



The Problem

- ***All young people experience learning losses when they do not engage in educational activities during the summer.*** Research shows that students typically score lower on standardized tests at the end of summer vacation than they do on the same tests at the beginning of summer vacation (Cooper, 1996).
- ***On average, students lose approximately 2.6 months of grade level equivalency in mathematical computation skills over the summer months.*** Studies reveal that the greatest areas of summer loss for all students, regardless of socio-economic status, are in factual or procedural knowledge (Cooper, 1996).
- ***Low-income children and youth experience greater summer learning losses than their higher income peers.*** On average, middle-income students experience slight gains in reading performance over the summer months. Low-income students experience an average summer learning loss in reading achievement of over two months (Cooper, 1996).
- ***Summer learning loss contributes to the achievement gap in reading performance between lower and higher income children and youth.*** Research demonstrates that while student achievement for both middle and lower-income students improves at similar rates during the school year, low-income students experience cumulative summer learning losses over the elementary school grades (Alexander & Entwisle, 1996).
- ***Large numbers of students who qualify for federally subsidized meals do not have the same level of access to nutritious meals during the summer as they do during the school year.*** Only one in five (21.1 per 100) of the 15.3 million children who receive free or reduced priced school lunches on a typical day during the regular school year participate in federal nutrition programs during the summer (Food Research and Action Center, 2002).
- ***Studies show that out-of-school time is a dangerous time for unsupervised children and teens.*** They are more likely to use alcohol, drugs, and tobacco; engage in criminal and other high-risk behaviors; receive poor grades; and drop out of school than those who have the opportunity to benefit from constructive activities supervised by responsible adults (Carnegie Council, 1994).

Current Interventions

Remedial Summer School Programs

A survey of the 100 largest school districts recently found that all districts operated some type of summer program. Over 90% of summer programs were described as “remedial,” targeting only students who were not on grade level (Borman, 2001). Remedial summer school programs are typically intermittent single-summer interventions offered only at gateway grades. Findings from a recent study of the Chicago’s Summer Bridge Program (Roderick, Engel, & Nagaoka, 2003) include:

- Students were extremely positive about their experiences in summer school.
- Whether teachers knew their students before summer school was an important predictor of test-score increases and teacher practice.
- Higher-achieving schools ran more effective summer school programs.
- The quality of interactions between teachers and students was a distinguishing factor between the most effective and the average classrooms.
- Students whose teachers spent more time individualizing the curriculum and working with students outside of class had greater learning gains than students in classrooms where teachers spent less time adapting the curriculum and providing individualized attention.
- Summer school may be a useful intervention for students who are behind, but it is not a substitute for effective instruction during the school year. There was no evidence that Summer Bridge had an impact on school-year learning rates.

Modified School Year Calendars

Another possible remedy for summer loss is modifying the school calendar to distribute the long summer break into shorter cycles of attendance breaks. This intervention does not actually increase the number of days children are in school, but distributes vacation time more evenly throughout the year. Emerging research on this model is generally positive; however, effect sizes associated with modified calendars are small compared to many other educational interventions (Cooper, in press).

Extended School Year

Attempts to add instructional days to the school calendar are typically based on international comparisons that show that U.S. students spend less time in school than students from high performing countries such as Japan. This model faces considerable opposition due to strongly held cultural beliefs about summer and financial interests connected to the current school calendar. For example, the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions supports efforts to fight “bloated school calendars and year-round school calendars” (IAAPA, 2003). Arguments against year-round schooling also question the extent to which additional time in school might lead to increased student fatigue (NEA, 1987).

New Directions

If policymakers are serious about improving excellence and equity in public education, social science research suggests that high-quality summer programs must become a significant and central component in school reform efforts.

- ***All young people should have consistent access to high-quality summer enrichment programs throughout their educational careers.*** Programs should be proactive and offered for multiple summers. Preliminary findings from a randomized, three-year longitudinal study of the Teach Baltimore Summer Academy program suggest that a multi-year summer intervention using collegiate volunteers as instructors can counteract the cumulative effect of summer loss on low-income students' reading outcomes (Borman, in press).
- ***Elementary schools and youth development organizations should form partnerships to prevent summer loss in reading among low-income students.*** A recent study of a summer literacy camp program in Los Angeles, CA found that when reading instruction and tutoring were integrated into a summer camp context, disadvantaged first-grade children from schools whose reading test scores were below the 25th percentile made significant gains compared to students who did not attend the summer intervention (Schacter, 2003).
- ***Teachers and youth development professionals should use the summers to collaborate and bridge gaps between schools and youth programs.*** Summer programs should incorporate research-based practices for improving cognitive development from high-quality after-school enrichment programs.
- ***Program models should maintain a strong academic focus, but also acknowledge the unique role that summers play within American culture.*** Summer programs can demonstrate the power of informal learning experiences such as reading and discussing books for pleasure and gaining exposure to new cultures and ideas. A recent survey by the Academy of Education Development found that nearly half of American parents (43%) just want their kids to have fun and relax during the summer. Second and third priorities for their children were learning new things (24%) and preparing for school (22%).
- ***Summer programs should be used to support the recruitment, professional development, and retention of teachers and youth program staff.*** Summers should be used to encourage teachers to try new techniques, teach different subjects or grades, acquire new skills and mentor new colleagues. Simultaneously, summers could be used to attract current college students or recent graduates to internship experiences in public school classrooms and with non-profit youth development organizations.
- ***Summer learning should be a community-wide, inter-agency priority.*** There are a wide variety of roles that public agencies, community-based organizations, cultural institutions, and colleges and universities can play in improving the quality and quantity of summer learning opportunities for all young people. Improved collaboration and leveraging of funds from multiple sources will help ensure greater levels of access to programs.

References

- Alexander, K.L., & Entwisle, D.R. (1996). Schools and children at risk. in A. Booth, & J.F. Dunn (Eds.). *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 67-89). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Borman, G.D., Rachuba, L., Fairchild, R.A., Boulay, M. and Kaplan, J. Can a multi-year summer program prevent the accumulation of summer learning losses? in *Summer Learning: Research, Programs, and Policies* (in press) Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Borman, G.D. (2001). Summers are for learning. *Principal*, 80(3), 26-29.
- Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. *A matter of time: risk and opportunity in the out-of-school hours: recommendations for strengthening community programs for youth*. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1994.
- Cooper, H., Nye, B., Charlton, K., Lindsay, J., & Greathouse, S. (1996). The effects of summer vacation on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 66, 227-268.
- Cooper, H., Valentine, J.C., Charleton, K., & Melson, A. (in press). The effects of modified school calendars on student achievement and school community attitudes: A research synthesis.
- Food Research and Action Center (2002). *Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report*. Washington, DC.
- International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (2003). <http://www.iaapa.org/government.html>.
- National Education Association (1987). *What Research Says About: Extending the School Day/Year: Proposals and Results*. Washington, DC.
- Roderick, M., Engel, M., & Nagaoka, J. (2003). *Ending Social Promotion: Results from Summer Bridge*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- Schacter, J. (2003). *Reducing Social Inequality in Elementary School Reading Achievement: Establishing Summer Literacy Camps for Disadvantaged Children*. Santa Monica, CA: Milken Family Foundation.