

# TIME

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## The Case Against Summer Vacation

By David Von Drehle

Recently I reread *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* after many years, and I was stunned to discover that Tom's summer vacation doesn't begin until the end of Chapter 21. Memory plays tricks. Tom's glorious idyll of mud, mild rebellion, chaste romance and rampant imagination--electrified by a dash of danger and a blaze of heroism--had been filed in my mind under the heading of complete summer freedom. Even the most vivid scenes of Tom in school had been washed out by the brilliance of Tom barefoot and unbound. In reality, though, our hero spent much of his summer vacation pathetically bedridden with the measles.

I mention this because my muddled recollection is a small version of a broad misunderstanding, a skewed view of childhood and summertime. We associate the school year with oppression and the summer months with liberty--and nothing is more American than liberty. Summer is red, white and blue. It's flags and fireworks, hot dogs and mustard, cold watermelon and sweet corn. School is regimen; summer is creativity. School is work; summer is play. But when American students are competing with children around the world, who are in many cases spending four weeks longer in school each year, larking through summer is a luxury we can't afford. What's more, for many children--especially children of low-income families--summer is a season of boredom, inactivity and isolation. Kids can't go exploring if their neighborhoods aren't safe. It's hard to play without toys or playgrounds or open spaces. And Tom Sawyer wasn't expected to care for his siblings while Aunt Polly worked for minimum wage.

Dull summers take a steep toll, as researchers have been documenting for more than a century. Deprived of healthy stimulation, millions of low-income kids lose a significant amount of what they learn during the school year. Call it "summer learning loss," as the academics do, or "the summer slide," but by any name summer vacation is among the most pernicious--if least acknowledged--causes of achievement gaps in America's schools. Children with access to high-quality experiences keep exercising their minds and bodies at sleepaway camp, on family vacations, in museums and libraries and enrichment classes. Meanwhile, children without resources languish on street corners or in front of glowing screens. By the time the bell rings on a new school year, the poorer kids have fallen weeks, if not months, behind. And even well-off American students may be falling behind their peers around the world.

The problem of summer vacation, first documented in 1906, compounds year after year. What starts as a hiccup in a 6-year-old's education can be a crisis by the time that child reaches high school. After collecting a century's worth of academic studies, summer-learning expert Harris Cooper, now at Duke University, concluded that, on average, all students lose about a month of progress in math skills each summer, while low-income students slip as many as three months in reading comprehension, compared with middle-income students. Another major study, by a team at Johns Hopkins University, examined more than 20 years of data meticulously tracking the progress of students from kindergarten through high school. The conclusion: while students made similar progress during the school year, regardless of economic status, the better-off kids held steady or continued to make progress during the summer--but disadvantaged students fell back. By the end of grammar school, low-income students had fallen nearly three grade levels behind, and summer was the biggest culprit. By ninth grade, summer learning loss could be blamed for roughly two-thirds of the achievement gap separating income groups.