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# THE KANSAS CITY KANSAN

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## **Class is NOT Dismissed**

It's commonly thought that the typical school year, with an extended time off during the summer, is out of date. Perhaps it is, though not necessarily for the reasons you think.

Like a lot of people, I had always thought that the long summer vacation was a remnant of old-time agricultural practices, a throwback to a time during which many hands were required to work the land.

How we got the summer vacation—and what to do about it—is a bit more complicated. Researchers at Indiana University say that during the nineteenth century, there were two very different school systems in America. Urban schools tended to operate year-round, with some giving students only 3 weeks off. Rural schools, on the other hand, tended to be open in the winter and summer, closing for the spring and autumn months.

Today, almost every public school in the country operates on a calendar that runs from August or September to May or June. A number of factors contributed to the shift towards uniformity, including laws prohibiting child labor (they had to have something else to do) and the desire to use schools to assimilate a growing number of immigrants.

The Indiana researchers add that even though the needs of students have changed over time, “the educational system continues to rely on a schedule whose roots can be traced back to about 150 years ago.”

Last year, the Legislative Division of Post Audit came to a similar conclusion: “Today, most high schools are organized much the same way as their early 20 century counterparts—six periods in a day, 180 days in a school year, and a curriculum that features English, social studies, science, math, and foreign language.”

The researchers made this statement in a report on alternative methods of organizing middle schools and high schools. They found 41 schools throughout the country that used one of five approaches with success. These approaches included project-based learning, small schools, magnet schools, and year-round schools

In recent years, school officials across the country (and sometimes in Kansas) have experimented with a variety of alternative schedules, including longer school days, longer school years, and year-round schools. None have been widely adopted.

Year-round school schools, despite their name, don't always have longer school years. Instead, several shorter breaks throughout the year replace one long summer break. But they are fiercely opposed by the tourism industry and businesses that depend on low-wage teenaged labor. Tradition plays a big role,

too, as do the formidable costs of running air conditioning, a given in today's America.

It's commonly thought among education specialists that a shorter summer would mean that teachers have to spend less time reviewing materials in the fall. And longer school years offer the opportunity to do more teaching.

Can a longer school year or school day make a difference? Perhaps. Longer school years could improve student achievement, but only if the extra time is spent on instruction. That's often not the case.

One organization that does seem to make good use of both a longer school day and a longer school year is KIPP, which operates charter schools in many states. (It has no charter schools in Kansas, due perhaps to the state's unfriendly laws on the subject). The fact that it is a charter school helps ease the transition to an alternative calendar.

According to the post-audit office, there is at least one study that shows KIPP has positive results. But, the post-audit report warned, "While most models have examples [of alternative models] of successful schools, there is little rigorous research available that assesses the effectiveness of each model."

In other words, there's no one approach that works all the time.

That makes sense. Children are different one from the other, and so too are schools. During the last 100 to 150 years, one calendar has prevailed, and schools chase after the latest fads (such as whole language learning).

Perhaps it's time for us to have some experimentation in schools. Give parents more opportunities by fostering more choices among educational providers. Public school choice and letting schools manage themselves can give teachers and principles room to innovate in ways that will work for some students who aren't being effectively taught today.

A vigorous charter school movement would let parents take more ownership in their children's education, and free teachers from conventional methods that don't work everywhere.

Tax credits for educational expenses at private schools would be another way of emphasizing that there's a big difference between schools and learning, and put the emphasis on the process rather than the institution.

Summertime is a great time for thinking about how and why we organize schools the way we do—and how we might do it better.

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