

# World-class learning

BY DAVID BOLING  
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

As Arkansas students return to school, it is a good time to consider this basic question: Should our school year be longer? Here's why I think the answer is "yes."

In 1983, "A Nation at Risk" was published. Widely viewed as a key turning point in the history of American education, the report warned that the American education system was being eroded by a tide of mediocrity. Its main message could be summed up as follows: "History is not kind to idlers." It argued that the American education system was idling and therefore falling behind the education systems of our key international competitors.

"A Nation at Risk" made a number of recommendations (such as raising standards for the teaching profession) that became the staple of education reform efforts. But one recommendation that it made has largely gone ignored. It recommended that school districts and state legislatures "strongly consider" seven-hour school days as well as a 200- to 220-day school year.

No state has moved even close to this recommendation. The national average school year is still about 180 days with a six-hour day. In Arkansas, schools are required to be open for only 178 school days—slightly below the national average. At the dawn of the 21st century and the Information Age, the American school year is stuck in the 19th century, when an agrarian economy demanded that everyone help on the farm during the summer.

It is remarkable that this recommendation has fallen on deaf ears because it makes so much common sense. Everyone knows from experience in athletics that practice makes perfect. Yet, when it comes to exercising the muscle between our children's ears, Americans seem to ignore this common-sense approach.

Moreover, what common sense tells us has been backed up by research. Many studies have shown that long summers contribute to students forgetting much of what they learned the previous year. Homework over the summer is uncommon—it is routine in Japan—so American teachers often spend the first few weeks of the new school year re-teaching what was forgotten.

## Guest writer

Comparing America to other countries shows just how far behind we are when it comes to the length of our school year. We have one of the shortest school years in the developed world. In Japan and South Korea, for example, the school year is over 200 days, with some schools opting to go even beyond 220 days.

My experience of living in Japan made an indelible impression on me. A simple truth became evident: One of the main reasons that Japanese students consistently beat American students on international exams is because Japanese students study much, much harder than American students. The extra time that

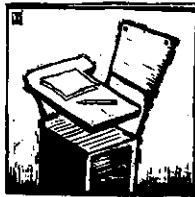
Japanese students spend in school coupled with extensive private tutoring has led me to the conclusion that a Japanese high school graduate is probably one of the best prepared persons in the world to compete in the global economy. Their hard work pays off.

Consider the following. If

Arkansas lengthened the school year by 20 days, that would mean children would be in school for one month longer every year. Over 12 years of schooling, from elementary through high school, the cumulative effect of an extra month every year would mean that children would be in school one year longer than under the current system.

Not only would creating a world-class school year help Arkansas students to compete in the global economy, but it would send the right message to foreign companies that are considering Arkansas for plant sitings. Japanese and Korean car manufacturers know how extended school years help produce a well-educated work force.

Idling along with a 178-day school year is not going to cut it in the global economy, especially when our international competitors race along at warp speed. We all know that in the global economy, what one earns depends on what one learns. Let's prepare Arkansas' kids for the future by bringing our school year into the 21st century.



David Boling, who lived and worked in Japan for four years, practices law in Little Rock at Mitchell, Williams, Selig, Gates & Woodyard.