

Close the Achievement Gap with Summer Learning

By Gary Huggins

Summer vacation from school can bring afternoons at the swimming pool, family vacations, and maybe a spirit-filled summer camp that ignites a passion for art or rock climbing. But for many children, summer also means setbacks in learning that take a tremendous toll on teaching and student performance over time. PTA leaders can make a vital difference in bridging the gap between the great need for low-cost, high-impact summer learning programs and their sometimes scant availability in many communities.

The facts about summer learning loss

Research shows most students lose about two months of grade-level equivalency in math skills over the summer months. Low-income students also lose more than two months in reading achievement, while their middle-class peers make slight gains. A study from Johns Hopkins University demonstrates that by 9th grade, these losses accounted for two-thirds of the achievement gap in reading between low-income children and their middle-income peers.

Summer learning loss means that all across our country, teachers must spend a good part of the first two months of school on review. A class in which all students have had a chance to learn over the summer is a class that can move on to new concepts more quickly when school starts.

Recent research from the RAND Corp. has demonstrated that high-quality, engaging, low- or no-cost summer learning programs can prevent summer learning loss and even boost student achievement. Summer learning also helps young people through transitions to and from the middle grades, when students are especially vulnerable to achievement dips and other off-track indicators.

Some school districts, including Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Boston, and Oakland, California, have started innovative summer learning programs that are transforming the remedial summer school of the past.

But, today's tough budget environment often means summer programs can be one of the first things a school district eliminates. In addition, summer learning can be a tough sell for children, who may not know how much fun it can be!

Whether your district is a leader in summer learning or has no resources at all for summer school, your PTA can play an important role in helping families make the most of summer by guiding them to programs in the community and resources online. PTAs also can help parents work with their children directly to fill the summer with learning opportunities while bonding as a family.

Steps to summer achievement

Advocate for summer learning. Begin by letting the administrator of your school or school district know that summer learning is important to you as parents. Ask how you can work together to send shared messages about summer learning.

Disseminate information to parents. Through your PTA's meetings and digital channels, share the facts about summer learning loss with parents. Many parents don't know that children can lose valuable skills over the summer break. The National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) has free fact sheets, research briefs, and other parent-friendly tools to download or link to at summerlearning.org.

If your district has a great summer learning program that serves a wide variety of children, volunteer as PTA leaders to help get the word out. Children can't benefit if they don't attend. Work with the administration to find peer ambassadors—enthusiastic students who have enjoyed attending the program in the past—who can spread the message to their peers.

Develop a list of summer learning resources. If district resources for summer learning are limited, work with your school to develop a list of affordable summer learning options in your community. Get

permission to distribute the information through flyers in backpacks, teacher conferences, and messages on school calendars and websites. If your PTA has a website and/or newsletter, offer the information there as well.

Teachers are great guides about what kids can work on over the summer to get ready for the next grade. Classroom parents can help by volunteering to work with teachers in each grade to gather websites, fun local curricula, and other resources for use by parents and their children. Try to gather the information before the last parent-teacher conference of the year and so that teachers will have the resources available to offer parents when they meet.

Share parent tip sheets on how to work basic skills practice into everyday activities, such as grocery shopping or vacation planning. NSLA has parent tip sheets, and PBS KIDS Lab offers easy at-home activities to practice early learning skills at <http://pbskids.org/lab/home>. National PTA also offers parent assistance in helping students achieve. Go to PTA.org/2529.htm.

Incorporate summer learning into existing spring school events, such as a Spring field day or fundraising festival. If the school approves, invite local summer learning programs to come to share information about their offerings. List your event on NSLA's interactive Summer Learning Day map at summerlearning.org/sld, and connect to a larger movement of parents, schools, community programs, and others who care about helping kids have safe, healthy, productive summers.

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Want to encourage your school district to provide more comprehensive summer learning programs? Let the administrators you work with know about NSLA's New Vision for Summer School Network, a group of 21 member school districts that are working to create a new kind of summer learning that transforms teaching and learning all year. Information about these districts and how to join the network can be found at summerlearning.org/nvss.

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