

Position Paper On Year-Round Education

Approved 2-24-2004

Position

The American Camp Association (ACA) believes the organized camp experience is a vital component in the development and education of the whole child. ACA supports year-round educational opportunities and actively supports the extension of organized camp experiences to all children (*Approved by the ACA Council of Delegates 2/22/03*).

Background

Debate continues to rage in the United States over the issue of quality public education. While the issues of training teachers and curriculum quality are often discussed, more emphasis has recently been placed on the school calendar. Alternatives to the traditional school calendar of nine months in school and three months off have been hotly debated and tested. Numerous studies exist to support either side of the position. There is no definitive answer to the question of how the school calendar impacts youth development and learning; however, one outcome is crystal clear – learning takes place year-round when supported by challenging, stimulating, and positive experiences.

It is our belief that learning, however, should not be confined to the time spent in school. Positive out-of-school activities have been found to be predictors of academic success, such as test scores, lower absenteeism, lower drop-out rates, completed homework, and higher grades.¹ Researchers and practitioners argue that high-quality, structured, out-of-school activities are environments that have the potential to support and promote youth development, because they situate youth in safe environments; prevent youth from engaging in delinquent activities; teach youth general and specific skills, beliefs, and behaviors; and provide opportunities for youth to develop relationships with peers and mentors.²

Rationale

The American Camp Association supports a system that recognizes a child's right to a developmentally appropriate approach to education: experiential learning experiences that enhance academic skills, build character, provide outdoor education, promote positive behavior, self-confidence, and healthy risk-taking.

Beyond academics, young people need to be exposed to different environments and different experiences that enable them to socialize in out-of-school situations with a wider variety of individuals. They need first-hand discovery. They need intergenerational experiences and a sense of community. They need to expand their horizons in an atmosphere designed for them that is safe, offers security from bullying and violence, and teaches diversity and conflict resolution.

No longer viewed only as places for children to “decompress” and have fun during out-of-school time, camps have embraced the concept of development of the whole child. They are assuming a greater role in year-round education and youth development, recognizing that the same “fun” activities and programs they have traditionally offered, are in reality highly effective alternative

learning models. As education officials search for ways to provide character education, social development, and solutions to vacation-time learning loss, camps are uniquely positioned to fill the gaps with proven, effective programming.

For example, vacation-time learning loss is significantly lessened when a child participates in a summertime camp experience. Examples include:

- Math and reading scores can be improved through participation in a wide range of camp activities, including journal writing, map reading, and orienteering.³
- Children have fun and thereby develop a greater love of learning.
- There are increased opportunities for learning in unique and diverse settings.
- Studies have shown that camp programs offered during school vacation periods help decrease the typical “learning loss” associated with these periods.⁴
- Studies have shown that children who attend camp programs have demonstrated improvements in both “hard” and “soft” educational skills.⁵

Non-summertime out-of-school camp experiences are also important contributors to learning. For example, camps can partner with schools to provide experiential education in character development, leadership opportunities, community living, environmental awareness and action, social and cognitive development, and increased positive identity. Numerous successful camp-school partnerships already exist:

- In Arkansas, a local camp works with school districts to provide an alternative classroom experience five days a week for third, fourth, and fifth graders who haven’t succeeded in a traditional setting.
- In St. Louis, more than 6,000 students from 53 schools study environmental education at camp between September and May.
- In Maine, the local United Way administers a grant that guarantees every elementary school child in three separate towns an opportunity to attend summer camp because of its value to the overall learning process.
- Florida’s sheriffs have created a camp-based alternate classroom program that has expanded to 22 counties across the state.
- In Indiana, one camp serves 13,000 students during the school year, more than three times the number that attend summer camp there.
- The Prep-for-Prep program in New England; the Houston, Texas, outdoor education program; and the Libra Foundation initiative in Maine provide opportunities for children to attend camp as an integral part of their education.

Youth development experts have long recognized the value that a positive camp experience can provide. Dr. Peter Scales, senior fellow at The Search Institute, says, “The biggest plus of camp is that camps help young people discover and explore their talents, interests, and values. Kids who have had these kinds of (camp) experiences end up being healthier and have less problems which concern us all.”

Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, wrote in *The New York Times*: “It should come as no surprise that a 1999 study financed by the Education Department, [Is it Just a Matter of Time?](#), concluded that it is the quality of education time that is the critical determinant of how much students

will learn.”

The camp community is experienced and equipped to participate in the positive development of children and youth throughout the year. Some examples of this positive development include:

- The ability to provide students with the experience of discovery.
- Access for all students to academic enrichment programs that are both intellectually stimulating and fun.
- Innovative opportunities to make learning come alive for students.
- A chance to get kids out of their comfort zones so they will become more open to learning and retain more of what they learn.
- School-year camps provide children with safe and low-cost exposure to camp experiences.

Those involved in the positive development of children and youth need to partner with one another in order to provide children and youth with well-rounded, developmentally appropriate, year-round learning opportunities. The camp community is an important partner. Young people need and benefit from experiences that teach them physical skills and put them in environments where they can exercise leadership and character out-of-school.

Call to Action

The American Camp Association urges youth development advocates to promote partnerships between traditional education venues, community organizations, and camps, and to initiate dialogue focusing on year-round educational opportunities and the extension of organized camp experiences to all children.

Notes

1 Eccles, J., & Barber, B.L. (1999). Student council, volunteering, basketball, or marching band: What kind of extracurricular participation matters? *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 14(1), 10-43.

2 Gambone, M.A., Klem, A.M., & Connell, J.P. (2002). *Finding out what matters for youth: Testing key links in a community action framework for youth development*. Unpublished manuscript, Philadelphia: Youth Development Strategies, Inc. and Institute for Research and Reform in Education.

3 Miller, F. The Chatham Group, Inc., Chatham, Massachusetts.

4 Based on studies conducted by the Break-Aways Program, American Camping Association – New York Section. (1998).

5 Miller, F. The Chatham Group, Inc., Chatham, Massachusetts.

Reference Material

American Camping Association, Inc. (2002). *Creating Camp School Partnerships: A Guidebook to Success*. Martinsville, Indiana.