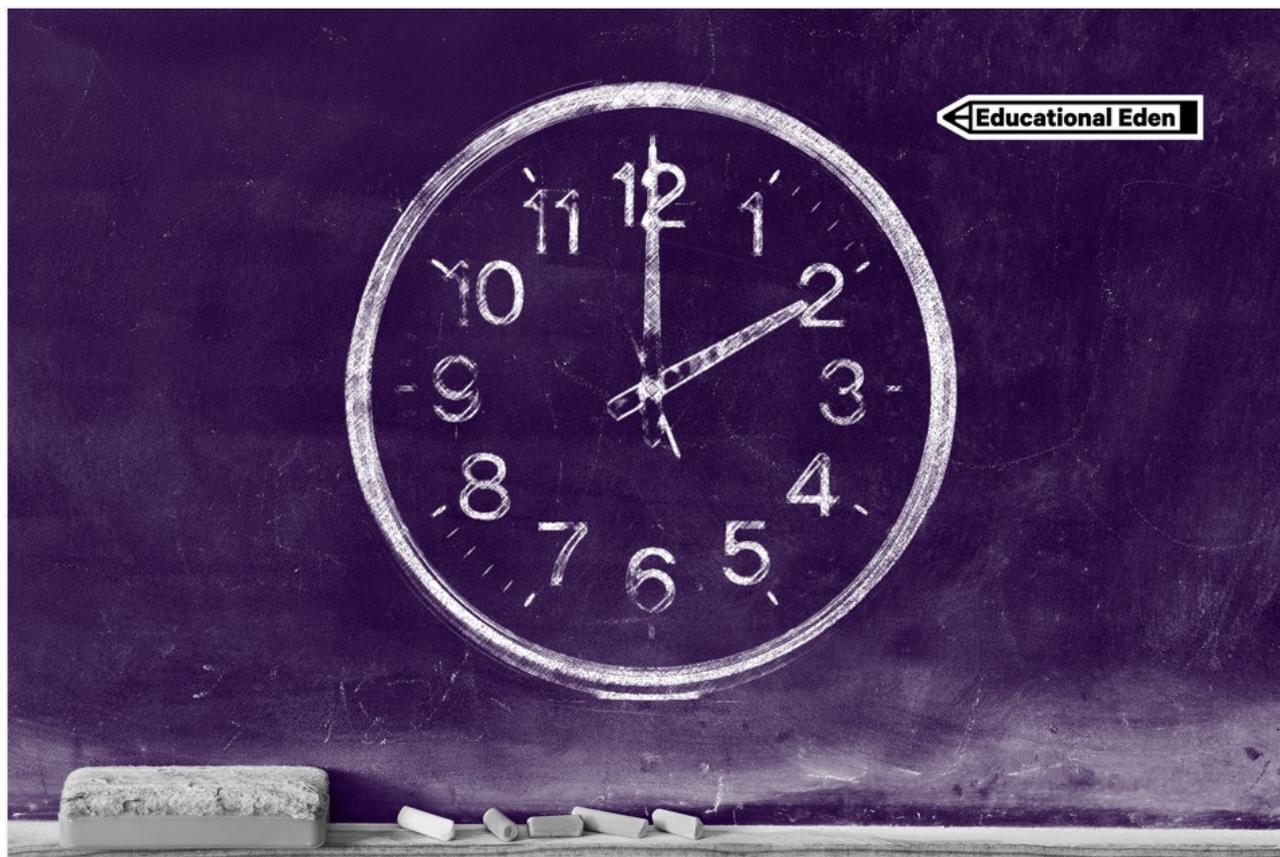


The Atlantic

Fixing America's Broken School Calendar

We asked education experts how much time they think kids should spend in class. Here's what they had to say.



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Nothing is perfect, but what if it could be?

Back-to-school season is in full swing, and despite the crispness of new notebook paper and the allure of Friday night lights, it's hard to ignore the serious inequities, debates, and issues currently hampering America's education system. Students will walk down hallways they haven't seen since June with questions of segregation **raging** around them. Teachers will greet their pupils as public-school systems around the country **are flailing**. And administrators will continue on as innovative

ideas about how best to reach learners **emerge**. And so, it's no surprise that many are entering the school year with both aspiration and trepidation.

With that in mind, we asked a variety of prominent voices in education—from policy makers and teachers to activists and parents—what their vision of a perfect school system would be. We asked them to look beyond laws, politics, and funding to imagine a utopian system of learning. We wanted to know how these men and women would critically examine the most macro and micro aspects of school and reform these elements in a perfect world. They went back to the drawing board—and the chalkboard—to build their educational Garden of Eden. We'll be publishing their answers to one question every day this week. The responses have been lightly edited for clarity and length.

Today's assignment: The Calendar. How much of the year will students spend in school?

Rita Pin Ahrens, *the director of education policy for the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center*

Students will be in school year round, with the equivalent of eight weeks of vacation distributed throughout the year—two weeks every season. This will diminish the frequency and extent of summer learning loss, reduce the need to review at the start of the school year for certain subjects, and provide more time and opportunities to go into more depth in the curriculum. Summer will not be a time for parents to worry about what they are doing with their children, especially for elementary- and middle-school students, as it will be no different from the fall, winter, or spring.

Schools will be open five days a week, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., from kindergarten to grade 12, though the start times for academic learning will vary by age and developmental needs. Also, students will not have to be physically at school every day or all day. This will allow for other learning opportunities and environments to be integrated into a child's education. This schedule flexibility will allow for more

extracurriculars before and after school and better match parents' working schedules.

Nicholson Baker, *the author of Substitute*

Once, working as a substitute teacher, I asked a class full of chatty seventh-grade math students how they would design the school day. A girl said that it should be illegal to start the day before 11 in the morning and illegal for it to end after 11:01. A boy disagreed: "They'd just give you a ton of homework," he said. Another girl thought the day should start at noon and go for about an hour. "We could all use 40 minutes of schooling," she said. A quiet boy said that four hours of school would be about right.

The days, the years, can feel fearsomely long—to teachers and students both. Nobody's learning enough to justify all those hours. A sense of timewaste and exhaustion hangs in the air. Something drastic has to happen. The simplest solution is to cut the length of a typical day in half.

Carol Burris, *the executive director of the Network for Public Education*

Students in high-performing nations like Finland, Korea, and Japan spend the same or less time as American students in school. The myth that American students spend less time learning than students in other industrialized nations **is not true**. It is also clear from studies that increasing school time **is very expensive** and there is little return in achievement. Reductions in class size and peer tutoring, for example, have been found to be far more effective.

That being said, we do know that students from disadvantaged homes **experience** summer reading learning loss, while students from affluent homes experience small gains, and all students lose a little bit of knowledge in mathematics in the summer. Rather than lengthening the school day, which exhausts young children and deprives older children of the opportunity to engage in extracurricular

activities and sports, a better alternative is to provide targeted, enriched learning activities, especially in the summer.

We will fund summer day camps for disadvantaged students that are staffed by certified teachers that integrate enrichment and recreational activities with some reading, science, and mathematical experiences intertwined. Similar programs will be designed for students who are learning English. Good after-school childcare that provides enrichment and recreation within neighborhood schools will be available for every child.

Catherine Cushinberry, *the executive director of Parents for Public Schools*

School will be year-round with intercessions built in so students can take time off to relax at home, travel with their families, get tutoring, address other needs and public interests, or have access to additional courses they are interested in, such as martial arts. Students will have the opportunity to job shadow or participate in experiential trips outside of their community or city. Long summer vacation will be a thing of the past. We will move away from the agrarian calendar and recognize the needs of the information age. The school day will be an eight-hour day, five days a week, to correspond with the typical hours of daytime working families. In-school classes for students ages 5- to 6-years-old will be 35 minutes, 7- to 14-year-olds will spend 45 minutes focused on topics, and the 15- to 18-year-olds' classes will last 60 minutes each. All will have to be interactive and engaging.

Michael Horn, *the co-founder of the Clayton Christensen Institute*

Each student will spend as much or as little of their time in school as needed to be successful. Schools will be more accessible—open for greater hours during the day for more days of the year—and flexible—with individuals able to arrive when it makes sense for them and able to stay longer. This will be possible because we will view learning as a 24/7 endeavor that doesn't just take place in school. Online and mobile learning platforms will stretch our sense of what is possible.

We will also understand that schools play a valuable custodial role in the lives of students, keeping them safe and, in some cases, well nourished. And we will see schools as a gathering place for students to work with their peers in a variety of endeavors—academic projects and extracurricular activities—as well as with teachers and other community members. No longer will days be organized in strict time blocks of “classes,” but instead, students will work in different learning studios suited for the type of work they need to undertake—be that individual or group work. Students will progress when they master concepts, not based on the calendar.

Richard Kahlenberg, *a senior fellow at The Century Foundation*

The American school calendar, with its long summer break, is a critical driver of inequality of opportunity. Years ago, researchers at Johns Hopkins University noted that low-income students do comparatively well during the school year but then suffer a summer setback in learning. Doris Entwisle, Karl Alexander, and Linda Steffel Olson [noted](#), “children from poor and middle-class families make comparable gains during the school year, but while the middle-class children make gains when they are out of school during the summer, poor and disadvantaged children make few gains or even move backwards academically.”

Free public schooling will be offered year round. But the summer curriculum will look different than that of the regular school year. As the Hopkins scholars noted, traditional summer-school programs—which generally provide more of the same from the traditional school year—have been disappointing, leading to few academic gains for students. Instead, summer programs will consist of the type of programs that middle-class children enjoy during the summer—trips to zoos, parks, and museum that enrich learning.

The school day will also start and end later than it currently does. Scheduling will be based on health research on the optimal hours for student learning, not the convenience of adults.

Michelle Rhee, *the founder of StudentsFirst and the former chancellor of Washington, D.C., public schools*

Students and their families will have the option to choose the schooling calendar that is best for them. Traditional, year-round, semester, and trimester options will be available to best support community members. School districts will also provide morning and evening programming and learning opportunities for families who seek extended school-day options. Class lengths may vary across schools, but teachers and students will both have ample time for instruction and hands-on applications.

Randi Weingarten, *the president of the American Federation of Teachers*

We will reimagine public education with multiple pathways for students to discover and pursue their own passions. So when we think about the calendar, we will think much less about identifying a magic number of days, and more about what students and communities need.

It isn't simply more time in class. In countries that outperform us, students spend less time in class, not more. Children—especially young children—learn through play and activities.

Some kids may need a safe place in the evening, a meal during school breaks, or opportunities for engagement and learning outside of school hours. That's where community schools can play a big role, especially in hard-hit areas—staying open late and year-round, offering a place for kids to find activities that keep them engaged and out of harm's way.

And the summer learning gap holds back kids who live in poverty and don't have the same opportunities for out-of-school learning as their more-advantaged peers. We will ensure that kids have those kinds of opportunities in high-poverty communities, too. We will make sure schools are open longer hours for students and their families so they can stay engaged in learning through after-school and summer activities.

Check back tomorrow for the next installment in this series.

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