

Should Schools Give Summer Homework?

The school calendar as we know it, with a long break during the summer, came about more than a century ago, when most Americans lived on farms and young people were needed during the summer for work in the fields. Today, fewer than 2 percent of Americans live on farms or ranches, but students still enjoy summers off. More school systems, however, have begun doling out homework over summer vacation. Students may get reading lists, math problems, book reports, and even test prep to work on. As the summer assignments in many districts have grown, so has the debate about whether they're worthwhile. Here are opposing views from two education experts.

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YES Children learn best when instruction is continuous. The long summer vacation disrupts the rhythm of learning, leads to forgetting, and requires time be spent reviewing old material when students return to school in the fall.

Studies show that, on average, achievement test scores decline between spring and fall—the so-called summer slump—and the loss is more pronounced for math than reading. All students, regardless of economic status, show roughly equal amounts of decline in math skills over the summer. But substantial differences are found when it comes to reading: While middle-class children either maintain or improve their reading during the summer, poor children lose ground.

The long summer break can also have negative consequences for children with special educational needs. And it can be an extra burden for children who don't speak English at home: For them, it's not simply a matter of re-learning academic material; in many cases, they also must re-acquaint themselves with the language of instruction.

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With all the testing pressures that educators face, the amount of summer homework has increased. These assignments can vary from giving students a head start in reading books they'll cover in next year's English class to having them read chapters of a textbook they'll be tested on when they return to school.

I don't know of any studies that have directly examined whether students who get summer homework do better in school the next school year. But research has shown that summer school can be highly effective, and summer homework might be considered a "low dose" of summer school.

Summer homework can have a positive effect on students' achievement. But as important as it is to keep academics fresh, homework shouldn't be allowed to crowd out other summer activities. Summer is an important time to practice social, artistic, and physical skills. It's also a good time to learn that academic skills can contribute to fun outside school. •

—HARRIS COOPER

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