

# Making Summer Count

## How summer programs can boost children's learning

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From the RAND Corporation

During summer vacation, many students lose knowledge and skills. By the end of summer, students perform, on average, one month behind where they left off in the spring. Summer learning loss disproportionately affects low-income students. While all students lose some ground in mathematics over the summer, low-income students lose more ground in reading, while their higher-income peers may even gain. Most disturbing is that summer learning loss is cumulative; over time, the difference between the summer learning rates of low-income and higher-income students contributes substantially to the achievement gap.

Participation in summer learning programs should mitigate learn-

ing loss and could even produce achievement gains. Indeed, educators and policymakers increasingly promote summer learning as a key strategy to improve the achievement of low-performing students.

In 2009, a Johns Hopkins University-based center for summer learning became an independent organization, the National Summer Learning Association, providing resources, guidance, and expertise. In 2010, First Lady Michelle Obama launched "United We Serve: Let's Read, Let's Move," a program that encourages Americans to fight the summer reading gap, acknowledging that youth who do not read during the summer can lose months of academic progress. ►

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## Study Purpose and Research Questions

The Wallace Foundation is encouraging the establishment of district-supported summer learning programs, particularly for urban students in grades 1–8. To support this effort, The Foundation asked RAND to conduct a study to assess the need for summer learning programs and the existing evidence on effective, viable, and sustainable programs in urban districts. Here, we address the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of summer learning loss?
2. Are summer learning programs effective in improving student achievement? What are the elements of effective programs?
3. How much do programs cost?
4. What are the facilitators and challenges to implementing summer programs?

## Data and Methods

To answer our first two questions, we conducted literature reviews on summer learning loss and the effectiveness of summer learning programs. To examine cost, we conducted a literature review to identify common funding sources for summer programs, collected detailed cost data from seven programs, and determined their costs and the primary reasons for the variation among them. To address the final question, we conducted 15 telephone interviews: eight with

providers (either school districts or programs affiliated with school districts) and seven with national nondistrict providers. We also conducted site visits to five cities, where we interviewed summer learning leaders from among city and district representatives, summer learning staff, and external partners. In four of the cities, we observed summer learning. Cities selected for interviews and site visits were those that had a long history of providing summer programs or were considered to have particularly innovative programming or a particular context of interest, such as city-led programming or high proportions of English language learners.

## Key Findings

***Summer learning loss, which is disproportionate and cumulative, contributes substantially to the achievement gap.***

Research indicates that, on average, all students lose skills over the summer, particularly in mathematics. However, summer learning loss disproportionately affects low-income students. Low-income students lose substantial ground in reading during the summer, while their higher-income peers often gain. Most disturbing is that it appears that summer learning loss is cumulative and that these periods of differential learning rates between low-income and higher-income students contribute

substantially to the achievement gap in reading. Efforts to close the achievement gap during the school year alone may not be successful.

***Students who attend summer programs have better outcomes than similar peers who do not attend these programs.***

Rigorous studies of voluntary programs, mandatory programs, and programs that encourage students to read at home in the summer have found positive effects on student achievement. These studies suggest that all of these types of summer learning programs can mitigate summer learning losses and even lead to achievement gains. Longitudinal studies conclude that the effects of summer learning programs endure for at least two years after the student has engaged in the summer program.

***Strategies for maximizing quality, enrollment, and attendance are critical to achieving benefits.***

Not all summer learning programs result in positive outcomes. Programming needs to be high-quality, and students need to attend regularly. Research points to several practices associated with program quality, including individualized instruction, parental involvement, and small class sizes. For voluntary summer learning programs, providers need to adopt targeted strategies to build enrollment and maximize attendance.

Strategies include notifying parents early before they make other plans for the summer was important in maximizing enrollment. Offering engaging enrichment activities, providing transportation, and offering full-day programs, which better suit the needs of working families, increase enrollment and encourage attendance.

***Cost is the main barrier to implementing summer learning programs.***

Providing a high-quality program can cost between \$1,109 and \$2,801 per child for a six-hour-per-day, five-week program. Although preliminary evidence suggests that the cost of summer school programs can be less than two-thirds of what providers spend on programs during the academic year, summer programs nonetheless represent an additional cost to districts, especially relative to other interventions that simply update or reform practices used during the school year.

***Districts question the cost-effectiveness of summer learning programs, and many have discontinued them in response to budget cuts.***

The National Summer Learning Association indicated that, given the costs, districts are uncertain of the value they would get from a summer learning program. Further, some interviewees who currently offer summer learning programs questioned the extent to which

the benefits outweigh the costs. The recent economic downturn has created such severe shortfalls in state education budgets that many districts across the country have cut summer programming. However, district leaders who are committed to such programs have found creative ways to fund them.

### ***Partnerships can strengthen summer learning programs.***

Summer learning programs examined were provided by or operated in partnership with districts. We found that summer learning programs cost less when offered by school districts due, in part, to lower central office costs and in-kind contributions of services, such as facilities and meals. In addition, districts can leverage consistent sources of funding (e.g., Title I or general operating funds), creating a greater likelihood of sustainment. Partnerships between districts and community-based organizations (CBOs) also provided increased benefits and lowered costs. CBOs offered opportunities for enrichment beyond those typically offered in schools, such as kayaking and fencing, that encouraged students to enroll and attend. Also, CBO instructors were less expensive than certified teachers.

### ***Developing and sustaining district-based voluntary summer learning programs is challenging but feasible.***

Early implementation challenges include establishing consistent expectations for the program, navigating internal district bureaucracies, and partnering with local CBOs. Ongoing challenges to maintaining a program include funding (particularly during times of constrained school budgets), facilities constraints due to building maintenance or lack of air conditioning, low or uncertain enrollment, and an underspecified or unsupported vision for the program. Interviewees also reported that the lack of evaluations and teacher contract rules threatened program quality. Despite these challenges, some urban districts have long-standing summer learning programs, and others have launched programs over the last few years. Challenges can be overcome by supportive leaders who can find and dedicate funding, as well as ensure that qualified staff devote time to early planning, early hiring, and early recruiting.

### **Recommendations for Districts and Providers**

Rigorous studies have shown that strong summer programs can achieve several important goals: reverse summer learning loss, achieve learning gains, and give low-performing students the chance to master material that they did not learn during the school year.

We recommend that districts

and other providers invest in staffing and planning for summer learning programs, actively incorporate practices that will help ensure the success of programs, and maximize the benefits of partnerships and a variety of funding sources.

### ***Invest in highly qualified staff and early planning.***

We found that providers that succeeded in developing a well-structured program that attracted students to enroll and attend had high-quality, dedicated year-round administrators with time devoted to planning and programming. Planning began early in the school year, which allowed programs to conduct early hiring (thereby maximizing their teacher recruiting pool) and early recruiting (thereby maximizing student enrollment).

### ***Embed promising practices into summer learning programs.***

A number of practices are associated with improved student outcomes, such as smaller class sizes, involving parents, providing individualized instruction, and maximizing students' attendance. Other best practices include providing structures that support high-quality instruction, aligning the school year and summer curricula, including content beyond remediation, and tracking effectiveness. Providers also need to adopt strategies for attracting students, such as print and radio advertising; advertising at community meetings, summer learn-

ing fairs, and even grocery stores; targeted recruiting of students living in housing projects, including door-to-door recruiting and phone calls to parents; student and teacher focus groups; and CBO recruiting among students in their after-school programs.

### ***Consider partnerships when developing summer learning programs.***

We found benefits from partnerships between school districts and CBOs that included a wider variety of programming options, and more varied funding sources. However, a number of other partnerships may be beneficial, as several types of organizations have an interest in promoting summer learning experiences for youth—districts, CBOs, private summer learning providers, cities, and local funders. Each of these organizations has a set of resources and skills that can help build sustainable summer learning programs.

### ***Think creatively about funding.***

There are several pots of funding from which districts can draw. Researchers found, for example, more than 100 programs that can support summer learning. The National Summer Learning Association provides guidelines for funding summer learning programs on its website. Other ideas include hiring AmeriCorps students and hiring teachers who need administrative hours to serve as summer

site coordinators. Partnering with local CBOs can also result in economies of scale, as noted earlier.

### **Recommendations for Policymakers and Funders**

Finally, we offer recommendations for policymakers and funders who are interested in supporting summer learning programs:

#### ***Extend the research base.***

Although research has established the efficacy of summer learning programs, it has not tested several aspects of such programs when offered to large numbers of low-performing students in urban settings. Rigorous, longitudinal research on large programs would provide valuable information to policymakers and practitioners. In particular, we recommend:

- Conduct randomized controlled trials of programs designed to maximize attendance that compare treated to nontreated students over multiple years.

- Conduct studies that include multiple outcomes beyond academic performance: secondary academic outcomes, such as school attendance and graduation rates, and nonacademic outcomes, such as reductions in juvenile delinquency, improved nutrition, and increases in exercise. Including a range of outcomes will help motivate other stakeholders, such as city governments, to support or fund summer learning programs.

- Conduct studies that examine

whether programs can be constructed to attract high levels of participation in multiple, consecutive years.

- Conduct studies of the cost-effectiveness of summer learning programs to help district leaders and other policymakers consider how best to invest in improving education.

#### ***Support consistent funding sources for summer learning programs.***

A key obstacle is a lack of stable funding. Policymakers at all levels can work to provide funding by specifying that existing funding targeted to high-need youth can be used for summer programming, by establishing new funding, and by fundraising for summer programming. The school district officials whom we spoke with who run summer learning programs independently confirmed that funding was contingent on the support of key leaders, including the superintendent, local politicians, and local foundations.

#### ***Provide clear guidance regarding the use of scarce funds.***

District leaders described the difficulty of braiding multiple funding sources together, given the restrictions and requirements associated with each source of funds. State policymakers could support district efforts by providing clear guidance on how federal and state funds can be combined to support summer programs. ■

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