

## Keep camp in summer

A move to make school year longer is a threat to a pillar of U.S. education

*By Marla Coleman*

President Barack Obama's ambitious plans for reforming the nation's schools include extending the length of the school year. "You're competing for jobs with kids from India and China," Obama's Education Secretary Arne Duncan told students recently in Denver. "Schools should be open six, seven days a week; eleven, twelve months a year."

If this sounds like a pretty good idea, think about this: It would mean the end of summer camp as we know it. After 150 years, this would be tragic for American education.

Whether it's day camp or sleepaway, children learn what they cannot glean in school. A nation whose top priority is education in the broadest sense needs to have camp as a cornerstone of learning.

One mother I know compares the morning ritual of donning the camp shirt to "changing into a Superman cape" for her son, because of the self-confidence he gets.

Just about anyone who has been to camp knows the feeling. It's one of the lessons that camp, as an informal, experiential learning community, teaches better than school. Campers develop more sophisticated social skills and grow more independent, more adventurous and more willing to try new things.

A parent once told me that the family was on a ski vacation, and his son was apprehensive at the top of a difficult run. The father "talked him down" by making this simple statement: "Pretend you are at camp. What would you do?" The child responded, "Thanks, Dad, I've got it from here." Down the slope he went.

The skills camp teaches are also crucial for competing successfully in the adult world. Daniel Goleman, psychologist and author of "Emotional Intelligence," discovered in his studies of highly successful adults that it wasn't grades but other qualities that distinguished them from peers: empathy, optimism, teamwork and the ability to bounce back from failure.

These are not subjects offered at school. The teacher-centric mode of instruction isn't favorable for encouraging human connections; classroom walls limit hands-on experience in the natural world.

Even a champion for year-round school wrote recently in *The Washington Post* that her children learn more during camp-like intersessions in their modified-calendar school than in the classroom:

"My daughter had no idea that she was learning chemistry when her Harry Potter class made butter beer and chocolate frogs. My son developed a much better grasp of plot and character when he had to create both on film."

This is how learning happens at camp every day.

In school, we learn about biology by dissecting a dead critter, whereas at camp, we observe the wonder of the living world by trying to grasp a hopping amphibian in its natural habitat. And research shows that increased contact with nature can improve problem-solving, creativity, self-esteem and self-discipline. It's not that school has failed, but that camp is also essential. Might they be the yin and yang of education?

Because camp doesn't teach to a standardized test, and keeps no grades or permanent records, children are free to go at their own pace to conquer their fears. One child whose dread of horses left him afraid even to get on a carousel, for example, sat self-assuredly on a horse at camp within a few weeks.

Time after time, parents will describe their child as defiant or teachers will label a child as a poor listener, while camp counselors manage to channel the same child's energy onto the courts, fields, stages or workshops. Children often shine when they can focus on what they are good at.

Philliber Research studied 80 camps in 2003 and 2004 and noted significant growth in campers' self-esteem, independence, leadership, friendship skills, social comfort, peer relationships, courage, environmental awareness, ethics and spirituality. A national survey conducted in 2007 by TRU, a youth research company, found that middle and high school students who attended camp are less likely than non-campers to say they drink, use marijuana or engage in sexual behavior.

They also may be less prone to obesity. Text-messaging, e-mail and video games, have made children more sedentary than ever. From this point of view, increasing the amount of time spent at a school or homework desk by hours, days or months is not a feasible solution for improving education.

But let's say Obama's plan passes, and it becomes impossible to have summer camp. Is there any hope of salvaging some of the experience?

Already camps partner with schools, offering after-school care, weekend and extended-vacation camp experiences. We would see more of this, though these programs lack the unique design and intentions of a camp community.

Unless we are certain that more of the same will yield better educational results, as opposed to what we get from a more holistic approach, we must defend the camp tradition. Remember, more school does not equal better-educated children. As one veteran youth counselor says, "School prepares you for college. Camp prepares you for life."

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