year-round schooling, nothing raises more emotional ire than a perceived threat to the sanctity of summer.

The calendar in most year-round schools starts in the beginning of August, effectively chopping the summer vacation in half. It then redistributes those vacation days throughout the rest of the year. In a country that longs for those first rays of summer sunshine and an end to all that snow, it's not a frivolous concern. Let's take a look at the top reasons to leave kids' summers at full strength.

### Summer feels short enough as it is

"When you live in Vancouver, you live for the summer and I plan to enjoy every possible minute of sun we get!" said mother of two, Ann Gallery. Her sons' school just rejected a motion to become a year-round school.

It's a common sentiment.

"So much of who we are lies in summer memories from childhood," said Becs Hoskins, the Victoria-based executive director of the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada, a non-profit group that aims to stem the decline in kids' contact with nature. "Most adults could look back and say, 'When did I connect with nature?' In Canada, that happens in the summer months."

Like many in the field, her group's focus is on the kind of "immersive" experiences summer offers: spending entire days outside on the grass, exploring and being at one with the natural world.

Summer vacation is "an antidote to the structured lives so many kids are leading now in the school year."

There's a health argument embedded here, too. Advocates say more active outdoor time can address increasing rates of childhood obesity. There are the mental and development health implications of what researchers have dubbed the "nature deficit disorder."

Spending time outdoors in green space has been found to improve the performance of children with ADHD, for instance.

So, many parents are willing to balance those benefits with the theories about how a shorter summer could be better for learning.

“I know the knowledge base slips during the summer, but school shouldn’t be everything in a child’s life,” said Ms. Gallery. “Summer is when my boys get to slow down, do the things they enjoy, see the people they love and figure out how to amuse themselves when they do get bored. It also gives them some perspective on the last school year so they can hopefully enter a new grade with fresh ideas.”

### **A short summer eats into summer camp, and family vacation time**

Summer camp is a Canadian tradition. In Ontario alone, more than 250,000 children attend day or summer camp. And while those in the summer-camp industry acknowledge that their businesses could take a hit if the year-round school calendar were adopted widely, they make the case that it’s also an experience worth preserving.

Heather Heagle, the Toronto-based executive director of Ontario Camps Association, said adventures away from home can create experiences ranging from cozy campfire circles to working as a team to clean up your cabin.

“The learning process with camp is equal to school. Even though it’s a short period of time, it’s a period of time where children are away normally from TV, video screens, from all modes of distraction,” she said. “Camp is not just about having fun – although that’s the bottom line for us – it’s about learning about yourself.”

While there are few studies that prove the benefits of a summer vacation, researcher Ken McCleary at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University did examine the positive and negative impacts of year-round schooling on family vacations.

Among his findings, released this month: Families found it easier to decide on when to go on vacation before year-round schooling was implemented. Many families moved their major travel to the fall break rather than the summer. And since many extracurricular sports continue through the shorter breaks during the year, this caused problems in vacation planning.

For Vancouver mother Ms. Gallery, it sounds like a headache.

“As a working mom, I have my summers down to a science. If I needed to cover off longer breaks throughout the fall and spring, that would be much harder for my family to manage.”

### **Most schools aren’t air-conditioned**

It’s not a lofty philosophical point, but a crucial practical one: most schools do not have air-conditioning. And while some teachers take care to think up outdoor activities, Augusts in Canada are downright steamy.

In fact, historically, the summer heat – and not rural agricultural practices, as many of us think – was a key factor behind the extended summer vacations students now enjoy.

A student’s ability to learn in a hot classroom remains one of the key obstacles for any year-round school to overcome, educational researcher Robert Brown of the Toronto District School Board wrote in a 2008 report.