

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Kenneth M. Gold.** *School's In: The History of Summer Education in American Public Schools.* New York: Peter Lang, 2002. xiv + 315 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8204-5657-7.



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This book is an excellent analysis of an important topic neglected by previous historians. Building on his dissertation, conference papers, and journal articles, Ken Gold skillfully fills a large gap in the scholarly literature.

*School's In* opens with snapshots of the prevalence of summer terms in the early-nineteenth century. Although this section is brief, Gold ably dispels a widespread misconception that farming kept rural youth out of school throughout the summer. The spring and fall were the seasons when extra hands were needed in the fields. (In the cities, the typical antebellum urban school calendar included four sessions, each lasting twelve weeks).

Gold's data from New York makes clear that rural and urban summer term attendance and curriculum paralleled those of the other sessions. The major difference was in the teachers, not the students or the subjects. Young and inexperienced women staffed the summer sessions—in New York in 1843, “women constituted 84.9 percent of the summer teachers while men accounted for 74.2 percent of the winter teachers” (p. 16). Those discrepancies seemed to be both a cause and an effect of educational reformers' harsh opinions of the caliber of the summer fare, and throughout the century they fought to eliminate summer sessions rather than revamp the teaching force or change the curriculum.

In separate chapters on the mid- to late-nineteenth-century rural and urban efforts to alter the school calendar, Gold offers a wide range of reasons for the gradual and successful assault on summer terms. In the countryside, the steady pressure from state governments was particularly important, more so than shifts in labor markets or local political fluctuations. In contrast, urban changes were not spurred by state mandates and incentives. Surprisingly, neither financial efficiency nor building repairs were crucial. Instead, Gold highlights the importance of what he calls “popular practices regarding time-practices of holiday and celebrations” (p. 50). The archival evidence to support and develop that point is thin, so much of this chapter is a careful elimination of rival explanations rather than a full account of urbanites' views of holidays.

What Gold does instead is shift gears, in the next chapter, to focus on what he considers the major explanation of the decline of nineteenth-century summer schooling: pervasive notions of the frailty of young minds and bodies. He summarizes well a vast scientific and medical literature on that topic and deftly traces its reverberations in educators' articles, books, and speeches. Strenuous mental exertion would supposedly enervate or even injure students unless punctuated by lengthy periods of rest. Concern for the health of students was the key to

the waning of nineteenth-century summer schools.

Not surprisingly, there were dissenters who questioned the consensus opinions, and as late-nineteenth-century cities expanded rapidly, there was no doubt that an unsupervised summer posed dangers—moral as well as physical—to the well-being of many urban youth. “Vacation schools” offered a wholesome alternative to idleness, gang membership, saloon mischief, and other perils of city life. “Concerns about the urban environment simply outweighed fears of [mental] overtaxation” (p. 125). The vacation school sessions were attractively brief—half days for six weeks—and they downplayed the traditional academic subjects taught during the school year. Frequently the teaching was creative, and the classroom ethos was usually less austere than the September to May regimentation.

Gold then traces the lamentable “bureaucratic transformation” of those vacation schools. As they evolved from privately funded and governed initiatives to become a sturdy part of the public schools by World War I, “summer schools adopted a regular academic focus and a credit-bearing function, and they soon bore little resemblance to the vacation programs that preceded them” (p. 142). The summer schools increasingly served the needs of students who wanted to earn extra credits, either to catch up or to accelerate. Innovative curricula and pedagogy became less common; boasts about efficiency became more common as soon as the funding and staffing were in the hands of the “administrative progressives” overseeing the urban districts. (Gold makes clear that he is not examining private schools or higher education, so two thesis topics await the doctoral students who can tell us if similar transformations took place there. He also does not tell us much about rural developments from the 1890s on, and that too would be a significant topic to explore.)

The final chapter is a poignant case study of summer schools in Detroit from 1901 to 1939. Summer sessions were popular in Detroit, and excellent local teachers eagerly sought appointments there. Classes spanned the fifth through twelve grades, with the elementary school-

work running from 8 a.m. to noon and the high school courses lasting either 90 or 135 minutes. Interestingly, far more students enrolled in order to accelerate than to remediate (a pursuit made easier than it is today because in Detroit and elsewhere, skipping one semester or graduating at mid-year was possible). Yet despite the good staff and able students, educators persistently criticized the summer work as “inferior” or “deficient.” The brevity of the summer session was the crucial reason for its poor reputation. Although the high school classes required almost as many hours as the same course during the regular school year, the fifth- through eighth-grade work took only two-thirds of the customary time. Detroit educators’ views of schooling hinged on counting hours and minutes, scrutinizing the number of chapters and topics covered, rather than focusing on what had been learned, regardless of how long that took. In many ways, the history of summer schooling reminds us of missed opportunities, chances to break free from the bondage to time and credits as the basis for promotion and graduation.

In a concise epilogue, Gold sketches some of the major trends in summer schooling since 1930, especially the rise of state and federal support and oversight of many summer programs, often spawned by ambitious politicians eager to solve huge problems quickly.

The evidence that supports each chapter is massive. Gold provides excellent state (Michigan, New York, Virginia) as well as local (New York City, Chicago, Detroit) case studies. Additional information was mined from dozens of annual reports from other states and cities. He also drew heavily from magazines, journals, and newspapers. It is unfortunate that there are so few diaries, autobiographies, or other reminiscences from teachers or students in the summer schools. In light of his thoroughness, Gold surely would have used those records to good effect had they survived. The abundant evidence that was available he read and analyzed with care and insight; the result is a first-rate account of an important topic. This book will be of value to many scholars, educators, and students. We now need a comparable study of summer camps, a curiously neglected topic in our field. Let’s hope that subject attracts someone as competent as Ken Gold.

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