

Summer Learning

► Moving from the Periphery to the Core

For a long time, the issue of summer learning has waited in the wings, like a fully prepared understudy, ready to jump in and take the stage should the star need a back-up. Recently, though, summer learning has moved into the spotlight — and at the same time, the script is changing. Instead of memorizing and mimicking the star's lines, summer learning is writing its own script. Transcending the punitive and remedial model of summer school, summer learning's new form is an artful blend of core academic learning, hands-on activities, 21st Century skills, arts, sports and meaningful relationships.

Why the new vision?

Put simply, kids need it. Without ongoing opportunities to learn and practice essential skills, kids fall behind on measures of academic achievement over the summer months. Research dating back 100 years confirms the phenomenon often referred to as “summer slide.”¹ Most youth lose about two months of grade-level equivalency in mathematical computation skills over the summer months. More importantly, however, *low-income youth also lose more than two months in reading achievement*, despite the fact that their middle-class peers make slight gains.² This disparity has grave consequences for disadvantaged young people. Differences in a child's summer learning experiences during his or her elementary school years can impact whether that child ultimately earns a high school diploma and continues on to college.³

What's Inside

- How is summer school changing?
- What does the research say?
- What can policymakers do?

Schools have additional reasons to adopt the new vision for summer learning. Contending with ever-higher benchmarks and bleak international comparisons, schools need creative solutions to narrowing the achievement gap. Summer presents an untapped opportunity — a time of year when youth and families seek programs that look and feel different from the traditional school year; and community partners with specialized expertise in arts, recreation, sports and youth development abound.



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Who Participates in Summer Programs?

As families have become increasingly reliant on two incomes, with both adults working outside of the home, summer programs have become more and more a necessity. Despite significant participation, very few nationally representative databases collect any information on summer activities. Those that do, use varying terminology (for example, “summer activities” vs. “summer camp”) and lack critical information on the focus and intensity of programs and activities.

One estimate suggests that one in four kids participates in some type of summer program.⁴ This estimate is likely low, as the data are a few years old. Another way to examine participation is by looking at two particular types of summer programs:

One study estimates that only 4% of youth from the lowest income bracket participate in summer camps, as compared to 18% of the highest-income youth.

Schools. About 10% of public school children, or roughly six million kids, attend school-sponsored programs each summer, and the number of public schools offering summer programs has doubled over the past 25 years.⁵ Many of these programs are remedial summer school programs, offering credit for failed classes or extra time to be promoted to the next grade. Other school-sponsored programs may include specialized arts programs, sports programs, gifted and talented programs, or services for youth with disabilities or special needs.

Camps. The American Camp Association (ACA) estimates that more than 11 million youth attend camp each year.⁶ Enrollment in camps has been steadily increasing over the past five years, with 65-77% of camp directors reporting the same or better enrollment each year through summer 2008.⁷

Are there any trends in summer program participation?

- ▶ *Children and youth from higher-income families are more likely to participate.*⁸ One study estimates that only 4% of youth from the lowest income bracket participate in summer camps, as compared to 18% of the highest-income youth. Tutoring programs and summer school are the exception — these programs include disproportionate numbers of low-income and minority youth.
- ▶ *Parents cite summer as the most difficult time to ensure their children have productive things to do.*⁹
- ▶ *Kids spend more hours per week in self-care over the summer than during the school year (10.3 vs. 4.8 hours per week).*¹⁰

What does a new vision for summer school look like?

It incorporates the following seven research-based principles:

1. **Increase the duration and intensity** of the traditional summer school model to a comprehensive research-based, six-week, full-day model.
2. **Expand participation** from only those students struggling academically to all students in school-wide Title I programs.
3. Change the focus from narrow remediation and test preparation to a **blended approach of both academic learning in core subject areas and hands-on activities** that foster critical 21st century competitiveness skills like collaboration, innovation, creativity, communication and data analysis.
4. **Strengthen and expand partnerships** with community-based organizations and public agencies that provide summer activities, to align and leverage existing resources, identify and meet gaps in service, improve program quality and develop shared outcomes for summer success.
5. **Provide incentives to students that improve attendance and engagement** by making enrichment activities such as arts, music, sports, and free breakfast and lunch through the federal Summer Food program an essential component of summer programs.
6. **Provide innovative professional development** for educators and ensure summer programs offer teachers a chance to test new models of teaching and gain valuable leadership experience.
7. Lastly, summers need to move from the periphery to the center of school reform strategies through **better planning, infrastructure, data collection and accountability.**

— National Center for Summer Learning

Summer Learning and the Academic Achievement Gap

During the summer months, young people living in poverty often don't have access to essential resources that support their academic performance and healthy development. As a result, they experience well-documented setbacks in academic skills that contribute to growth in the achievement gap. Since 1906, there have been 39 empirical studies that have found incontrovertible evidence of a pattern of "summer learning loss", particularly for low-income youth. Together, these studies offer a compelling reason to focus education resources on providing summer opportunities in high-poverty communities.

Findings from Key Studies

Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap.

K. Alexander, D. Entwisle and L. Olson, *American Sociological Review*, 2007 (72, 167-180).

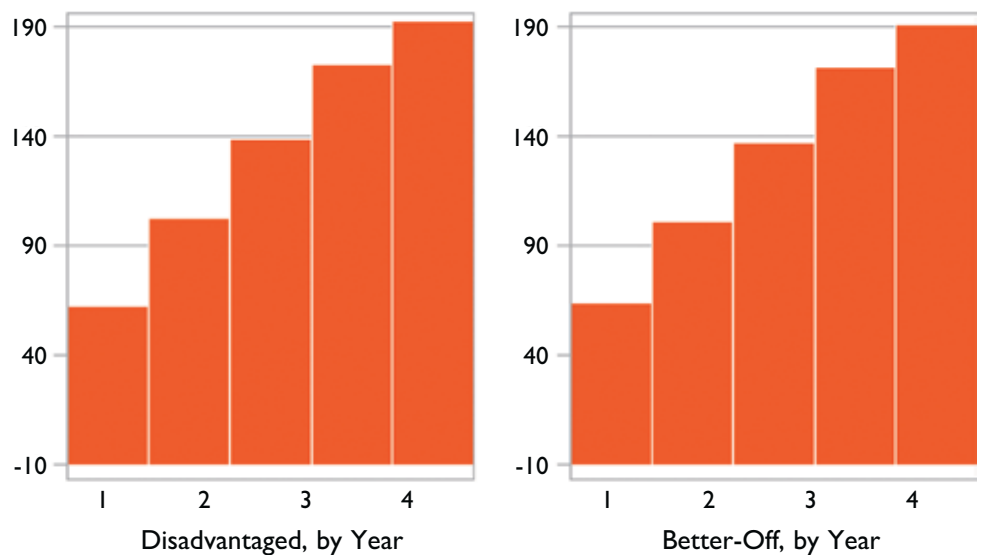
What did the study examine?

Launched in 1982, the Beginning School Study (BSS) monitored the educational progress of a representative random sample of Baltimore school children from first grade through age 22. The BSS tracked testing data, learning patterns, high school placement, high school completion, and college attendance, among other indicators.

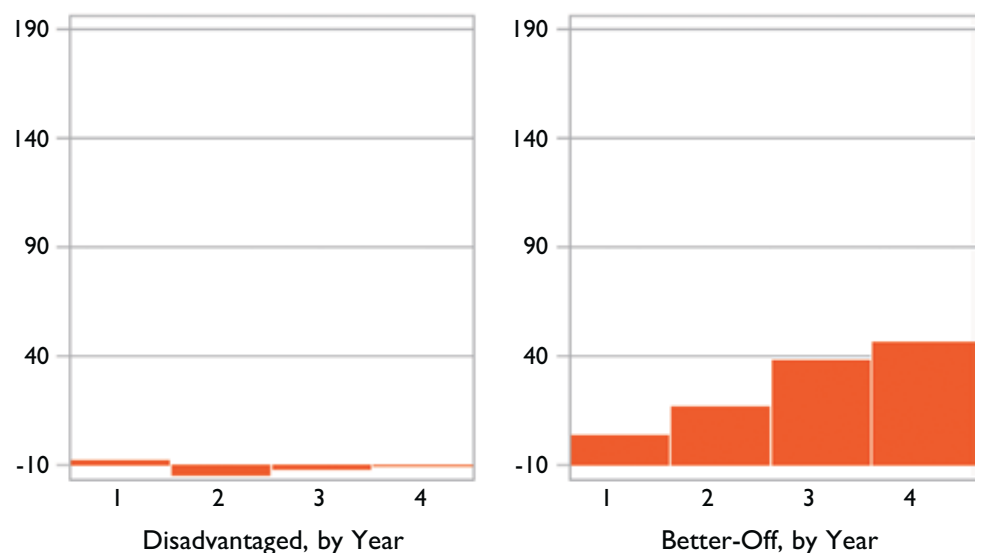
Key Findings:

- ▶ Better-off and disadvantaged youth make similar achievement gains during the school year; but during the summer, disadvantaged youth fall significantly behind in reading.
- ▶ By the end of 5th grade, disadvantaged youth are nearly three grade equivalents behind their more affluent peers in reading.
- ▶ Two-thirds of the 9th-grade reading achievement gap can be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities during the elementary school years; nearly one-third of the gap is already present when children begin school.
- ▶ Early summer learning losses have later life consequences, including high school curriculum placement, whether kids drop out of high school and whether they attend college.

School Year Cumulative Gains



Summer Cumulative Gains



Graph shows cumulative gains on California Achievement Test (CAT) in reading over elementary school years and summers. CAT scores calibrated to measure growth over a student's 12-year school career.

Source: Entwisle, Alexander and Olson (1997), Table 3.1.

The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A Narrative and Meta-Analytic Review.

H. Cooper, B. Nye, K. Charlton, J. Lindsay and S. Greathouse, *Review of Educational Research*, 1996, (66, 227-268).

What did the study examine?

This meta-analysis uncovered 39 research reports that contained descriptions of empirical studies meant to test the effects of summer vacation on school achievement. Thirteen of those studies were examined together to determine the effect of summer break on student achievement.

Key Findings:

- ▶ At best, students showed little or no academic growth over the summer. At worst, students lost one to three months of learning.
- ▶ Summer learning loss was somewhat greater in math than reading.
- ▶ Summer learning loss was greatest in math computation and spelling.
- ▶ For disadvantaged students, reading scores were disproportionately affected and the achievement gap between rich and poor widened.

Leading the Way

Despite documented setbacks associated with summer break, there also is evidence that innovative summer programs are making a positive difference in the lives of young people and their families. Their impact probably extends beyond what can be measured over the course of one summer. Future program evaluations need to consider not only the academic, social and health benefits after one summer of participation, but the benefits of sustained participation over time.

What do we know about results?

Evaluations of summer programs currently examine a wide variety of measures, including academic achievement, engagement in learning, attitude about learning, social skills development, leadership development, youth development skills (e.g. self-respect, responsibility), high school enrollment and completion, and college enrollment and completion.

The two reports on the following page examine the impact of summer programs on student achievement. Cooper (et al.) conducted a review of several summer school evaluations in their report, *Making the most of summer school: A meta-analytic and narrative review*. Chaplin and Capizzano's report, *Impacts of a summer learning program: A random assignment student of Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL)*, evaluated BELL, an innovative summer program that is dedicated to increasing the academic achievements, self-esteem and life opportunities of children in low-income, urban communities.

What does it mean to be a summer learning program?

A summer learning program is intentional about building skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors that promote academic achievement and healthy development. These programs offer organized activities during the summer months that are designed to meet a specific need or offer youth the opportunity to achieve a specific goal. In areas with high rates of poverty, summer learning programs exist to narrow the achievement gap and increase rates of high school graduation, college entrance, and college completion among low-income and minority youth.

ECS Resources

ECS StateNote: Issues in Funding Summer School Programs

To better understand how, or if, states fund summer school programs, ECS reviewed the education funding formulas of 11 states with policies supporting summer school. Of the 11 states in the study, only one did not provide any state funding stream for summer school programs. ECS found that the remaining 10 states provided funding in two distinct ways: (1) Through a state's primary funding formula or (2) Through categorical funding. www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/80/24/8024.pdf

ECS Alert: Maximizing Education Reform in the Stimulus Bill: Enhancing Summer Learning Programs

A joint paper from the Education Commission of the States and the National Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University identifies how states can use summer learning programs to maximize new federal funds while also increasing their chances of receiving additional federal funding through the Race to the Top awards program. www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/80/21/8021.pdf

ECS StateNote: Summer Remediation Policies

For years, various states have chosen summer as an ideal opportunity to offer remediation to their students. This ECS StateNote summarizes policies in place in 35 states and the District of Columbia. www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/63/01/6301.pdf

ECS Issue Site on Summer School

This Issue Site looks at the scope and magnitude of the summer school boom; the financial and logistical problems that extending the school year poses for districts, particularly large urban districts; and the latest research findings on the design, use and potential benefits of summer learning programs. It also includes a roundup of recent state-level summer school initiatives. www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueid=121

ECS Policy Tracking database: Summer School Enactments

This ECS database lists recent policy changes across the states. www.ecs.org/ecs/ecscat.nsf/WebTopicViewAll?OpenView&Start=1&Count=1000&Expand=365#365

Making the Most of Summer School: A Meta-Analytic and Narrative Review

H. Cooper, K. Charlton, J.C. Valentine and L. Muhlenbruck, *Making the Most of Summer School: A Meta-Analytic and Narrative Review*, 2000.

Results Summary

- ▶ Remedial summer school programs and acceleration summer school programs do have an overall positive impact on the knowledge and skills of participants – math more than reading.
- ▶ Middle-class students benefitted more than disadvantaged students.
- ▶ Smaller programs tended to yield better results.
- ▶ Programs with small group or individualized instruction and high parent involvement produced the greatest impact on student outcomes.
- ▶ Unclear whether advantages persist over time.

Impacts of a Summer Learning Program: A Random Assignment Study of Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL)

D. Chaplin and J. Capizzano, *Impacts of a Summer Learning Program: A Random Assignment Study of Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL)*, 2006.

Results Summary

- ▶ BELL Summer¹¹ has a statistically significant impact on the reading achievement of youth.
- ▶ Youth participating in BELL have an academic advantage of at least one month when compared to the achievement of youth utilizing other summer alternatives, including summer school, other academic summer programs, and non-academic activities.
- ▶ When accounting for actual rates of participation in BELL, the impact is closer to 2.5 months.
- ▶ BELL parents are more likely to read with their children and to encourage home reading as compared to the control group.

What do high-quality summer programs look like?

Literature on summer program quality is scant. Looking across the afterschool and education literature, though, several commonalities emerge as foundations for summer programs. High-quality programs include a broad array of enrichment opportunities; opportunities for skill-building and mastery; intentional relationship building; experienced and trained management and staff; and support for sustainability.¹² Quality also is affected by staff-to-youth ratio, participation levels and years of operation.¹³

The National Center for Summer Learning has been working in and with summer programs for more than 15 years. Based on those experiences, the Center is engaged in the development of standards of quality for summer programs, including schools and community-based programs. These standards are framed around several key concepts that align to the literature on program quality (see table to right):

The Center plans to study the validity and reliability of the tools it has developed to assess summer program quality.

The Program Improvement System

Purpose	Individualized
Planning	Intentional
People	Integrated
Professional Development	
Partnerships	

What Can Policymakers Do To Support Summer Learning?

Even with the compelling and extensive research on summer learning loss, the issue largely has been ignored by policymakers, particularly at the state level. A recent ECS report (<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/80/24/8024.pdf>) showed that many states are unable to determine how much state funding is being used to support summer learning programs.

This is because states often include summer school as an allowable use of either formula or categorical funding programs, but do not require districts to report on the amount of funds that actually were used to support summer programs. As a result, states are unable to determine the impact of their investments in summer programs. Improved data collection could yield important information relevant to efforts to close the achievement gap, while contributing to effective state financial oversight. Fortunately,

data collection could yield important information relevant to efforts to close the achievement gap, while contributing to effective state financial oversight. Fortunately, state policymakers have a wide range of options to increase support for summer learning:

1. Require that districts and schools report on the amount of state formula and categorical funding used to support summer learning programs.
2. Consider requiring districts, particularly those struggling with student achievement, to use a set percentage of formula and/or categorical programs specifically for summer programs.
3. Create a dedicated funding stream for summer school programs, either through new investment or re-allocation of existing resources.
4. Utilize and leverage federal funds which can be used to support summer learning programs. This includes recent ARRA funds, Title I (both ARRA and annual funding), 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and Workforce Investment Act (for summer jobs for older youth). For more information on ARRA and summer learning, please see: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/80/21/8021.pdf>.
5. Align key state funding sources for summer programs, such as those focused on issues like libraries, recreation and juvenile delinquency to create comprehensive, full-day summer programming for low-income students.

Endnotes

- 1 W. White, *Reviews Before and After Vacation*. American Education, 1906, 185-188.
- 2 H. Cooper, B. Nye, K. Charlton, J. Lindsay, and S. Greathouse, *The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A Narrative and Meta-Analytic Review*, 66, 227-268 (Review of Educational Research, 1996).
- 3 K. Alexander, D. Entwisle and L. Olson, *Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap*, 72, 167-180 (American Sociological Review, 2007).
- 4 C. Wimer, S. Bouffard, P. Caronongan, E. Dearing, S. Simpkins, P. Little, and H. Weiss, *What are Kids Getting into These Days? Demographic Differences in Youth Out-of-School Time Participation*, (Harvard, MA: Harvard Family Research Project, 2006).
- 5 G.D. Borman, *Summers are for Learning*. Principal, 2001, 80(3), 26-29.
- 6 <http://www.acacamps.org/2020/>, accessed May 13, 2009.
- 7 http://www.acacamps.org/campmag/issues/0903/enrollment_tables.pdf, accessed May 13, 2009.
- 8 C. Wimer, S. Bouffard, P. Caronongan, E. Dearing, S. Simpkins, P. Little, and H. Weiss, *What are Kids Getting into These Days? Demographic Differences in Youth Out-of-School Time Participation*, (Harvard, MA: Harvard Family Research Project, 2006).
- 9 A. Duffet, J. Johnson, S. Farkas, S. King and A. Ott, *All Work and No Play: Listening to What Kids and Parents Really Want from Out-of-School Time*, (Washington, D.C.: Public Agenda, 2004).
- 10 J. Capizzano, S. Adelman and M. Stagner, *What Happens When the School Year is Over: The Use and Costs for Child Care for School Age Children During the Summer Months*. Occasional Paper, 58 (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2002).
- 11 For more information on BELL Summer, go to: http://bellnational.org/education/bell_summer_programs.php.
- 12 J. Birmingham, E.M. Pechman, C.A. Russell and M. Mielke, *Shared Features of High-Performing Afterschool Programs: A Follow-up to the TASC Evaluation*, (Washington, D.C. Policy Studies Associates, 2005).
- 13 J.B. Grossman, C. Lind, C.Hayes, J.McMaken, A.Gersick, *The Cost of Quality Out-of-School Time Programs*, (New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation, 2009).

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The National Center for Summer Learning is leading an initiative called a **New Vision for Summer School**. Interested states and districts can work with the Center to develop, fund, implement, and evaluate innovative, comprehensive summer programs that transcend the remedial and punitive summer school models of the past.



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