

## MAKING THE MOST OF SUMMER VACATION

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

The summer vacation as we now know it is a 19th century invention. As primary-level schooling became more common, and then compulsory, across the United States, communities experimented with a range of timetables for the academic year. Although it is often said that today's summer vacation was instituted to accommodate students in farming communities, there was actually variation across the country. Some schools closed instead for harvests in the early fall, and others, especially in urban centers, kept students in class for 11 months of the year.

By 1900, most districts had adopted the now standard school calendar, and concerns about summer learning loss have been confronting educators ever since. In some districts, pressures of population growth prompted creative scheduling to rotate students through school buildings over an entire twelve-month school year. The National Association for Year-Round Education reported in 2010 that approximately 3,000 schools across 46 states utilize some form of year-round education, often in the form of a modified calendar with a shorter summer vacation and more frequent breaks during the rest of the school year.

More commonly, interventions aimed at mitigating students' "summer

slide" utilize the traditional summer vacation months to enrich learning and reinforce skills learned during the academic year. Research on "fade-out" at the University of California-Irvine identified three factors that make some programs more effective than others in the longer term:

1. Programs must focus on student characteristics that are malleable, or capable of being changed by an educator or school program.
2. Programs must focus on skills that are fundamental to long-term goals—not just test preparation, for example.
3. Programs must focus on skills and habits that students would not necessarily develop on their own as they grow older.

For students on the verge of starting college, the summer stakes are even higher. The term "summer melt" describes the gap between the number of students accepted to college and those who actually enroll, and research shows it is a significant issue for students from low-income backgrounds and other underrepresented groups. For a variety of reasons, students often find it hard to navigate the complex and sometimes opaque processes for course selection and financial aid. The more colleges can do to simplify these processes and

offer assistance during the summer months, the better. Meanwhile, parents, teachers, and counselors should encourage their college-bound students to attend orientation, connect with their academic advisers, and pay attention to deadlines. Most of these will be communicated in a student's new college email account, so it's important to check there on a daily basis for key information and reminders.

Of course, summer should be fun, and all students and educators need some downtime to relax their brains and recharge their energy reserves. But "summer slide" and "summer melt" are shared problems that affect our society as a whole. If we want to achieve more equitable outcomes for young people across the socioeconomic spectrum, we owe it to ourselves to think creatively about academic schedules and increase summer supports to keep our most vulnerable students from falling behind.



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