

One District's Strategy to Curb Summer Slide Among Elementary School Students

By Annette Shideler, Elizabeth Scaduto, and Grace B. Wivell

Introduction

Across the United States, K-12 schools are recognizing that as the number of English Language Learners (ELLs) enrolled increases, there is an opportunity for greater linguistic and cultural exchange among all learners. ELLs also face the dual challenge of learning English in addition to rigorous academic content. This makes them vulnerable to "summer slide," one of several terms used to describe when students attain a level of measured achievement based on standardized testing at the end of the school year, but begin the following school year with lower scores after having spent approximately 8 to 10 weeks outside of an academic setting.¹

A diverse suburban school district on Eastern Long Island, New York has seen a dramatic increase in English Language Learners over the past decade. The district recognizes that these students make strong progress during the academic school year and also experience the effects of spending two months away from school in the summer. This diverse suburban school district has run a grant-funded summer program for seven years as of 2018. The initial goal was simple: to help students learn English. Success was measured anecdotally at first: students were excited about the experience, and teachers reported considerable language growth. However, the district recognized that more was needed and created a partnership with Stony Brook University. For two summers, reading scores for students in the program were more closely examined. When reading scores at the end of the school year were compared with reading scores at the start of the following school year, students who participated with regular attendance in a summer program for ELLs were able to begin the school year in September without further academic loss. In fact, the majority of students had reading scores that either improved or remained at the same level - a great step toward reducing the academic learning gap.

Literature Review

There is considerable research documenting the need to bridge the K-12 summer learning gap across the United States, much of which focuses on the way summer

slide disproportionately affects students from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) background. When considering the various factors influencing academic performance of 9th grade students with a low SES indicator and mid-and high-SES indicator, Alexander et. al found "two-thirds of the total achievement loss could be traced to summer learning differences over the elementary years" (2007, pg. 171). Although all students tend to lose ground in math, students with a low SES indicator tend to lose ground in reading scores while Mid- and high-SES indicator students tend to gain ground during the summer months (McCombs et. al. 2012, pg. 47). Allington (2013), Alexander et. al (2007), and Cooper & Charlton (2000) all suggest that much of the summer slide experienced by students from lower SES backgrounds is attributable to a lack of access to experiences that can improve academic performance: while middle and high SES students often have the opportunity to attend summer camps and other programs, students from low SES background are often not.

While many ELLs have access to enriching summer experiences, English learners who have a low SES may not. English learners also often receive language input throughout the summer in a language other than English, and this can affect students when they return to school in the fall (DelliCarpini 2009). To embrace all students' home languages and experiences, schools must employ culturally responsive educational practices and provide equitable access to education.

One approach to continuing academic progress is the implementation of summer programs, and several studies have sought to measure the effect of summer school programs toward neutralizing summer slide for mainstream students. McCombs et. al. (2012), found that various kinds of summer programs, mandatory and voluntary, had some measure of positive effect on student achievement. Borman and Dowling (2006), in their three-year study of the Teach Baltimore Summer Academy, found that students who participated in at least two of the three years of the program experienced a "treatment effect" that was the equivalent of "50% of one grade level in vocabulary, 40% of one grade level in comprehension, and 41% of one grade level in total reading" when compared to their peers who did not participate in the program (pg. 46).

¹ Other frequently used terms include: Summer Gap, Summer Learning Loss, Summer Setback, Summer Shortfall, Summer slump, and (Summer) Regression.

Furthermore, researchers do not find that all programs lead to an equal effect, and offer suggestions for a successful program. Borman and Dowling emphasize that continued participation in summer programs is key (pg. 26). Alexander, Entwisle and Olsen's work points to the importance of implementing efforts to bridge the learning gap early: "...attempting to close the gap after it has opened wide is a rear-guard action. Most of the gap increase happens early in elementary school, which is where corrective interventions would be most effective, or even before" (2007, pg 176). They also stress the importance of summer school programs which target economically disadvantaged students: "All children can benefit from high quality 'universal' programs--preschools for all; summer schools for all--but they will not benefit in equal measure" (2007, pg 177). In other words, the importance of such programs is greater for students who may not otherwise have access to similar programs.

There is little research which focuses *exclusively* on the effect of summer school programs for English Language Learners. Though ELLs did make up at least part of the population in each of the aforementioned studies, they were small in number and the researchers did not consider their scores separately. However, in their study of a summer school program for ELL students in kindergarten through eleventh grade in Kentucky, Vanderhaar and Munoz (2005) found that when tested before and after participation in the program, a majority of students' scores increased and, importantly, students who had the lowest scores at the outset of the study were those who showed the greatest gains (pg 15). While the Kentucky summer program focused on both reading and math, students experienced greater gains in reading, reinforcing the strong effect summer programs have on reading (pg 17). Hur and Suh conducted a two-year study on a summer school program focused on assisting native Korean speakers from late elementary school through high school, and found this program improved students' confidence in their English abilities as well as academic skills, especially for those students in the elementary school grades, again showing that early intervention is key (2010 pg. 16).

The Study

This study focused on the diverse suburban school district's Summer Program for English Learners. The program was developed by the district's English as a New Language (ENL) and Bilingual Education department with the explicit purpose of providing an opportunity for ELLs at the elementary level, in keeping with the literature's assertion that this is a key time to bridge the learning gap, to continue their academic learning throughout the summer. The program was voluntary and open to all elementary ELLs with particular attention to students identified as Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE). The program has run for seven years.

For the first six years, the program ran for four weeks (20 days), but due to funding cuts the 2018 program ran for only three weeks (15 days). Students attended for three hours

each day, from 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. The district provided transportation and partnered with Island Harvest, a local food bank and summer feeding program provider, to ensure students received breakfast and lunch each day. The district had two primary goals for the program: 1) students should feel that they had a fun, learning-rich summer camp-like experience and 2) students would be provided access to high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive learning experiences. The program began with approximately 50 students in the first year and in 2018 served over 200 students in grades K through 5.

In order to assess the success of the summer school program, we compared students' Spring and Fall Reading scores, and sorted the scores into two groups to measure program success: students whose scores decreased and those whose scores either increased or remained the same. We chose to group score increases and no change together because research shows the students in our studies to be statistically likely to lose reading skills over the summer, and it was this loss that the program sought to prevent. Even if student's scores did not increase, the anticipated loss was still prevented, and the program could be considered a success.

Several reading assessments were used to understand students' progress from the Spring to the Fall. This district is currently shifting their literacy and assessment programs and therefore multiple assessments were being used by the schools in the spring and fall of 2018. Rather than implement an assessment solely for this research, we used data from the standardized reading assessments already used by the district. This was useful as access to data was simplified and the assessments were administered by trained teachers in the district. There were three tests being used during this time period², and while each test might have its advantages or disadvantages, for the purposes of our research, we treated each test equally. Importantly, we ensured that the scores we compared for a single student were from the same test. Any students who were assessed with one assessment in the spring but a different assessment in the fall were excluded from our study.

Included in this study are data from a total of 92 students in 2017, and 158 students in 2018. We were unable to compare scores from all 200+ students who participated in the programs each year, either because a student did not receive one of the tests, or because the student was assessed using different tests in the Spring and in the Fall, which we did not consider valid representations of student progress. We were able to look at both spring and fall data points from 92 of the students who regularly attended the program in 2017, and 158 of

² Teachers College Quick Assessments, The American Reading Company's Independent Reading Level Assessment (IRLA) and its Spanish language partner, Evaluación del nivel independiente de lectura (ENIL), and Renaissance Learning's STAR Reading Assessment

Table 1: Number of Scores by Grade

	K	1	2	3	4	5 (+6) ³	Total
2017	11	16	24	31	-	10	92
2018	34	27	32	36	15	15	158

the students from 2018. A breakdown by grade level of students from whom we compared data can be found in **Table 1**.

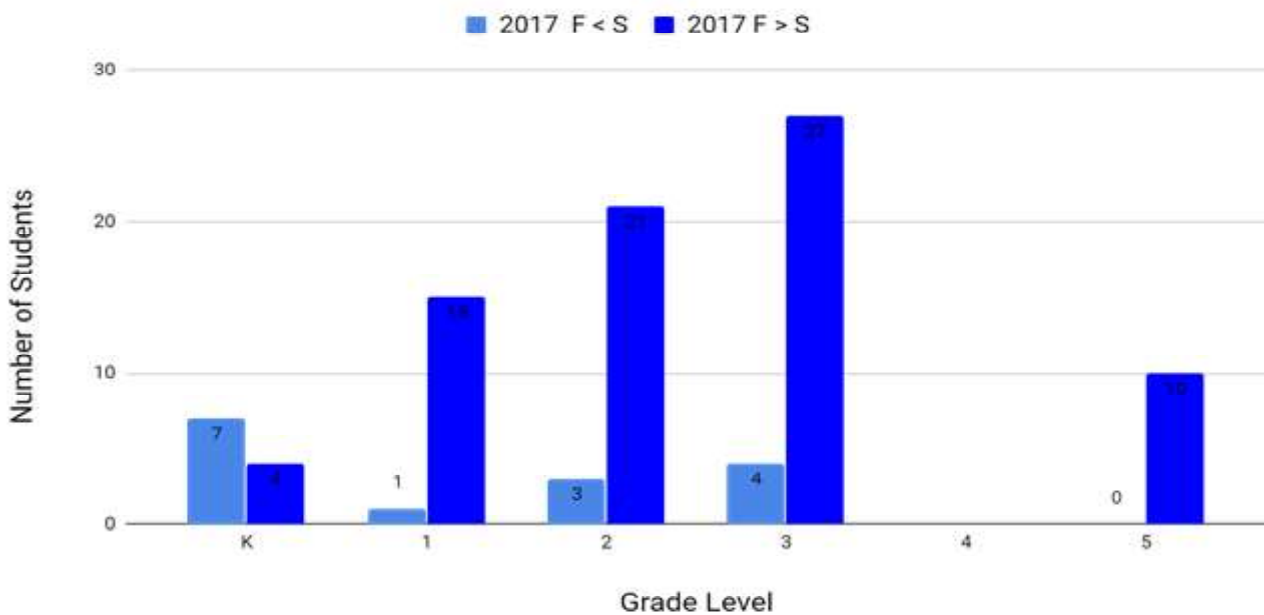
For the summer of 2018, we had hoped to provide training in intentional teaching⁴ as part of the instructional plan for the program. This focused teaching, specifically based on trends seen in students' state assessment scores, may have provided a stronger base for teachers to work from. However, there was not sufficient time for teachers to undergo specific training for this intentional teaching. Teachers involved in the planning and implementation for the 2018 program were still asked to focus on the identified areas specific to their grade levels, but it

is our belief that if the training had occurred, we would have seen even greater success. It is an area which the department in this diverse suburban school district will continue to explore.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the summer school program demonstrated significant success. In 2017, the summer program saw a majority of students improve, as can be seen in **Figure 2**. The largest percentage of students whose scores increased or remained the same was found in the class of mixed fifth and sixth grade students, in which 100 percent of students improved or remained the same from the spring

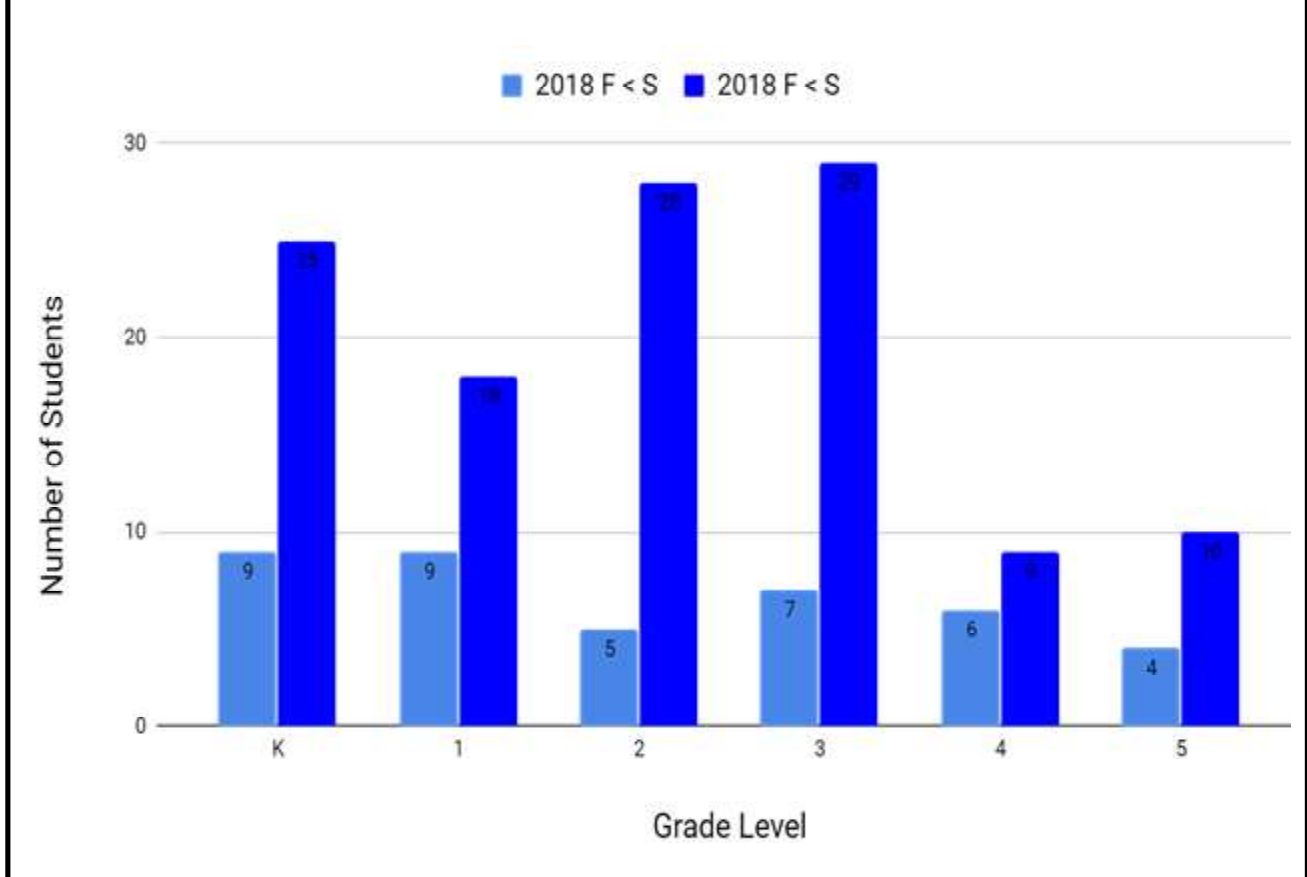
Figure 2: Summary of Student Scores, 2017



³ In 2017 some students who had already completed the sixth grade included in the fifth grade class. There were not, however, any students who were identified as SIFE that year. In contrast, in 2018 while there were no sixth grade students included, all of the students in the fifth grade class were identified as SIFE (Students with Interrupted/Inconsistent Formal Education). Of these 14 students, 10 improved and 4 declined in their reading levels. Two of the four who declined in reading levels were very new entrants to the country.

⁴ For additional information regarding "intentional teaching," please reference Shideler, A. (Fall, 2016) "A case study of data use, project-based learning, and language development for ELLs. *Journal for Leadership and Instruction* pp.22-27.

Figure 3: Summary of Student Scores, 2018



to the fall. Students in this group had the most to gain because they began at a point of very low literacy in any language and had interrupted formal education. Class size for this group was relatively small and for 2017 and 2018, the district noted greater advancement for this age group than in previous years. This may have been due in part to changing the location of the classroom to another part of the building, perhaps giving the older students a sense of greater autonomy. Also, for 2017 and 2018, the 5th and 6th grade students' regular teacher during the school year worked with them again during the summer. Both the students and the teacher began the summer program already comfortable and knowing what to expect from each other.

The other classes also demonstrated notable results in 2017, with the scores of 94 percent of first grade students, 88 percent of second grade students, and 87 percent of first grade students improving or remaining the same. The 2017 kindergarten class that year was the exception to the overall trend, both that year and in the overall two-year study, in that a majority of student's scores actually decreased, and only 36 percent of students' scores increased or remained the same. Many of these

students, however, had been enrolled in bilingual classrooms during their kindergarten year and in the first grade some were placed in monolingual English classrooms with monolingual teachers who did not have training in TESOL, and we believe this might have played a role in the decrease in students' scores.

The 2018 student group also demonstrated considerable success, with over half the students in every class showing scores which improved or remained the same, as can be seen in **Figure 3**. The scores from 74 percent of kindergarteners, 67 percent of first graders, 85 percent of second graders, 81 percent of third graders, 53 percent of fourth graders, and 71 percent of fifth graders increased or remained the same. It is especially exciting to note that so many of the fifth grade students showed positive results, as all of these students were identified as SIFE students, and therefore had additional barriers to overcome in their pursuit of academic success.

Though both years showed excellent results, there were fewer positive scores in 2018, when 75 percent of all students had scores which increased or remained the same, compared to 2017 when 84 percent of students'

scores increased or remained the same. There are a few possible explanations for this decrease in positive results. Because of the overall increase in students in the program, class sizes were larger in 2018 than they were in 2017 and this may have affected on the amount of direct individual support received. Though no research was found to specifically document the effect that the length of programming can have on student progress in summer programs, we also believe that since the 2018 program was shorter than the 2017 program, this may account for some of the difference. However, almost three quarters of students for whom we have data had scores which improved or remained the same, making the results similarly impressive. This is a group of students who will have started the school year on more solid footing because they had access to a quality summer learning program and for whom the academic learning gap continued to narrow as students' progress continued.

Conclusion

Previous research suggests that the implementation of a summer program for students likely to experience an academic gap will have a positive effect and help reduce or overcome this potential obstacle. Practical experience and existing research would indicate that English Learners are at particular risk for having the achievement gap increase annually. Furthermore, prior research indicates that students at the elementary school level have the greatest opportunity to bridge this gap and reduce or even eliminate the achievement gap through participation in summer learning programs. Our experience with the ELLs of this diverse suburban school district fully supports this research. The majority of elementary students who attended regularly maintained academic success over the extended summer recess period, and many increased their reading levels. Improvements can and should be made to the program outlined in this study, but our results clearly show that summer programs specifically developed for ELLs can effectively reduce the achievement/opportunity gap.

References

- Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., & Olsen, L. (2007). Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. *American Sociological Review*, 72, 167-180. doi: 10.1177/000312240707200202
- Allington, R., & McGill-Franzen, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Summer reading: Closing the rich/poor reading achievement gap*. Teachers College Press.
- Borman, G., & Dowling M. (2006). Longitudinal achievement effects of multiyear summer school: Evidence from the Teach Baltimore Randomized Field Trial. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 28(1), 25-48. doi: 10.3102/01623737028001025
- Carter, V. (1988). The effects of summer reading participation on the retention of reading skills. *Illinois Libraries*, 70(1), 56-60.
- Cooper, H., Valentine, J., & Charlton, K. (2000). *Making the most of summer school: A meta-analytic and narrative review*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- DelliCarpini, M. (2009). Teacher collaboration for ESL/EFL academic success. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 14(8). <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/DelliCarpini-TeacherCollaboration.html>
- Hur, W. H., & Suh, S. (2010). The development, implementation, and evaluation of a summer school for English language learners. *The Professional Educator*, 34(2).
- Johnson, P., (2000). Building effective programs for summer learning. *America Reads*. http://www.ed.gov/inits/americareads/sum_build.doc.
- McCombs, J., Augustine, C., Schwartz, H., Bodilly, S., McInnis, B., Lichter, D., & Cross, A. (2012). Making summer count: How summer programs can boost children's learning. *Rand Corporation*. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1120.pdf
- Miller, B. M. (2007, June). The learning season: The untapped power of summer to advance student achievement. *The Nellie Mae Education Foundation*. https://clalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/files/Learning_Season_ES.pdf
- Shideler, A. (2016). A case study of data use, project-based learning, and language development for ELLs. *Journal for Leadership and Instruction*, 15(2), 22-27. <https://www.scopeonline.us/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/JLI-Fall-2016.pdf>
- Smith, L. (2011). Slowing the summer slide. *Educational Leadership*, 69(4), 60-63.
- Vanderhaar, J. E., & Munoz, M. A. (2005). Limited English proficient intervention: Effects of a summer program in reading and mathematics. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 19(1), 17-33.
- _____
- Annette Shideler is Director of TESOL Teacher Preparation and Certification, Linguistics Department, at Stony Brook University in NY.
- Elizabeth Scaduto is Director of K-4 ELL Services and STEM at the Riverhead Central School District in NY.
- Grace B. Wivell is a Ph.D. student in the Linguistics Department, at Stony Brook University in NY.