

SUMMER LEARNING LOSS

Summer break doesn't mean it's time for your child's brain to take a break

FEW PEOPLE would resent children having more holidays than adults. Their brains are, after all, going through great change and need more time to rest and recuperate than their parents. However, even as a teacher who is fortunate enough to enjoy the same holidays as his students, I find the long summer break a rather curious arrangement.

What is known is that its origins go back to the 19th century. Whether or not the current school calendar was first built around the agricultural one (and the need for children to work on the farm during the summer months) is not fully known or agreed upon, but what strikes me as odd is that governments and schools around the world continue to adhere to what is now a somewhat archaic tradition.

The long summer break gives us a modern problem—the summer learning loss. This loss of learning is no longer just a phenomenon, it's fact. Therefore, continuing with this practice is not conducive to maintaining learning gains. One could even go as far as to say that it goes against the main aims and objectives of schooling.

At a time when schools are under more pressure than ever before to improve learning, it seems even more bizarre that schools have not already moved towards a more learning-focused arrangement. Reasoning such as: “that's the way it's always been” and “we have to fit in with what other schools do” simply doesn't seem like any reasonable justification to me.

One cannot help but wonder, then, how schools might organize their school calendar differently if they had the freedom to start with a blank piece of paper and no agenda other than what is in the best interests of their students.

So, while I foresee change in the future, for now I accept the situation as it is and wonder how to make the best of it. As a teacher, that means encouraging parents to take on the responsibility for maintaining their

child's academic learning during the long summer break, but first that means overcoming a barrier.

For many parents, there is a subconscious way of thinking that learning is something that only happens in school and their child's learning is the school's responsibility. But there is, however, an undeniable correlation between how much interest a parent takes in their child's education and how well that child tends to perform at school. Parental support is then not just a summer-holiday issue, it is something required all year round.



Of course, every parent has different expectations regarding how much home learning their child should be doing each evening. Some parents expect two hours of homework, others none at all. For schools, that makes home learning a thankless and almost impossible task to get right.

A rethink is therefore required. Rather than the teacher attempting to plan the right amount of learning for each child, a better situation would be one whereby the teacher guides parents toward being able to source their



Brendan Hearne is the Deputy Headteacher at Saigon Star International School. He moved to Vietnam in August 2013, having previously taught at two award-winning schools in the UK.

own home learning. Parents would then be free to pick and choose what they want their child to study more of—and how much—as they see fit.

Whatever a family's preference, whether they place high value on reading, spelling and handwriting, or whether they want their child to pursue sporting excellence or to master a musical instrument, they could each be pointed in the right direction. The direction parents go in is a very personal choice and comes down to the type of child each family wants to develop.

My personal standpoint is that children already spend a sufficient amount of time in school and should therefore be free to pursue other learning opportunities in order to become well-balanced, well-rounded individuals.

Unfortunately, another strong misconception exists that ‘learning’ relates only to academic subjects, and yet learning exists in many different forms and occurs in many varied situations. Whether it's baking a cake, visiting the zoo, practising a musical instrument or building something out of Lego, the common factor is learning. No matter whether it's something that has been done before or it is something new, the neurones in a person's brain will be firing and the synapses getting stronger. That is learning.

Despite being a strong advocate of children being able to pursue non-academic learning opportunities outside the regular school day, during the long summer break in particular, the teacher in me hopes that parents will help to maintain their child's academic learning by overseeing just a little bit of practice each day.

Maintaining reading habits, exploring fun maths websites and playing board games which involve words and numbers are great places to start, but asking for tips and advice from your child's teacher will lead to other ideas that you might not think of yourself. ■