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EDITORIAL

Changes to school year an experiment worth trying

OUR SYMPATHIES GO out to parents trying to juggle multiple lives with their children's schools' calendars. But we are encouraged to see changes being made in schools that cost little money yet could have dramatic impact.

Studies indicate that students' retention of information diminishes greatly with a three-month sabbatical from their studies. Many schools, for various reasons, have gone to year-round schedule, and retention seems improved.

Apparently, however, simply shortening summer vacation could help students better hold on to last year's knowledge and will allow less rehashing of subjects and more opportunity to acquire new information.

One or two weeks cut from summer vacation is a small price to pay for those results.

So the Mt. Diablo Unified School District plans to have schools that normally open after Labor Day start before Labor Day this year.

However, not everyone is thrilled with this plan.

Of course, the students are not. Despite cries of "I'm bored" practically from the day school closes, most of them still don't want to be in school. Too bad.

But many parents, who also spend a lot of time wishing summer break was over, aren't highly supportive of the plan. Many complain about increased child care and vacation planning problems.

We encourage parents to pull out their calendars early, put it alongside the school year calendars and cobble together a vacation plan for the long-term benefit of the education their children will receive.

We are glad to hear parents concerned about things that cut into their family time. However, we question in many cases the logic. Parents have made other decisions that cut into the family time. They choose bigger houses, more material objects, longer commutes and longer work hours. They choose to enroll their children into every extra curricular activity available every season.

They choose to send them off to camps and other countries as soon as school is out. Each is a valid choice, each with benefits, but each cuts into the family time that many complain the school year change is stealing.

Interestingly enough, these decisions school districts make to shorten summer or go year-round don't add any hours to the school year.

The vacation time around the other holidays increase. This should actually help families in planning to be together.

It certainly will help the schools, many of which suffer lower attendance -- and thus lower state funding because that funding is based on daily attendance -- because parents won't have to pull their kids out of school on those days leading up to or directly following holidays.

The degree to which that happens makes one wonder where education falls on the parental priority list. We could actually make a strong case for lengthening the school year -- as in adding more hours, not just rearranging them.

For now, however, we support this simple change being made by Mt. Diablo at least as an experiment worth trying.

We know that the results will be difficult to track and will be at least partially anecdotal, but this could be highly effective in improving the education our children receive as well as increasing the amount of money the district receives from the state.