

What if School Was More Like Summer Camp?

For many children, summer camp is transformational. Working collaboratively, mostly through play and hands-on experimentation, campers try new things, encounter new challenges, and meet new mentors and friends. They are often outside, exploring the world around them, with ample opportunities for freedom and self-expression. Then summer ends and they go back to school, confined in a classroom for most of the day, passively learning what others want them to know.

Some educators are challenging this divide between summer learning and fall schooling. Why, they ask, isn't school more like camp?

In his book, [The Art of Self-Directed Learning](#), author and educator Blake Boles writes:

“School taught me how to memorize a fact until Friday and alter the margins on an essay to create a higher page count; camp taught me how to figure out what I want, take the initiative, conquer my fears, own my victories, and learn from my failures. To my teenage sensibilities, the annual ratio of camp to school didn't make sense. Why didn't I go to camp most of the year and then head off to school for a couple months to learn grammar, algebra, and whatever else camp didn't teach?”

Boles now spends his time trying to bridge the gap between the self-directed learning he experienced in summer camp with the prevailing forced schooling model. He [works](#) with teenagers outside of schooling to support their own passion-centered learning, or to reignite their self-directed learning senses that are often dulled at school. Through his [Unschool](#)

[Adventures](#) program, Boles leads extensive, multi-week trips around the world for teenagers throughout the year. His goal of extending the benefits of summer camp past summer is being realized with hundreds of young people who learn by being fully immersed in the people, places, and things around them.

In Massachusetts, educators are also blurring the lines between summer camp learning and academic year schooling. At [Parts & Crafts](#), a self-directed learning center just outside of Boston, summer camps with long waiting lists provide young people with the freedom to explore their own interests and passions, while helpful facilitators are available to assist.

Parts & Crafts, a community makerspace that encourages creativity and innovation through hands-on tinkering, building, and collaboration, continues its summer camp philosophy of self-directed learning throughout the academic year. It offers a schooling alternative program for local homeschoolers, as well as an after-school program, where young people are free to learn without coercion.

Away from the fetters of the standard compulsory schooling model, summer programming provides a glimpse of what education could be. A mix of public and private organizations, church-based groups, neighborhood co-ops, and family-focused arrangements combine to nurture and nourish children all season.

In summer, children have more opportunities for play and hands-on discovery, and become more active participants in their lives rather than passive onlookers. With interactive camps, engaging summer activities through local organizations, and closer connections with their own family members, it is no wonder that most young people would prefer not to go back to school come fall. Perhaps we should look more to summer for the solutions to our school-year woes, and challenge a system that puts more emphasis on containment than freedom.

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