

American Educational Research Association

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**Reconstructing Summer Vacation:
CUNY Education Professor Sets Record Straight**

WASHINGTON, DC, July 30, 2001 — Contrary to popular belief, these lazy, hazy days of summer that elementary, middle and high school students today enjoy stem not from labor practices of 19th-century agrarian America, according to an historian of education.

"Rural areas held very tentative winter and summer sessions throughout most of the 19th century, leaving the spring and fall completely open for farm work," explains Kenneth M. Gold of the City University of New York. "Cities opened schools nearly year round in the antebellum era, and neither setting had a well-established summer vacation until after the Civil War."

What difference does setting the record straight make?

As an historian of education at the CUNY's College of Staten Island, Professor Gold wants to remind policy-makers what parents seem to know about this long-standing school and entrenched cultural practice: "Summer has always served social purposes beyond the cognitive development of children.

"As school systems across the country raise academic standards and initiate rigorous and mandatory assessments, they have assigned an important role to summer schools," says Gold, an assistant professor of education whose book, *School's In: The History of Summer Education in American Public Schools*, is scheduled to be published in the spring of 2002 by Peter Lang Publishing. He presented his research on school calendars and summer vacations to colleagues at the American Educational Research Association's annual meeting, held this spring in Seattle.

In reviewing school calendars and summer vacations from the 19th century, Professor Gold gleaned that summer vacation emerged from the processes of centralization, professionalization and standardization within public education. Larger cultural practices and medical beliefs played a role as well.

City and state school officials pried away control of the school calendar from local districts partly to establish uniform vacations. They also feared that over-taxing students with too much schooling would impair their health. While teachers needed to rest too, a lengthy vacation was intended to give them time for professional development, he notes.

"Summer appeared to be the natural season for this vacation," he adds. "It was a hot and sticky time to be in school, it was already established as the vacation time of the social elite who ran the fledging school systems, and it was seen as the academically weakest of the school terms.

"In cities like New York and Chicago, students who are not promoted at the end of the school year are mandated to attend summer school and pass examinations in August in order to move into the next grade," he says. "As high absentee rates in New York have shown, students and families do not lightly give up summer vacations.

"Of course, knowing that some American children once attended school in the summer-only if they were not contributing to the family economy-will not make families more likely to enroll their children today," he says.

"If parents, educators and policy-makers know that summer vacations were conscious creations, not natural byproducts of an agrarian economy," Professor Gold argues, "then they can reconstruct summers that balance academic goals with other activities that may have more lasting importance."

"Mass and elite cultures, rich and poor, people of color and white alike participate in activities centered on summer vacation and warm weather: Fourth of July fireworks, baseball games, outdoor concerts, amusement parks, summer camps and camping, barbecues, hours by the pool, days at the beach, weekends at the shore, and months abroad," Professor Gold notes.

"There are also a legion of cultural artifacts, from the Fresh Prince rap music to Edith Wharton literature, that edify images of summer freedom, romance, personal growth and more," Professor Gold says.

"Increasing summer school may be a good educational policy for raising standardized test scores, but is it good social policy to tamper with the season during which many families and friends forge their most enduring bonds and memories?"

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The American Educational Research Association (AERA), a professional society that represents more than 23,000 educators who conduct research and evaluation in education, offers a comprehensive program of scholarly publications, training, fellowships, and meetings to disseminate research findings and improve the profession. Founded in 1916, AERA is based in Washington, D.C.

Editor's Note: To interview Professor Gold, please call (718) 982-3737.