

Summer. Weak link in American education

Ah, summer: Lazy, grassy afternoons, damp towels, the scent of chlorine. It's a sweet scenario; but for working parents, summer is a treacherous season, filled with wrangling and expense over how to fill the 10-week break with worthwhile activities and good supervision.

Like many full-time working parents, my husband and I spend more than \$7,000 a year on day camp for our two children. We employ an afternoon baby-sitter, too, who also has to be paid. Every October, we start saving to meet the cost. And we're among the lucky families.

Pat Lenehan, a single father in Deer Park, told Newsday he may have to leave his 11-year-old home alone if Suffolk County, N.Y., eliminates the family from its subsidized child care program. High demand and lower state funding may force the county to drop 1,200 children this month.

Yet increasingly, children are being raised in homes where all the adults work. In 2010, nearly half of households with children were headed by two working parents, and another quarter were single-parent homes.

The answer isn't more child care, it's more school. That would solve a much bigger problem than what to do with the kids during the summer: the need to improve education.

Most students lose academic skills over the summer. And we've known since 1964, when standardized tests began comparing students worldwide, that our kids rank poorly — currently in the bottom half among 30 developed nations in problem-solving, reading, math and science.

Many school reforms have rolled through our classrooms in the past four decades, but one thing we haven't tried on a large scale is more time in

whites and Asians.

Some cities have organized summer learning programs for low-income kids. Summerbridge in Pittsburgh is high-energy and hands-on — which must be a nice contrast with the regular classroom.

In Indianapolis, 11 charities pooled \$3 million to create a summer program that builds on the city's patchwork of day camps, community centers, sports camps and summer jobs programs. It is staffed by volunteers from fire departments and 100 Black Men of Indianapolis, a group that mentors young people.

Long Island could make similar use of our recreational abundance. Better yet, we could do it in cooperation with school districts. That sort of innovation would require thinking collectively instead of every parent for himself or herself.

For some kids, summer breaks can be lonely, boring and even dangerous. We should put our imaginations to work to find better solutions for those lazy, grassy afternoons.

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class. At 180 days a year, Americans have one of the shortest school years. Germany, Japan and South Korea average 220 to 230 days.

By eighth grade, American students have spent roughly 400 fewer days in school than kids in those countries. Not coincidentally, perhaps, middle school is where Americans begin to fall behind their peers.

Low-income students tend to suffer more summer learning loss, according to sociologists from Johns Hopkins University who tracked 800 Baltimore students over 20 years.

The better-off kids retained more over the summer break. Their minds were stimulated by trips to the library, to museums and concerts, and out-of-town vacations. They participated in organized sports and lessons.

But the lower-income students in the Baltimore study fell back.

Researchers blamed summer breaks for two-thirds of the achievement gap seen between low-income students and their better-off peers by ninth grade — a persistent and debilitating drag on American public schools that often translates into Hispanic and black students doing worse than