# School terms and holidays literature review

## 1. Historical context

The current academic year 'model' was originally established in pre-industrial times to facilitate crop harvesting over the summer months. At the time all able-bodied young people, including children, were required to work to ensure a successful harvest. Thus, at the core of the school year model was the necessity for an aligned holiday period in July and August. The resulting academic year was ordered into three terms, these being split by Christmas and Easter (participation in these significant religious celebrations was/is very widespread). Therefore, to understand the reasoning underpinning the model for the academic year both socio-economic and religious factors must be considered.

## 2. Prevailing baseline for England and Wales – 3 terms

As mentioned previously, the school year in the UK is generally divided into three terms running from autumn to summer. The school year consists of 195 days, of which there are 190 teaching days and 5 INSET teacher training days.

Most schools operate a three-term school year, each term divided in half by a week-long 'half-term' break, and are structured as follows:

- Autumn term: Early September to mid December (half term: late October)
- *Christmas holiday period (approx 2 weeks)*
- Spring Term: Early January to Easter (half term: mid February)
- *Easter holiday period (approx 2 weeks)*
- Summer Term: Easter to mid July (half term: late May/early June)

As noted, the terms are bisected by both the Christmas and Easter holidays.

## 3. Proposals to revise the 3-term academic year model to 5-terms

In 1999, a House of Commons Education Select Committee recommended that schools move from the standard 3-term academic year to a five-term model. It was proposed that each term should be eight weeks long with a two-week break in between terms (thus abolishing half terms). The summer break period was proposed to last a minimum of 4 weeks. These proposals were introduced at a small number of schools nationally.

## 4. Evidence – Why change the academic year model?

The principle focus of evidence, which is sited broadly in the media (see press coverage for links) is concerned with claims that some pupils can experience a developmental /educational lag, which, in part, is brought on by the lengthy 6-week summer holiday period. It is intimated that this lag can delay academic progress for some pupils. On deeper examination, some of the evidence which underpins this claim comes from the National Summer Learning Association at Johns Hopkins

University in Baltimore, USA. It is reported that the "summer slide" disproportionately affects low-income students, contributing to high drop-out rates and a persistent academic achievement gap between richer and poorer students. With this need in mind, academics at Johns Hopkins University established a national organization whose purpose was to make high quality summer learning available to all children, especially those from low socio economic groups. This organisation became known as the National Summer Learning Association.

Thus, it appears that a long summer holiday period can lead to some deterioration in pupils academic skills, however, research indicates that this finding is more evident when considering mathematic skills and spelling. In addition, the detrimental impact is more markedly felt by those pupils of low-socio economic status. Conversely, the long summer period actually sees an increase in English reading skills for 'middle class' pupils. It is purported that this improvement is due to middle class pupils having more positive resources available to them over the holiday period, more access to books and summer learning schemes, and general encouragement from parents to read during the break. Therefore, the evidence underpinning a potential change to the academic year model is contradictory.

**5. Other issues to consider**

The evidence base for a summer learning lag is pretty explicit in the US. It is expected that similar issues arise in the UK. In order to mitigate against the negative impact on pupil's learning that the summer months have, the main recommendation would be to establish an outstanding and coherent scheme of summer/holiday learning for the pupils of Nottingham City. As demonstrated in America, such schemes can and do counter the educational loss experienced when no enriched summer activities are on offer. Partnership working with Universities and well-performing schools/academies may create a strong network to manage such a scheme.

A more prudent financial mitigation method to counter the summer learning loss may be to reduce the length of the 6-week summer break, currently in place across maintained schools in the LA. It could be argued that this proposal alone would not provide a proactive solution to resolve learning loss for our children and young people. However, a combined reduction in time away from school and the establishment of a summer learning scheme in the City may be a gold standard approach to tackling the summer learning slide and mitigating the underlying socio-economic inequalities across the City.

There have been mixed reports from educationalists, some suggest that the current pattern of terms and holidays is essential to allow both teachers and pupils down time to recover from a heavy workload during term. It is suggested that any reduction in the length of the summer break would not be accepted by teachers and their associated unions. However, others in the field argue that teacher planning would be simplified by having consistent term times. Blocks of learning would be better matched to consistent terms, and would allow teachers to move away from the necessity to front load some periods in the year, in order to ensure that pupils cover the necessary curriculum before their next holiday break. Whether there is research evidence to underpin these claims remains to be seen.

## 6. Current local position

In terms of statutory requirements, Nottingham City Council works to national guidelines which state that schools must open for 380 half-day sessions (190 days) in each school year, beginning with the first term to start after July. Statutory conditions of service for teachers require up to 195 working/'term' days a year. In Nottingham there are 190 teaching days for pupils, but 195 working/'term' days for staff. The additional 5 days include an administration day which is set by the Local Authority. The remaining 4 'term' days are in-service training days for staff.

In addition to the LA-maintained schools, there are 4 secondary academies currently in operation, one of which also includes a primary-element academy. Only 2 of these providers operate amended academic years. Djanogly City Academy Nottingham operates a 5-term academic year and Bulwell Academy a 6-term.

According to information on 'www.teachernet.gov.uk' under current law, LAs and school governing bodies can make changes to local terms and holidays after consulting locally. The DfE would expect wide consultation and if any changes were made, ample notice to parents, teachers and others so they can plan accordingly. In essence, LAs are free to change to an alternative academic year model within the current legal framework.

## 7. Research Evidence

7.1 Cooper, H. 2003. Summer learning loss: The problem and some solutions. *ERIC Digest*, May. Champaign, IL: Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

**Key Findings:**

Concerns regarding negative impact of summer break include equality issues in that disadvantaged children and children with special educational needs experience more summer learning loss. Also, children learn best with continuous education.

Research shows children perform one month lower on tests in the fall than when they left school in the spring. Knowledge loss is more pronounced in math facts and spelling, and is greater in math overall than reading. All students experienced equal math learning loss, but disadvantaged children had a greater loss of reading achievement than other students.

Common remedies for summer learning loss are an extended school year, summer school, and a modified academic calendar.

An extended school year could have a positive effect on student learning if coupled with curricula reform.

Summer school is an effect intervention, and research supports larger positive results for middle-class families.

A modified calendar, effectively shortening summer, improves disadvantaged achievement, has shown improvement in student performance in recent programs,

and receives reports of positive experience when programs contain parental involvement.

**Link**

http://www.ericdigests.org/2003-5/summer.htm

**7.2** Entwisle, D. R. and K. L. Alexander. 1992. Summer setback: Race, poverty, school composition, and mathematics achievement in the first two years of school. *American Sociological Review* 57 (1): 72-84.

**Key Findings:**

Differences in children's math achievement associated with family economic level significantly higher than difference linked to school racial mix. Economic factors are far more important than school racial settings.

Home disadvantages are compensated for in school. Seasonal comparisons show that in summer children below the poverty level demonstrate loss of knowledge whereas children not in poverty demonstrate gains. Yet, when poverty is controlled, summer gains and losses are not very different between races.

Racial mix plays a role in knowledge loss during school time. After 2 years there is a noticeable gap between African American and white children.

Possibility of mixing students is difficult in Baltimore and across the nation because of city demographics.

**Link**

http://www.jstor.org/pss/2096145

**7.3** Alexander, K. L., D. R. Entwisle, and L. S. Olson. 2007. Summer learning and its implications: Insights from the beginning school study. *New Directions for Youth Development* 2007 (114): 11-32.

**Key Findings:**

The beginning School Study began in 1982 and followed Baltimore students from first grade through high school and after, until age 22. Half of the students were from low-income families and for all students summer school attendance was rare.

Over early elementary grades disadvantaged students and better-off students had parallel learning gains from fall to spring, but from spring to fall better-off students continued to gain whereas disadvantaged students remain the same or have learning loss. The summer loss is large enough to account for almost all of the increase in achievement gap across social lines during elementary grades.

The adverse educational consequences for disadvantaged children from early patterns of cognitive development, traces back to students' lives outside of school. Outside of school time during preschool, and elementary years, account for almost

the entire achievement gap between low and high socioeconomic status (SES) children at the start of high school.

All children learn more in school than not in school, and disadvantaged children come closer to keeping up with better-off children during the school year than summer months. Therefore, low-income students need school like activities such as after-school programming, summer programming, and modified calendars in order to improve their academic scores and depend on the school to provide these opportunities.

Interventions should be targeted at elementary grades or before. Quality preschool and full-day kindergarten programs can reduce the first grade achievement gap associated with SES.

Supplementation of learning resources in early grades helps children maintain academic edge and the benefits continue into upper grades. Programs should include enrichment activities along with academics.

**Link**

http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/114286267/abstract?CRETRY=1&SRETRY=0

**7.4** National Summer Learning Association. 2009. Summer can set kids on the right – or wrong – course: Interview with Karl Alexander. Research in Brief. Baltimore: National Summer Learning Association.

**Key Findings**

Low-income youth suffer significantly from loss of academic skills over the summer time and losses pile up summer to summer contributing to the achievement gap. Two-thirds of the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged kids is explained by what happens over summers during elementary school.

Low-income students begin school with lower achievement scores than their peers, but progress at the same level during the school year. In the summer, low-income students remain at the same level or fall behind while advantaged children's skills increase over the summer.

Children that are better off are more likely to go to the library and take books home, engage in a variety of enrichment experiences, take out-of-town vacations, and engage in organized activities and lessons.

Summer learning loss accounts for a two-third difference in the likelihood of students pursuing a college preparatory track in high school. Thus, Summer learning is important to academic achievement.

Children without an enriching home base need planned, structured summer experiences. Summer programs providers can use current research, inform the

media and parents, and enlist the support of community partners to ensure programs are available.

**Link**

http://www.summerlearning.org/resource/resmgr/publications/2009.alexander_research_brie.pdf

**7.5** Cooper, H., B. Nye, K. Charlton, J. Lindsay, and S. Greathouse. 1996. The effects of summer vacation on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research* 66 (3): 227-268.

**Key Findings:**

Summer vacation results in learning loss on achievement test scores equivalent to one month on a grade-level equivalent scale. Loss is greater for math overall than reading overall and greatest for math computation and spelling. Reading loss varies with economic class. Middle-class children display reading gains and lower-class students experience reading loss.

Negative effects of summer vacation increase with student grade level.

Suggested explanations for summer learning loss are the differing availability of opportunities to practice academic material over the summer, differing susceptibility of education material to memory decay, and differing economic status of families which possibly provides varying opportunities to practice and learn education material relative to economic class.

The authors find summer school should focus on mathematics if catering to all students or on reading if the goal is to eliminate the effects of economic inequality based summer learning loss. Furthermore, the authors support academic calendar changes in order to minimize the negative effect of summer vacation on learning and how summer learning loss is not equal for all students.

**Link**

http://www.jstor.org/pss/1170523

**7.6** Borman, G. D., M. E. Goetz, and M. Dowling. 2009. Halting the summer achievement slide: A randomized field trial of the KindergARTen summer camp. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* 14 (2): 133-147.

**Key Findings:**

Research shows a noticeable summer learning loss for all students, but is most evident with low-income students. The loss is greatest in math, but the difference in achievement gap between disadvantaged and advantaged students is largest in reading. The summer loss is a key cause of the widening achievement gaps between children of low and high socioeconomic status.

Summer school is a possible mechanism for closing the achievement gap. KindergARTen Camp is a summer program model which has a noticeable impact on students' reading achievement. The program focuses not only on reading academics but also on enrichment activities.

Pre-test and post-test score comparisons revealed KindergARTen Camp made important differences for students who participated, specifically in reading gains.

Attendance is of practical and statistical significance. Students with better attendance demonstrated greater improvement than their peers.

**Link**

http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a910824336

**7.7** Entwisle, D. R., K. L. Alexander, and L. S. Olson. 2001. Keep the faucet flowing. *American Educator* 25 (3).

**Key Findings**

Differences in schools and differences in home environments are the two areas analysts focus on when addressing why poor children do worse academically than children from advantaged families.

Disadvantaged students lose ground over the summer and advantaged students gain. The pattern persists over the first five summers of schooling and accounts for the gap in test scores between low and high socioeconomic children.

The "faucet theory" suggests that in school the resource faucet is on for all students, but during the summer the resource faucet is off. Advantaged families make up for school resources so children can continue learning but disadvantaged families cannot make up for lost resources. Furthermore, High-income parents take an active role in their students' learning whereas low-income parents do not, deferring to schools.

Although standardized test scores show improvement in low-income students throughout the school year, children receive low marks on school work and class exams. Thus, low-income parents believe their children are performing poorly and students are frustrated. Yet, Low marks for disadvantaged children are in relation to the school's socioeconomic status. Low class marks are not a grade of how much students improve, but rather where students begin.

Summer school tends to show little success because students performing better during the year take advantage of the opportunity over poor performing children.

The best course of action includes the following:

- Provide poor children with high-quality, full day preschool and summer school both before and after first grade. Also, poor children need to attend kindergarten.

- Create summer school for poorer children which adds on to pre-school and focuses on reading.
- Engage children in sports with complicated rules that require children to take on different roles. Coaches need to offer positive reinforcement.

Current education practice perpetuates the assumption that low-income children are slower learners which colours parents' perception of their child's ability. Parents need to know that simple activities can have a large impact on improving their child's academic achievement.

**Link**

http://archive.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/fall2001/faucet.html

**3. Further references**

1. Cooper, H., Charlton, K., Valentine, J. C., & Muhlenbruck, L. (2000). Making the most of summer school. A meta-analytic and narrative review. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 65 (1, Serial No. 260), 1-118.

2. Cooper, H., Nye, B., Charlton, K., Lindsay, J., & Greathouse, S. (1996). The effects of summer vacation on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 66, 227-268.

3. Alexander, K. L., Entwisle D. R., & Olson L. S. (2007a). Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. *American Sociological Review, 72*, 167-180.