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The Great Education Debate

by Peg Smith

If we aren't talking about health reform, we are talking about education reform. Across the nation, schools are considering extending the number of days children and youth spend in school. The issues at the forefront of this debate are decreasing summer learning loss and increasing the number of students who graduate from High School. Long gone is the dated reference to "the lazy days of summer."

In truth, there are reasons for concern. According to the National Summer Learning Association, all young people experience learning loss when they do not engage in educational activities during the summer months. But, is confining our children to classrooms year-round the solution? Will "inside the box" thinking help us develop a population capable of creating new solutions for a better tomorrow?

Have we considered that our children are lagging behind other nations in academic achievement because we are focusing on the wrong things and dated solutions? Teaching children to pass standardized tests doesn't necessarily teach them to think for themselves. Education is about more than teaching answers; it's about equipping our children with the ability to develop the art of seeing and realizing possibilities.

Perhaps the answer lies beyond the traditional classroom. Perhaps we should consider classrooms without walls. Places that capitalize on natural, developmental settings, and promote experiential learning, improve social skills, physical fitness, teach kids to take calculated risks in safe environments. Places that expand children's creative minds and offer strong, viable

learning opportunities that complement and strengthen the traditional classroom. Will additional institutionalized education endanger the ages and stages of childhood development and the natural maturation process that has long been understood as one that produces healthy, productive adults?

In order to solve the problem of summer learning loss, without jeopardizing the well-being and future success of our children and country by warehousing them within the walls of institutions, we need child-centric systems that understand growth and development. We need to seriously consider systems that set the stage for academic achievement when searching for ways to address a serious threat to our future — the need to produce productive, healthy citizens. It's time to develop learning environments.

The camp experience is one such environment, providing an alternative expanded learning environment that complements formal educational instruction and, in partnership with schools and parents, addresses the needs of the whole child. A camp experience addresses many of the gaps in our current education system — teaching values such as self-esteem, teamwork, contribution, independence, and resiliency. In truth, many of the national education standards are informally taught in camps across the country. As a society, we have unfairly defined fun as frivolous. Who said learning should not be fun? Fun is learning in action.

Child and youth development are a part of human development. The stages of development and their import should not be marginalized or lost. Yet, play

and creative time have been steadily eroding since the '80s; and in the home stretch of the first decade of the 21st century, many seem singularly focused on claiming what's left of them in the name of standardized test preparation. What happens when we put childhood on the endangered species list?

Innovative thinkers have made this country great. Many of the creative minds who have made impactful, positive contributions to this country were former campers — who had fun and learned important life lessons. Where would we be without the creative minds of individuals like former Disney CEO Michael Eisner, 60 Minutes journalist/host Mike Wallace, and composer Stephen Sondheim, all of whom went to camp?

There are thousands of camps across the country,

and each one of them is a piece of the solution to summer learning loss. Kids learn at camp. They learn life skills that will last long after lessons learned in traditional schools have faded and test papers have yellowed. Yes, let's talk about education reform.

Let's recast our solution.

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With nearly three decades of experience working with children, youth, and families, Peg L. Smith is the chief executive officer of the American Camp Association® (ACA). With up to 300 health, safety, and programming standards, ACA is the only national association that accredits camps and promotes a safe and fun camp experience with developmental benefits backed by independent research. To learn more about ACA, please visit www.CampParents.org or www.ACACamps.org.

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