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Kids sharpen academic skills to avoid 'summer regression'



Janet Coykendall listens to her son, Brandon, 8, read, but daughter Sarah, 5, is less-than-enthusiased about the project. Brandon, a student at Ottawa River Elementary, has gone to an optional summer school every year since kindergarten to keep him from suffering what is known as 'summer regression.'
(THE BLADE/ALLAN DETRICH)

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By **IGNAZIO MESSINA**
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Eight-year-old Brandon Coykendall spent most of his summer playing outside with other kids in his Point Place neighborhood.

But from mid-June to mid-July, his days started at Toledo Public School's Longfellow Elementary - a step he was not required to take but one his mother thought would give him a boost when it was time to return to school in the fall.

His mother, Janet Coykendall, said she has enrolled him in optional summer school each year so he can hit the ground running when the new school year starts.

"I think he has greatly improved with the summer schools each year," Ms. Coykendall said. "If I let him go a summer, then we are going to fall behind."

When school starts in just a little more than three weeks, many teachers will review material from last school year to help make up for "summer regression."

Hundreds of local families like the Coykendalls took advantage of programs to keep their children sharp - even up to the high school level. But the vast majority will return to school without that extra help.

At some schools, the reviews can last weeks and cut into valuable school days needed to get children ready for important state testing.

Harris Cooper, a psychology professor at Duke University who has conducted studies for the U.S. Department of Education on school calendar variations, said modifying the calendar can help students recoup knowledge they might otherwise lose during the summer.

He compared standardized test scores before students left school and when they got back after the traditional summer break.

"Children on average lost about a month of grade level achievement score," Mr. Cooper said.

"It was also the case that kids lost more math than anything; middle-class children tended to hold their own in reading, where economically disadvantaged children tended to lose more in math and reading," he said.

Maria Bailey, a literacy specialist for Toledo Public Schools, said summer school can certainly combat summer regression, but parents also can help by simply reading to their children or keeping them sharp with math problems.

"Reading one minute a day to a child would get that child 8,000 new words a year," she said. "Reading 20 minutes a day, and that child gets 1.8 million new words in a year."

Ms. Bailey also stressed: "Some kids, no matter what they did over the summer, are darn smart and can just pick right up where they left off."

Tami Perez, a third-grade teacher at Whittier Elementary, said her first quarter includes a lot of remedial learning.

"I always send things home for kids to do over the summer," she said. "I tell them to read every day for like half an hour or practice math."

Ms. Perez said parents of probably only about 3 of 25 children in a class work regularly with their children over the summer.

"Sure it's disappointing, because kids probably learn more from home than they do in school," Ms. Perez said. "But many parents have a busy lifestyle."

Dan Dippman, a social studies teacher at Genoa High School in Ottawa County, said high school students need less remedial work than younger children.

"There is probably not as much regression in social studies as, say, math or reading," Mr. Dippman. "I do review, probably for two or three weeks, to catch them up."

One of the most difficult things for students to get used to is getting up early after sleeping late all summer, Mr. Dippman added.

The Center for American Progress, a nonpartisan think tank, said last year that a new school calendar could address summer regression.

Year-round schools are now operated in 434 school districts in 46 states and the District of Columbia, according to the National Association for Year-Round Education.

Sam Pepper, the group's executive director, agreed that students who experience little or no academic growth over the summer can lose one to three months of learning.

"Our guideline is that no break should extend more than eight weeks and that six is what we consider to be optimum," Mr. Pepper said.

Susan Wolf, school leader of Wildwood Environmental Academy charter school in Springfield Township, said special-education children were offered individualized help over the summer.

"If a child is in special education, you have to look at whether they are going to be regressing over the summer," Ms. Wolf said. "I think that is why some schools have chosen to go to year-round schooling instead of having the summer break."

The Dayton Public School District altered its school calendar several years ago - starting some schools in mid-July and the rest in mid-August. All would end at the same time.

The district's calendar was changed back last school year so all schools would be uniform, said Jill Moberly, the system's spokesman.

School starts tomorrow for the Dayton district, but students have the same number of instructional days because they have three breaks through the year, Ms. Moberly said

In Toledo, Old West End Academy in Toledo starts Aug. 15, Early College High School starts Aug. 21, Grove Patterson starts on Aug. 22, and all the other schools start on Aug. 29. Old West End and Grove Patterson also have longer school days.

Other schools in the Toledo region start throughout the end of August.

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