
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WORK & FAMILY

Vacation Days: When Parents Take Their Kids Out of School for Family Trips

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950 words

9 November 2006

The Wall Street Journal

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English

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AS THANKSGIVING NEARS, Martha Winokur is mounting a minor revolt -- against her 17-year-old son's school.

The school explicitly prohibits missing classes for family vacations and imposes a work penalty on students who do, such as raking leaves or scraping gum off desks. But Ms. Winokur's family is planning a reunion starting the weekend before Thanksgiving, and she has decided her son will miss school to attend.

"I know it's against the rules," the Needham, Mass., mother says she told the school's dean last week in an email. "But we're doing it anyway."

More parents are pulling their kids out of school for family vacations. Some 61% of travelers say they would take their children out of school for a family trip, up from 57% in 2003 and 45% in 2000, says a 2006 survey of 1,600 travelers by Yesawich, Pepperdine, Brown & Russell, a travel marketing and research concern in Orlando, Fla. Other research shows the trips are increasingly likely to happen during the travel off-season in the fall.

The trend reflects a shift in values toward more family time. Also, it's often easier for dual-earner parents to schedule time off from work together on nonholidays because there's less competition from co-workers for those vacation slots, says Robert Darbelnet, CEO of AAA, the Washington-based auto and travel organization. Travel costs are lower in the off-season. And more business meetings are being held in kid-friendly destinations, Mr. Darbelnet says, leading people who have children to bring the kids along.

"We have no qualms about it," says Julia Trammell-McGill, Keswick, Va., whose sons, 10 and 7, missed a week of classes around Labor Day for a family reunion. "You can turn any family vacation into an educational experience. Visiting relatives can be an encounter with living history."

Some schools are cracking down. David Rost, dean of students at Concord Academy, Concord, Mass., where Ms. Winokur's son is a student, says the school's handbook and parent letters state that families are expected to fit their calendar around the school's. Missing the learning that takes place in the classroom puts a student at a disadvantage, Mr. Rost says.

In the 2 1/2 years John Dodig has been principal at Staples High School in Westport, Conn., he has sharply restricted family-vacation absences. He, too, cites the "high stakes academically." At a previous school where Mr. Dodig was principal, one family asked to take their son, a senior, overseas during school because the trip was 50% cheaper in the off-season. Mr. Dodig refused.

"It came down to drawing a line in the sand and being looked directly in the eye" by the parent who asked, "Are you really going to hold my child to this?" Mr. Dodig says. "The answer was yes." The family went anyway, and the student was required to attend summer school before graduating.

Schools feel mounting pressure to have all students in class. Falling attendance can affect schools' ratings under the federal No Child Left Behind law; under some state formulas, schools may even lose some funding. Also, growing emphasis on standardized testing is making teachers less flexible about the alternative assignments they permit.

Those who do send homework on family trips tend to pile it on. Gail Manginelli, Scottsdale, Ariz., says her 9-year-old son was given so much work during a family reunion in September 2004 that the family decided to hold future reunions in the summer. All the working cast a pall on her son's vacation.

Nevertheless, family-travel experts see no end to the trend. Author Eileen Ogintz recommends planning trips far enough ahead to avoid conflicts with school testing or other events. With teachers, respect the fact that "you're making their jobs harder" by asking for assignments in advance, says Ms. Ogintz, founder of www.takingthekids.com. Consider offering to have your child give a talk to the class or show a video from your trip on a topic related to the curriculum, she says.

Weigh the impact on your kids. Joy Wyatt gave a month's notice that her daughters, 10 and 12, would miss three days' classes last May at their private New York schools to attend a wedding in Hawaii. "We posed it as a question" to teachers and principals, who gave consent. When Ms. Wyatt's older daughter learned she was scheduled to make a presentation during that time, she finished it early. Nevertheless, "it gave me pause" to have them miss classes, Ms. Wyatt says. "Kids can be really stressed out . . . if they fall behind, miss something or somehow get out of sync."

Despite the obstacles, a growing number of parents say deciding to travel anyway is a no-brainer. Ms. Winokur's family reunion later this month will bring together in Florida 24 cousins, siblings and grandparents from four distant states. "I am respectful" of school policies, Ms. Winokur says. "But life is short, and in a few years the school will not be there" for her son. "But the family will."

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Taking a Break From School

Before leaving on a family vacation:

- Schedule the trip around planned testing.
- Meet with teachers at least two weeks before.
- Plan time for homework.
- Pace the trip to avoid tiring out your child.
- Offer to have your child make a presentation upon returning.

Source: AAA, Washington

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