

What is Summer Vacation Costing Us?

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Most of us have fond memories of summer vacations from our childhoods. Warm days with little or no responsibilities, days spent running from friends house to friends house, eating lunch wherever we happened to be at the time, not wondering when or if we were going to get to eat that day, and our parents not worrying where we were and when, not if, we would be home. Our parents knew we were around. We didn't carry cell phones that gave our parents the ability to track our location. We didn't have to check in every hour and our parents trusted that we were safe to roam the neighborhood at will.

This was a time when a lot of us had a stay at home parent, it wasn't always Mom who was home, for me it was my Dad. Some of us were fortunate enough to have extended family nearby that was able and willing to watch us. We didn't give school or our past studies any more thought once we were out of the school building at the end of the year. A lot of us also didn't wonder if when we were going to eat again or what we would do now that we didn't have breakfast and lunch at school. Then there were those, who dreaded summer vacation, or even the weekend, almost as much as a trip to the dentist or doctor. These are the kids that rely so heavily on the nutrition provided during the school year that vacations aren't something that is looked forward to. With the changing times and the changing needs of society maybe it's time that we took a new look at summer vacation. Summer Vacation is a time of freedom but also a time of lost nutrition and lost knowledge.

As a child we also didn't realize, or even care, that once we got back to school in the fall that we would be doing several weeks of review due to the knowledge that was lost over the summer. Reviewing the prior year's material was just how the new school year always started. Have you ever wondered how your life would be different if you hadn't spent those weeks relearning old material?

From a child's perspective the thought of not having a long summer vacation is a tragedy waiting to happen. From a parents perspective summer vacation is a horror that is advancing quicker than anticipated every year. Most children look forward to the freedom that summer vacation brings, while parents realize the challenges of finding good, reliable, safe child care, or an affordable summer program, not to mention the additional meals needed every day and the strains this is going to add to most budgets that don't have a lot of wiggle room as it is. What happens if the best designed plan falls apart? You then have to scramble to figure out what you're going to do with the kids. This has the potential to cause unpaid time from work, just adding to the constraints of an already tight budget.

There are also those kids whose parents don't have the resources to be able to provide safe child care, or afford a summer program or even afford the extra meals that are needed now that the kids are out of school. These families lose a lot more than just the daily structure and safety that school provides. These are the kids that don't like weekends and vacations; these are the kids that don't understand the enjoyment of being out of school.

According to Deb Felton, Nutritionist for the local school district, for the 2010-2011 school year there are currently 1125 students district wide. Our district serves grades kindergarten – 8<sup>th</sup> grade, of those students 127 receive the reduced rate for breakfasts and lunches; the reduced rate is \$.30 for breakfast and \$.40 for lunch. There are also 319 students who receive free breakfast and lunch, to receive the free or reduced rate you have to fill out an application and eligibility is based on a family's total income, you must meet the poverty guidelines set by the federal government, for a family of 4 the poverty line is \$22,050.00 (Foundation for Health Coverage Education, 2009). These students make up 39.644% of the

district's students. Just for comparison the full rate is \$1.00 for breakfast and \$2.00 for lunch, adults can eat with the students for a cost of \$3.00 for lunch.

In our local area there is a summer program called the "The Kids Feed n Fun Program". This program currently runs from the middle of June until the middle of August. This program offers free breakfast and lunches to all kids under the age of 18, regardless of their ability to pay. Originally this program was created and run by a partnership between the Rocky Mountain Development Council (RMDC) and the local Food Bank in 2002. When it became clear that there was an overwhelming need for a continued summer nutrition program the directors of RMDC and the Food Bank got together to see what they could do. According to Shawna Amberg, Nutrition Program Coordinator for RMDC, in 2002 there were only 3,067 meals served that summer and of those meals only 247 were breakfast. By 2009 the last year that RMDC was able to fund this program there were 10,917 meals served. Due to increased costs of food and supplies and an ever decreasing lack of funding it became apparent in late 2009 that RMDC would no longer be able to continue this program. This is when RMDC started looking for a partner organization that could take over the summer program. Mrs. Amberg was put in touch with Robert Worthy, Food Service Director for the Helena School District, who because of his current position already had all of the necessary contacts needed to continue the summer food program. He was able to buy supplies in bulk at a reduced cost and had the facility and staff needed to prepare the growing number of needed meals. In 2010, 14,788 meals were served in the Helena/East Helena, Montana area. This is an increase of 11,721 meals in just 8 years. This just shows how necessary the nutrition programs offered by the school district really are to local residents.

A more year round approach to our education system would eliminate or greatly reduce a significant portion of these fears and hardships that are placed on all families with school aged kids every year. It would provide the stability of a reliable routine, a safe place for kids and provide the nutrition that some families rely upon so heavily.

According to *Barriers That Prevent Low-Income People From Gaining Access to Food and Nutrition Programs* “in 2002 there were 34.9 million people who still lived in hunger or lived in “food insecure” households (defined as households that do not always have access to enough food for an active healthy life for all household members because they lack money or other resources). This is an increase of more than 4 million people since 1999 – hunger is still sensitive to economic conditions.” (n.d.)

Now that a stay at home parent isn't considered the norm and parents are now working at least 1 job if not 2 or 3 just to be able to provide for their family's daily needs, is a long summer vacation really appropriate? Also, doesn't attending a shorter number of academic days per year put US students at a disadvantage compared to other industrialized nations?

Currently teachers in the local school districts spend the first several weeks of each year re-teaching the basics from the prior year. Over the career of a student that amounts to an entire current school year worth of review, this is based on 15 days of re-teaching over 12 grades equals 180 days, the current length of a school year in Montana. Our students could be an entire grade advanced if all of this time wasn't spent re-teaching.

As reported by the Associated Press in *Obama Would Curtail Summer Vacation* “In a survey of industrial nations children in the United States attend the fewest number of days per academic year at 180 days. Children in Japan attend 243 days per year, in Scotland they attend 200 days per year and in New Zealand they attend 190 days. Compared to Japanese students US

children spend approximately 4.5 years less in an academic environment.” (2009) Can we really continue to short change our children’s future this way?

It’s true that a more year round school program means more expenses for the school districts, yet we continue hear over and over how politicians talk about the need to invest in the future of our country by investing in our children. What better way could we do just that than providing our children with not only an increase in educational opportunities but also increased food security?

I’m not suggesting that we do away with vacations all together but I do believe that shorter vacations at various times of the year would be more beneficial. This would allow for the breaks that the kids need yet it would ease some of the financial burden that vacations cause, and it would reduce the amount of time teachers spend re-teaching the prior year’s lessons.

Take just a moment and think about where you could potentially be in your life if you had spent more time in an educational environment learning new things. Instead of having to spend weeks at the beginning of every new school year relearning the things that had been forgotten over the summer. Think of the extra time that could be spent learning more of the “fun” subjects that seem to have disappeared from the current curriculums, it could even be added time in a PE class. This would reduce the amount of time spend in front of the TV or a gaming system, in turn help to reduce the occurrence of childhood obesity, that’s a topic for another paper. As a child you knew that you would be able to eat something each day and there wouldn’t be weeks or even months where you didn’t know if or when you would eat again, and you had a safe place to be. Parents would know that their children were being fed, kept safe and would be able to be at work more consistently during the year.

What if you had been able to take classes at your public high school, because you had more academic time available to you that then transferred to the college or university of your choice? These would be credits that you had earned and were able to pay a reduced per credit fee for, during the 2009 school year local high school students paid \$220.00 per class that transferred to the state universities vs. the \$257 per credit that is currently charged at a state university, this is a greatly reduced cost and gives incoming freshman an advantage of already having some classes completed. You would be that much closer to earning your degree; you would be able to enter the work force sooner and with less debt. You would have the ability to achieve your goals sooner. I could see that more students would feel that they were actually ready to graduate from high school and move to college with a firmer grasp of what was going to be required of them. And finally moving to the “real” world of a full time job without summer vacations wouldn’t be quite the shock it is now.

While there are the drawbacks with an increase number of educational days, these increases include additional salaries for teacher, support staff and administration, additional upkeep and maintenance of the buildings, increased wear and tear on the reusable materials i.e. books, desks, computers, smart boards, gym equipment etc., as well as busses and kitchen appliances. The additional benefit of our students being able to more competitively compete with the rest of the world should without a doubt outweigh these drawbacks.

Fred Yeager of the California Department of Education states in *Year-Round Education Program Guide (2010)* that some schools are going to the Track Plan. There are two types of track plans, a Single Track Plan and a Multi-Track Plan. In the Single Track Plan all students attend school for 45 days and then have a longer break period, usually 15 days. There are variations of this schedule such as the 60-20 day structure that supports a “trimester” schedule.

Students still attend 180 day school year it's just spread over 230-240 days. Single Track plans do not increase space or save money, but they do promote continuous learning, especially when combined with intersession programs. Intersession programs are the equivalent of summer schools and are offered during each vacation block. The Multi Track Plan is similar but the student body is divided into 4 tracks, the number of tracks can vary from school to school, that are staggered so only 3 tracks are attending school at any one time. This allows schools to more efficiently use buildings that have already been constructed and reduce the need to finance and build the number of schools that would be required under a traditional calendar. This also allows schools to enroll a greater number of students. For example, a school with space for 1,000 students could potentially enroll 1,500 using the 3 track system (each track has 500 students and one track is always on vacation).

There are already proven systems that have been implemented that both decreases the lost knowledge by having shorter breaks and makes a more productive use of the current schools, this decreases the need for building more. So why wouldn't more and more schools move toward this model? Wouldn't the advantages that come from a more "real life" schedule benefit everyone involved? Wouldn't it be worth the added expense for a more secure future?

There will always be those who disagree with the thought of doing away with summer vacation. But there seems to be more and more families who are interested in a more year around approach. The year around approach would be able to more completely meet the changing needs of society by providing continued access to nutrition programs, a continuous safe environment, a more consistent learning environment and a more real world schedule.



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