**Brigid Schulte -- The Case for Year-Round School**

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*By Brigid Schulte*

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My second-grade daughter went to school the other day and made potions in her [Harry Potter](http://harrypotter.warnerbros.com/) class. My son's class of fourth- and fifth-graders wrote movie scripts, filmed them and learned how to edit them on the computer.

At their Alexandria public school, my kids have learned how to sail, designed entire cities in cardboard, built skyscrapers with toothpicks and marshmallows, performed in a musical and built and set off rockets on the front lawn. They've created passports and had them stamped after "visiting" countries around the world. They've learned CPR, calligraphy, Japanese, rollerblading and how to make art like Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock. My daughter was in kindergarten when she came home bubbling about Picasso's Rose period. In Spanish.

My children attend a year-round school. And these are the kinds of hands-on, big-project classes that are taught during "intersessions," or short breaks throughout the year that take the place of the long, lazy, Huck Finn summers that most Americans have come to think of as an inalienable right of childhood.

Far from grousing about missing out on the months-long summer break that will start in a few weeks, my kids love year-round school. My daughter had no idea that she was learning chemistry when her Harry Potter class made butter beer and chocolate frogs. My son developed a much better grasp of plot and character when he had to create both on film. I love their so-called modified calendar, too. And so, most of all, do the lower-income parents who've watched their kids thrive on it.

And now, it could be coming your way.

Both [President Obama](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/) and Education Secretary [Arne Duncan](http://projects.washingtonpost.com/2009/federal-appointments/person/arne-duncan/) have called the traditional school day and school year outdated and inadequate for the demands of 21st-century life. Students in countries that routinely outscore the United States on international tests go to school for as many as 230 days each year, 50 more than kids typically attend here. "Go ahead and boo me," Duncan [said](http://www.wtop.com/?nid=316&sid=1644453) in April to Denver students. "I think schools should be open six, seven days a week, eleven, twelve months a year."

Obama's recently passed [$100 billion stimulus plan](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/07/AR2009030701972.html) for education includes innovation grants and $5 billion for incentives to transform a public education system that produces too many high-school dropouts and too many failing urban schools. And the administration has made clear that it's ready to give high priority to proposals to extend the school day and year.

Though different schools and districts have different schedules, our modified calendar works like this: The first day back to school typically falls in the first week of August. The children attend regular classes for nine weeks. Then they have a two-week break, or intersession, in October, when they can choose either to attend fun, creative classes or to go on vacation. Then they have nine more weeks of school, winter break, and then a week of intersession in January. Nine more weeks of school, then a two-week intersession that bumps up against spring break. The school year ends in June, at the same time as schools on the traditional calendar. But summer break lasts five or six weeks, rather than the traditional 10.

If students choose to pursue the intersession classes, by the time they've gone from kindergarten through fifth grade, they'll have attended what amounts to an additional year of school. And this isn't just the same test-prep, paper-and-pencil, drill-and-kill stuff that so much public education has become. Done right, intersessions are a time to open minds and discover passions. At our school, students have learned karate, ballet, photography, cooking and a host of other things. Children needing extra help are invited to attend half-day remedial classes. But these are remedial classes with a twist. Like Math You Can Eat. My son learned fractions using brownies. Students learning English hone language skills in Books Come Alive by reading such classic stories as Goldilocks, writing their own scripts and acting them out.

Still, when [Mount Vernon Community School](http://www.acps.k12.va.us/mtvernon/) first considered the idea of going to a modified calendar a few years ago, it was a battle royale. Some middle-class parents argued that it was important for children to lie on their backs and watch the clouds for hours over a long summer break. That a year-round calendar was just another way to institutionalize our kids in the often dull busy-work of school.

I worried, too. But honestly, my children weren't idling their summer days away like ol' Huck on the Mississippi. A 10-week summer meant that my husband and I staggered our work schedules, shoved our kids in camps, set up carpools, cobbled together babysitters and imposed on neighbors and friends whenever one piece of our elaborately jury-rigged schedule fell apart. And because 71 percent of women with children under 18 work outside the home, I would imagine that most families experience summer much the same way.

But many middle-class parents left our school rather than lose a long summer. The ones who stayed, albeit uneasily at first, were in for a pleasant surprise. We found that intersession classes gave our children the kind of engaging school experience we had always wanted for them. The lower-income and immigrant parents, who had voted overwhelmingly to support the modified calendar, were convinced from the start that it would help their children academically and give them opportunities they could never provide. One of the most popular intersession classes recently taught children how to swim.

The majority of students in our school speak Spanish at home and have parents who work most of the day -- and sometimes the night. Summer break, for these children, was long, hot, bleak and boring. They start kindergarten far behind their middle-class peers, and after every summer fall farther and farther behind -- even those who are bused to dull remedial summer school. [Karl Alexander](http://www.soc.jhu.edu/people/Alexander/index.html), a sociology professor at Johns Hopkins University, studied 800 students for more than 20 years in Baltimore's elementary schools. He found that by ninth grade, low-income students had fallen 3 1/2 grade levels behind their middle-class peers. And most of that gap was attributable to learning lost over the long traditional summer.

What these children needed was more time to learn and less time to forget. And they needed more exposure to the world beyond their apartment walls, the TV and the 24-Hour Express Minimart. I saw that vividly when I chaperoned an intersession trip of first graders to the [National Gallery of Art](http://www.nga.gov/). As the children gazed up at the giant [Calder mobile](http://www.nga.gov/collection/calderinfo.shtm), the teachers asked who had never been to a museum before. More than half the hands shot up.

The atmosphere at school during intersessions even feels different. Teachers can experiment and get to know the students better in a more relaxed setting. "Problem" students, they find, are not problems when they're deeply absorbed in a task they like. Luisa Tio, an artist who regularly teaches intersession classes, was warned about one child. Instead, he was a model student. "He was able to create these incredibly detailed portraits," she told me. "Sometimes children need to learn in different ways."

Most importantly, teachers say, they are able to intervene throughout the year and help struggling students right when they need it.

But changing what has become a sacrosanct school calendar and messing with the cultural touchstone of summer will not be easy. It's expensive to pay teachers for intersessions and to keep buses, cafeterias and maintenance staff running five or six extra weeks. With school budgets already squeezed in the economic downturn, some districts are turning modified calendar schools back to the traditional calendar. "It had nothing to do with academics," said Eileen Cox, the spokeswoman for one such district, Virginia Beach. "It was all about the budget."

It's also controversial. Entire Web sites and organized parent groups, along with the[International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions](http://www.iaapa.org/), are mobilized to fight modified calendars. Some states protect long summers by law. Virginia has what some school officials privately call the "King's Dominion Rule." It is one of six states that mandate that the school year start after Labor Day. Schools wanting to start earlier, like my kids', have to apply for waivers.

And the research on whether modified calendars lift academic achievement is muddy at best. Some schools show great improvement, others little or none. Even researchers who've found that modified calendars significantly benefit students learning English say it's a hard sell. "We know that there's really no basis for the current calendar other than tradition," said[Elena Silva](http://www.educationsector.org/profiles/profiles_show.htm?doc_id=372241), a researcher with [Education Sector](http://www.educationsector.org/), a Washington think tank. It wasn't until World War II that the current 180-day school calendar became standard. Before that, some rural districts opened schools only in summer and winter. And some urban districts were in session all year long. "Summer is a sacred cow," said Silva. "But it doesn't have to be a 10-week cow. It could be a five-week cow."

Done well, a modified calendar offers the possibility of transforming schools and the way children learn. One night in early January a few years ago, my son, who struggles in a regimented setting, lamented that school would be starting the next day.

"But you've been at school all week," I said. He'd been solving riddles in Code Breakers to hone his problem-solving skills and making volcanos explode with baking soda and vinegar in a science lab.

"That wasn't school," he said. "That was *intersession*."

So let's give students more time in school. But let's give them time with great teachers using more time in rich and exciting ways. The world is changing. Let's let Huck Finn go and not stand in the way.

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