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The underworked American

Jun 11th 2009
 From *The Economist* print edition

Children are exceptions to the country's work ethic

Illustration by KAL



AMERICANS like to think of themselves as martyrs to work. They delight in telling stories about their punishing hours, snatched holidays and ever-intrusive BlackBerrys. At this time of the year they marvel at the laziness of their European cousins, particularly the French. Did you know that the French take the whole of August off to recover from their 35-hour work weeks? Have you heard that they are so addicted to their holidays that they leave the sick to die and the dead to moulder?

There is an element of exaggeration in this, of course, and not just about French burial habits; studies show that Americans are less Stakhanovite than they think. Still, the average American gets only four weeks of paid leave a year compared with seven for the French and eight for the Germans. In Paris many shops simply close down for August; in Washington, where the weather is sweltering, they remain open, some for 24 hours a day.

But when it comes to the young the situation is reversed. American children have it easier than most other children in the world, including the supposedly lazy Europeans. They have one of the shortest school years anywhere, a mere 180 days compared with an average of 195 for OECD countries and more than 200 for East Asian countries. German children spend 20 more days in school than American ones, and

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 McKinsey has its report on the economic impact of poorly performing schoolchildren. See also the Knowledge is Power Programme.

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South Koreans over a month more. Over 12 years, a 15-day deficit means American children lose out on 180 days of school, equivalent to an entire year.

American children also have one of the shortest school days, six-and-a-half hours, adding up to 32 hours a week. By contrast, the school week is 37 hours in Luxembourg, 44 in Belgium, 53 in Denmark and 60 in Sweden. On top of that, American children do only about an hour's-worth of homework a day, a figure that stuns the Japanese and Chinese.

Americans also divide up their school time oddly. They cram the school day into the morning and early afternoon, and close their schools for three months in the summer. The country that tut-tuts at Europe's mega-holidays thinks nothing of giving its children such a lazy summer. But the long summer vacation acts like a mental eraser, with the average child reportedly forgetting about a month's-worth of instruction in many subjects and almost three times that in mathematics.

American academics have even invented a term for this phenomenon, "summer learning loss". This pedagogical understretch is exacerbating social inequalities. Poorer children frequently have no one to look after them in the long hours between the end of the school day and the end of the average working day. They are also particularly prone to learning loss. They fall behind by an average of over two months in their reading. Richer children actually improve their performance.

The understretch is also leaving American children ill-equipped to compete. They usually perform poorly in international educational tests, coming behind Asian countries that spend less on education but work their children harder. California's state universities have to send over a third of their entering class to take remedial courses in English and maths. At least a third of successful PhD students come from abroad.

A growing number of politicians from both sides of the aisle are waking up to the problem. Barack Obama has urged school administrators to "rethink the school day", arguing that "we can no longer afford an academic calendar designed for when America was a nation of farmers who needed their children at home ploughing the land at the end of each day." Newt Gingrich has trumpeted a documentary arguing that Chinese and Indian children are much more academic than American ones.

These politicians have no shortage of evidence that America's poor educational performance is weakening its economy. A recent report from McKinsey, a management consultancy, argues that the lagging performance of the country's school pupils, particularly its poor and minority children, has wreaked more devastation on the economy than the current recession.

Learning the lesson

A growing number of schools are already doing what Mr Obama urges, and experimenting with lengthening the school day. About 1,000 of the country's 90,000 schools have broken the shackles of the regular school day. In particular, charter schools in the Knowledge is Power Programme (KIPP) start the school day at 7.30am and end at 5pm, hold classes on some Saturdays and teach for a couple of weeks in the summer. All in all, KIPP students get about 60% more class time than their peers and routinely score better in tests.

Still, American schoolchildren are unlikely to end up working as hard as the French, let alone the South Koreans, any time soon. There are institutional reasons for this. The federal government has only a limited influence over the school system. Powerful interest groups, most notably the teachers' unions, but also the summer-camp industry, have a vested interest in the status quo. But reformers are also up against powerful cultural forces.

One is sentimentality; the archetypical American child is Huckleberry Finn, who had little taste for formal education. Another is complacency. American parents have led grass-root protests against attempts to extend the school year into August or July, or to increase the amount of homework their little darlings have to do. They still find it hard to believe that all those Chinese students, beavering away at their books, will steal their children's jobs. But Huckleberry Finn was published in 1884. And brain work is going the way of manual work, to whoever will provide the best value for money. The next time Americans make a joke about the Europeans and their taste for *la dolce vita*, they ought to take a look a bit closer to home.

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