Where education is concerned, these long, languid days of summer – with apologies to Charles Dickens – can be the “best of times” and “the worst of times.” Many schoolchildren anticipate the next summer vacation almost as soon as a new school year has begun. Summer means pools, amusement parks and family holidays, as opposed to school time, which they associate with books, exams and homework.

However, for educators, summer vacation can have a vastly different meaning. They often view a traditional 10-week-long summer break as a time when the knowledge and competencies students have absorbed during the previous school year are often lost – resulting in days and weeks teaching remedial skills at the start the new school year. Academic research has pointed to a connection between summer vacations and so-called “learning loss,” particularly among low-income and at-risk students.

The roots of summer vacation is actually a topic of debate. Like many educators, I was taught summer breaks are a vestige of America's agrarian era when teenagers were needed to help families with a variety of farm chores. However, a published report quotes Bob Thaler, a professor at Saginaw Valley State College in Michigan, who says the origins of a lengthy summer break are actually urban, not rural. He contends summer is a less labor-intensive time for children living on farms than spring and autumn. On the other hand, he points to large cities being hot, dusty, smelly and uncomfortable places in summer. In by-gone days, taking a hiatus from the school calendar allowed families to get away from cities during the hottest and potentially unhealthiest time of the year.

Naturally, parents can take steps to ensure their children’s minds remain active during summer vacation, even when they aren’t in school. Summer reading, trips to the library or museums can be beneficial remedies to learning loss. However, policymakers can also consider actions to minimize learning loss from summer vacation.

One idea that has garnered the most traction is called a “balanced calendar,” or, by some, “year-round-school.” According to a published report in 2010, more than 2.5 million students now attend schools with balanced calendars. The idea isn’t new. Newark, N.J. adopted an alternate calendar as far back as 1912.

There is no single template for the balanced calendar. Typically, it involves eight- to 10-week quarters with breaks of two- to five-weeks in-between. According to the advocacy group, the National Association for Year Round Education, the balanced calendar “does not eliminate the summer vacation, but reduces it and redistributes it as vacation or intersession time during the school year. Students attending a year-round school go to the same classes and receive the same instruction as students on a traditional calendar. The year-round calendar is organized into instructional periods and vacation weeks that are more evenly balanced across 12 months than the traditional school calendar. The balanced calendar minimizes the learning loss that occurs during a typical three-month summer vacation.”
Despite evidence that a shortened summer break would be academically beneficial, many school districts considering alternative schedules that would shorten summer vacation have encountered push-back from students and parents, who object to the new school calendars. They worry a shorter summer break would interfere with traditional family vacations and other activities. Older students who hold down jobs during summer breaks would also be impacted negatively by a balanced calendar and for the same reason, some business owners who depend on student labor oppose year-round-calendars.

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