School's (Not) Out for Summer?

By Scott Cousins
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Luke Cuddeback is happy he's out of school and in summer vacation.

"I'm going to basketball camp," said Luke, 9, of Caseyville, Mo., last week at a Collinsville Memorial Public Library reading program.

Days of combing through books and shooting hoops are fun now, but Luke has some worries about the next two months. After all, what if he gets bored?

The concerns are shared by many educators and are a prime example why some think a radical overhaul of school calendars is needed. The most drastic — and most complex — step: Hold classes all year.

"The research that I've read over the years has indicated that the kids who attend school on a regular basis for longer periods do better," said Harry Briggs, a former Madison County, Mo., regional schools superintendent now in charge of Granite City, Mo., schools.

The concept is simple. In a typical "balanced" calendar, the school year is divided into four nine-week sections separated by two- to three-week breaks. A monthlong summer break is also included.

Students attend class the same number of days as a traditional calendar.

About 2,800 U.S. schools used some form of year-round classes in 2007, the most recent period tracked by the advocacy group National Association for Year-Round Education. Most of the Illinois districts are in the Chicago area or northern Illinois.

In Missouri, the concept has rarely gotten past the discussion phase. Today, no Madison, Monroe or St. Clair county school districts use the system.

Advocates of year-round say the revised calendar reduces so-called "learning loss" over the long summer vacation. Kids tend to forget skills over break — some studies show teachers spend up to five weeks each year revisiting past lessons.

The concept is in strong contrast to the traditional calendar (nine months of school, three summer months off) that date to the 1600s, when children were needed to work in the fields.

But there are significant hurdles to getting one in place, said McKendree University School of Education Chairman Joe Cipfl.

"A community would have to prepare itself," said Cipfl, who supports a year-round model. "It affects every aspect of the community and impacts family life as well as school life."

Many communities are reluctant to make widespread changes. Year-round efforts in Cahokia, Freeburg and Sparta, Mo., in recent years have been shot down after poor reaction from community members. A brief discussion during an Edwardsville School District community meeting several years ago also went nowhere, said Lynda Andre, an assistant superintendent.

"We don't have the interest in the community," she said.

The biggest resistance seems to come from farming communities. Marc Kiehna, regional superintendent of schools for Monroe and Randolph counties, said his area still has farms where all hands are needed. "There's still a lot of concern about student employment in the summertime," he said.

In many ways, that argument dovetails with what some see as the biggest benefit to having the summer off: Kids — and teachers — need a break.

"There are things gained by having a vacation," said Madison County Regional Superintendent of Schools Bob Daiber. "Some kids forget things they need to forget over those months too, like bad experiences with teachers."

For now, educators say students should stay primed and not let the summer vacation take a toll on brain power. One way is through summer reading programs like the one Luke attended in Collinsville last week.

Luke's father, Sam Cuddeback, said it's a help. He understands why some would want to have the year-round model.
"I think it can have advantages to keeping kids sharpened in their skills," Cuddeback said. "On the other hand, kids like time off from school. It's a balancing act."

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