

### The case for reducing school holidays

Jonathan Gullis MP

#### Summary of the findings

- It is time to shorten the school holidays by two weeks and redistribute the remaining fortnight across the Summer and Autumn terms. This would increase teaching time, reduce burdens on parents and help children who have lost out from disrupted learning during the pandemic.
- The global shift towards home working since March has presented considerable challenges to working families. Parents have been forced to juggle full-time employment with full-time parenting. Many have struggled to find, let alone afford, childcare to help them balance these demands. These challenges were especially acute over the summer holiday just gone.
- This experience is not just a function of the pandemic, but a common experience for working parents every year. The six-week summer holiday and long breaks throughout the year holds back working parents' finances and constrains their time. The arguments in favour of long holidays - a break from teaching and an opportunity for greater family time - are increasingly difficult to balance with our modern working culture and out of step with some of the most successful education systems in the world.
- Longer school holidays don't do children much good either, with disadvantaged pupils having to spend weeks of the term making up the lost time. If we care about working families, we should help children to catch up on lost learning and parents to catch up on lost earnings by cutting the summer and winter breaks.

School holidays can be a stressful time for many families. For working families, moving from six hours a day of free childcare during the week to multiple weeks of round the clock care simply isn't feasible.

Many families struggle to balance work and provide their children with a relaxing and entertaining school holiday. Many also find it hard to make ends meet during holidays, given the strain of forking out for childcare, extra summer activities, and an inflated food bill.

These problems are particularly acute in more financially disadvantaged families, stunting the educational and social progress of less well off children - simply because they cannot afford a month and a half's worth of stimulating activities that are readily available during the school term.

Earlier in the summer, the Government agreed to provide free school meals (FSM) during summer holidays to prevent holiday hunger. They were right to do so. Reclaiming two weeks of school time from the summer holiday period, and potentially reducing the Christmas break, would further ease the financial strain on working families.

We know that children who are not given nutritionally valuable food over the summer and winter months can suffer from weak growth and rising obesity. This is a particular problem in former industrial towns, as the link between economic deprivation and regional public health is strong. It has been found that some parents even struggle to afford essentials such as clothes, toothpaste, and toothbrushes.<sup>1</sup>

Summer clubs and funded activities are essential in the pursuit of a higher level of health and wellbeing by reducing loneliness, isolation and anti-social behaviour, as well as increasing social interactions, confidence and nutrition.<sup>2</sup>

By breaking up the school holidays into shorter and more manageable parts, evenly distributed across the school year, we can ease the financial burden on families caused by lengthy childcare costs or sacrificing work to do childcare and mediate the socioeconomic inequalities in both physical and mental health.

### **Box: The strain of school holidays on family budgets and child wellbeing**

The average cost of holiday childcare in the UK is £133 per week.<sup>3</sup> As of 2015, nursery costs had increased by 77% compared with 2003 while earnings have remained roughly the same.<sup>4</sup>

Oral evidence submitted by researchers and food bank staff to the APPG on Hunger described how food bank use accelerates significantly among families during the long summer holidays as they struggle to feed their children every day.<sup>5</sup> Professor Defeyter estimated that the loss of free school meals adds between £30 and £40 per week to parents' outgoings during school holidays.<sup>6</sup>

According to the APPG on Hunger's 2018 report, every year 3 million children are at risk of going hungry over the summer period every year. A study by UKActive found that on average, pupils lose up to 80% of the fitness they have accrued over term-time, with most summer camps and summer sporting activities are outside of the financial means of families.

UKActive researched this phenomenon in the North West of England, studying 8 and 9-year-olds over a 13-month period. It was found that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds suffered a greater loss of fitness following the summer holidays. These findings demonstrate that the poorest quarter of kids see a drop in their fitness levels 18 times greater than the wealthiest 25% over the summer.<sup>7</sup>

## The costs of holiday learning loss to children's attainment

There is strong evidence that holiday learning loss can and does contribute to widening attainment gaps between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students.<sup>89</sup>

Evidence shows that children from low socioeconomic status (SES) families in Britain start their educational career behind their peers from high SES families. The gap is evident at age three and widens by the age of five and expands at a faster rate in primary school (5–11years) than secondary school. Despite advances in education in recent decades and the hard work of teachers, poorer children still go on to perform less well in GCSE examinations at age 16 compared to children from higher SES families.<sup>10</sup>

This impacts on the career trajectory of poorer students through decreased likelihood of attending university and ergo poorer employment prospects.<sup>11</sup> Official data on this phenomenon in the UK can be difficult to come by however a number of reputable surveys have been conducted.

The UCL Institute of Education collected and analysed data about homeschooling from a sample of UK households and 4,559 children.<sup>12</sup> On average, during the second fortnight in April, pupils were doing an average of two and a half hours of school work per day. When broken down based on eligibility for FSM a shocking gap was observed.

Around a quarter of pupils eligible for FSM spent on average no time or under an hour on schooling compared with 18% of those students not eligible. This survey also found that roughly 20% of FSM pupils had no access to a computer at home. This figure rests at 7% for other students.

In March, Teach First surveyed teachers teaching in disadvantaged areas and found that 98% believed that some of their pupils would not have the necessary access to technology to continue learning online. The ‘COVID-19 slide’ estimated that pupils could return to school having made only 70% progress compared to a normal year in reading and only 50% in Maths.<sup>13</sup>

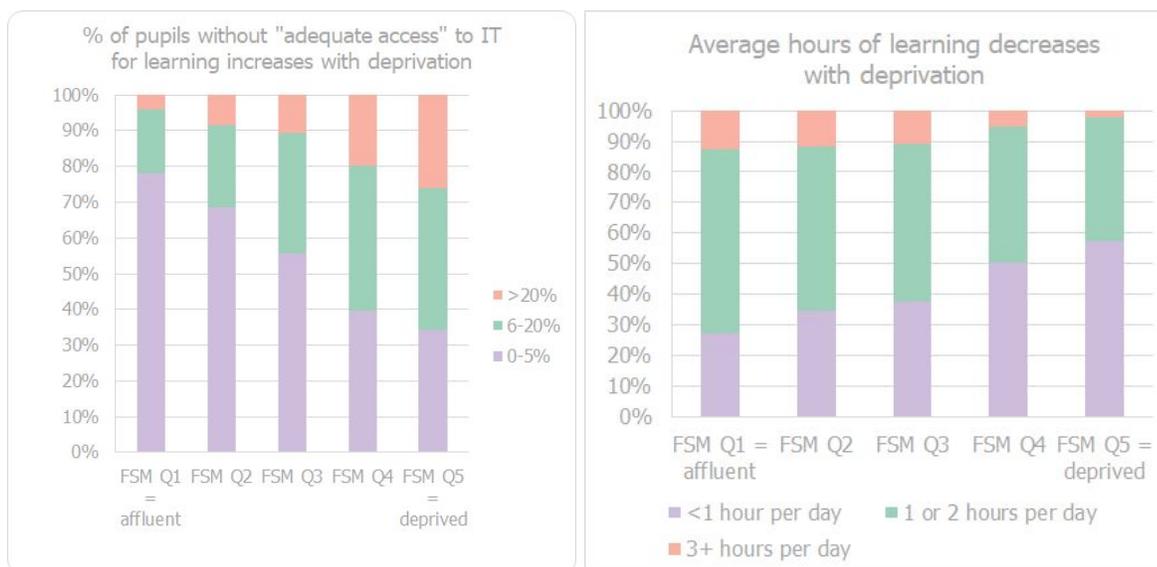
### The drawbacks of extended breaks for poorer families

While some studies do point to the importance of a break from academia to children’s personal growth and the expansion of key skills outside of the classroom, there are limits to this approach: extended breaks from safe, structured learning can also negatively impact a child’s growth and development.

While this can be made up by online projects and tutorials, experience shows that this is heavily reliant on family resources. Initiatives can be frustrated by a lack of IT access in the home or by multiple students in one household requiring use of equipment, as was common when schools closed earlier in the year due to the pandemic.

**Figure 1 & 2: Pupils’ access to IT and learning per day, against deprivation**

Source: House of Commons Library, Teacher Tapp



Another factor contributing to the attainment gap is the home environment, and specifically the involvement (or lack of) parents in a child’s educational development. This can present through lack of educational engagement as well as a lack of encouragement and the setting of expectations.

For more disadvantaged families, parents can be more unlikely to be able to provide this support due to work constraints and lack of resources to pay for educational outsourcing in the form of tutoring, learning software or homework clubs.

On return to school in September, considerable pressure is placed on students and teachers to ‘make up’ the stagnation and loss of learning that has occurred over the summer before being able to progress. Studies

have found that only after seven weeks of teaching were children able to exceed the level of education they achieved prior to the summer.<sup>14</sup>

## International comparisons

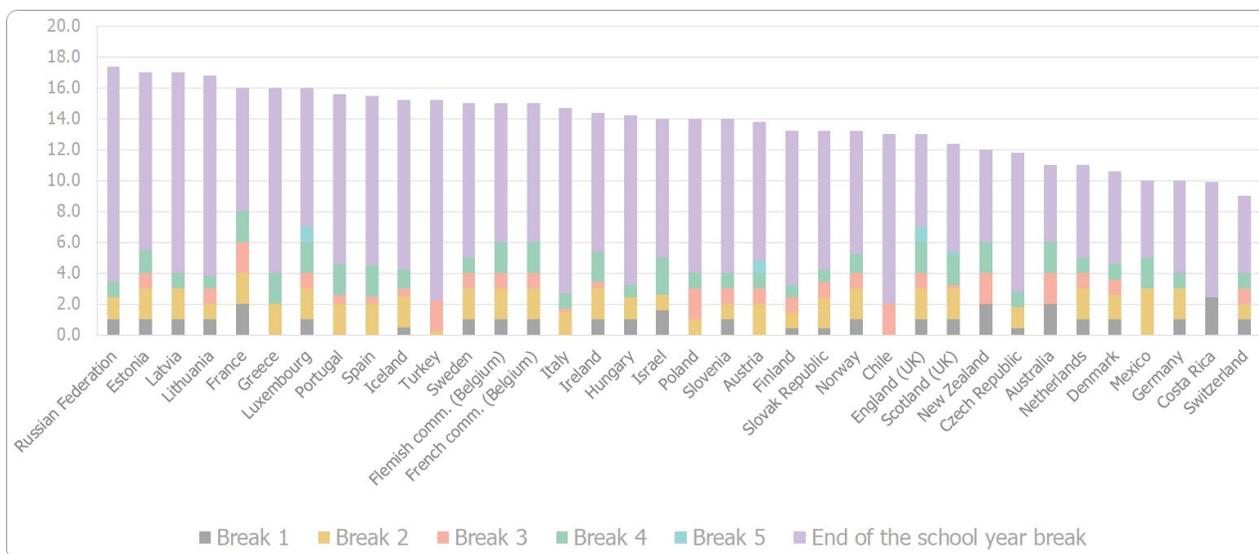
There is wide variation in school holiday duration around the world. In some parts of Asia, including high performing countries like South Korea and Japan, students are only on summer holiday for four weeks, whereas in Italy and Portugal pupils are typically out of school for up to 13 weeks.

In Europe, there are a number of education systems, such as some German Länder, the Netherlands and Denmark, which follow the UK’s model of a six week holiday, albeit with some variation between regions and different age groups.<sup>15</sup> A recent OECD report on the French education system called for the country to reduce its summer holiday period from 8 weeks to support educational competitiveness.<sup>16</sup>

Of the 36 countries listed in the OECD’s most recent *Education at a glance* report (see Figure 2 above), nine have shorter school holidays than England or Scotland, including Denmark (10.6 weeks), Mexico (10 weeks), Germany (10 weeks), and Switzerland (9 weeks).<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 2: Length of school breaks, by country, OECD**

Source: OECD (2018) Education at a glance, Indicator D1



Notes: breaks exclude public/religious days, except if these days are included in longer breaks.  
 1. Minimum length of breaks as some may be longer for some regions within the country.

This partly reflects differences in the school year. The UK school year is 190 days long. This is marginally longer than the OECD average but shorter than many of the countries which appear higher than the UK in the OECD PISA rankings. These include Singapore (193), Denmark (200), Japan (201), Korea (220) and Indonesia (244).

A number of academics have made the case for shorter summer holidays, including University of Bern Professor Tina Hascher, who has argued that four weeks of summer holiday should be enough to ensure pupils, teachers and parents are able to enjoy a degree of respite whilst mitigating the effects of the summer slide in learning.<sup>18</sup>

In the UK, free schools, academies and local authorities have the ability to tailor the length of summer holidays but have largely failed to change their approach. However a number of local developments signal a growing interest in reduced school holidays.

The Isle of Wight recently launched a pilot scheme following a row over non-authorized absences during the school term due to family holidays. In the ensuing public consultation, a clear majority of respondents favoured a shorter summer break and an extended autumn half term. A further pilot was scheduled for schools in Nottinghamshire before the pandemic, following a consultation from Nottingham County Council that found over two thirds of parents were in favour of the shorter summer break.

## The effect of lockdown on learning

While the effect of lost learning time on pupils' attainment cannot yet be predicted, there can be little doubt that the pandemic has exacerbated many of these problems.

In the UK, schools closed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, secondary schools reopened for selected year groups for face-to-face learning, twelve weeks after the initial shutdown. Three of those weeks were scheduled school holidays, taking the amount of lost learning to nine weeks. That equates to a minimum of 225 hours of lost classroom contact. If a student did not return to school in June and studied from home until the end of the academic year, returning on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, this jumps to 325 lost learning hours.

This is considerably higher than in many other countries, such as Singapore, Norway and France, which reopened in late May, suggesting that UK learners have disproportionately suffered as a result of the crisis. The mitigation of pandemic learning loss is not dissimilar to the annual catch-up all schools have to play in the wake of the summer holidays, but it will be more acute given normal term time and exams were disrupted.

We cannot change the past: the time that has been lost, has been lost. But we can make up for that lost time. There is a clear case for changing school holidays in Summer 2021 to ameliorate this impact, and catch up UK pupils against international counterparts. This time could be used to reinforce core subjects, and invest in foundational language, literacy and mathematics skills. The data consistently shows that where a good grasp of these basic skills is reached, additional and more complex information can be processed and retained.

## Conclusion

As a former teacher, I recognise the importance of the summer break. Students and teachers alike need the time to recuperate from the academic year. But I also recognise that the greatest burden I and my colleagues felt in school was preparing for the first few weeks back in September when students must be brought back up to speed all over again.

The last six months have brought home the challenges that arise when children spend too long at home and away from school: their learning suffers, the gap between well off and disadvantaged children widens, and working families suffer greater strain on their time and finances.

To correct those problems, and to ensure future generations do not experience similar challenges, Ministers should introduce a shorter summer break of four weeks from Summer 2021 and consider reducing other holidays, including the upcoming Christmas break. The reclaimed weeks should be used for structured activities and education in the term-time either side.

During this time, teachers would not conduct normal lesson time. These two extra weeks in school could be used for activities to help disadvantaged students, one-on-one support, and extracurricular pursuits like drama or sports which too often can fall by the way side in a full classroom under the pressure of targets.

Shorter summer breaks, with structured time either side packed with activities for disadvantaged students, would help close the attainment gap, while allowing educators the freedom to provide more one-on-one feedback - something which can often fall to the wayside in a full classroom under the pressures of curriculum targets.

## Endnotes

1. Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) (2017b) Poverty and Child Health: Views from the Frontline (Report). London: CPAG. Available at: <http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf%20RCPCH.pdf>
2. Morgan, Kelly, et. al., 'Socio-Economic Inequalities in Adolescent Summer Holiday Experiences, and Mental Wellbeing on Return to School: Analysis of the School Health Research Network/Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Survey in Wales', in the International Journal of Environmental Health and Public Research, 2019, 16:7
3. <https://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en/articles/childcare-costs>
4. Petrie, S (2015) "Commodifying" children: The impact of markets in services for children in the United Kingdom. International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies 6(2): 275–294.
5. Forsey, A (2017) Hungry holidays: A report on hunger amongst children during school holidays. Report, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger. Available at: <http://www.frankfield.co.uk/upload/docs/Hungry%20Holidays.pdf>
6. <https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/hungry-holidays-1.pdf>
7. <https://www.ukactive.com/news/school-summer-holidays-driving-victorian-era-health-inequalities-among-children>
8. Alexander, KL, Entwisle, DR, Olson, LS (2007) Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. American Sociological Review 72(2): 167–180.
9. Stewart, Hilary, et. al., '[The cost of school holidays for children from low income families](#)', in *Childhood: A journal of global child research*, Vol. 25, issue 4, 2018.
10. Chowdry H, Crawford C, Dearden L, Joyce R, Sibieta L, Sylva K, et al. Poorer Children's Educational Attainment: How Important are Attitudes and Behaviour? York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation; (2010). p. 1–72; Shaw B, Baars S, Menzies L, Parameshwaran M, Allen R. Low Income Pupils' Progress at Secondary School. London: (2017).
11. Crawford C, Macmillan L, Vignoles A. Progress Made by High-Attaining Children from Disadvantaged Backgrounds: Research Report (2014).
12. UCL Institute of Education, Schoolwork in lockdown: new evidence on the epidemic of educational poverty, [https://www.llakes.ac.uk/sites/default/files/LLAKES%20Working%20Paper%2067\\_0.pdf](https://www.llakes.ac.uk/sites/default/files/LLAKES%20Working%20Paper%2067_0.pdf)
13. Kufeld, M. & Tarasawa, B. (2020). The COVID-19 slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement. NWEA. Available at: <https://www.nwea.org/research/publication/the-covid-19-slide-what-summer-learning-loss-can-tell-us-about-the-potential-impact-of-school-closures-on-student-academic-achievement/>
14. Shinwell, J., and Defeyter, M, 'Investigation of Summer Learning Loss in the UK—Implications for Holiday Club Provision', in *Frontiers in Public Health*, 2017, 5: 270.
15. OECD (2019), The Organisation of School Time in Europe. Primary and General Secondary Education - 2019/20. [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/sites/eurydice/files/school\\_calendars\\_19\\_20\\_en.pdf](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/sites/eurydice/files/school_calendars_19_20_en.pdf)
16. OECD (2020), Education At A Glance. <http://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/>
17. OECD (2018), Education At A Glance. <http://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/>
18. [https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/society/back-to-the-books\\_when-school-holidays-might-be-too-long/44285054](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/society/back-to-the-books_when-school-holidays-might-be-too-long/44285054)