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No Evidence Early School Start Dates Aide Academic Success

By Camila Knowles

Students in more than a dozen Georgia school districts returned to class in July this year. You read that correctly: July. Forty-eight percent of Georgia schools were back in session by the end of the first week of August. My own children returned to school August 1st.

When I discuss this issue with my friends and other parents, the constant refrain I hear is “this is insane.” Parents’ instinctive reaction is rationally based: research shows there is no academic reason to begin the school year in the middle of summer, but there are numerous drawbacks.

Regardless of when schools begin, all Georgia public schools are required to offer students 180 instructional days, or the hourly equivalent. Getting started earlier doesn’t increase academic performance. However, it does reduce time for students to gain valuable work experience, earn much-needed money for college, makes formal summer learning difficult, creates childcare nightmares for parents, and reduces the length of time summer feeding programs are available.

Just because the school year is starting in late-July or early-August doesn’t mean more instructional time between the first day of school and standardized tests. Most early school start date calendars have numerous non-traditional vacation days scattered throughout the school year. This stop-and-go schedule robs students of learning opportunities outside the classroom, as many programming opportunities available during the summer simply are not offered during these week-long breaks. Additionally, it causes childcare costs to soar: many quality, low-cost child care opportunities are available during the summer but the same is not true for sporadic, week-long breaks during the school year.

Most of the states that are consistently ranked in the top 10 for student performance on the SAT, ACT and Advanced Placement tests begin the school year in late-August or early September. I challenge the notion that early-August school start dates aid in student success. I think that credit goes to our talented teachers, hardworking students, and involved parents.

Early August school start dates also reduce time high school students have for meaningful work opportunities, to experience an internship in a field of interest, or to pursue academic studies over the summer. Many students work during summers to save for college, but the value doesn’t stop

there. University admissions officers say students who show a strong work history stand out in the selection process. Summer work shows dedication, maturity, and good time management skills

Research shows summer work experience also translates to the classroom. Summer work increases the likelihood a student will graduate from high school and increases non-cognitive skills such as responsibility, positive work habits, motivation, and self-confidence. Not to mention summer employment can give students a glimpse into professions they didn't know existed.

The piecemeal breaks and vacation days in many school calendars around our great state reduce the length of summer and, for many students, that translates into less days receiving proper nutrition. Thousands of students across our state depend on our public schools to not only provide a quality education but for nutritious meals. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Summer Food Service Program provides nutritious meals to low-income families during the summer. These programs are available during the summer months, but normally, no similar programs are in place during days off during the school year – yet another unintended consequence of non-traditional school calendars.

Mid-summer school start dates are not providing any educational benefit to our children, but they are diminishing the excitement that once accompanied the start of a new school year. Let's reconsider the school calendar and send kids to school excited and ready for another year of learning. This issue impacts such a significant number of our state's children that I believe it worthy of our General Assembly's study and attention. Join me in supporting the further study of the school start date issue by liking the [Save Georgia Summers Facebook page](#) and getting involved.

Editor's Note: Camila Knowles is the mother of four, a supporter of Save Georgia Summers, and Commissioner of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. This opinion piece has been slightly edited for statewide distribution after appearing on July 27, 2017 on the Atlanta Journal Constitution Get Schooled Blog.

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