

The Case for Summer Learning

Why Supporting Students and Families All Year Is Vitaly Important



BY SARAH PITCOCK

For many people, the word “summer” evokes easier days, a time when life slows down. So does the term “summer break,” a time parents, teachers, and students alike value as a well-deserved respite from the labor of the school year. Unfortunately, a growing body of evidence shows that summer is far from a time to recharge for many families. Instead, it’s a time of loss and lack, a time of struggle and stress. With half of all public school children today living in low-income households, the reality is that summer is actually no vacation at all.

The truth is, public schools are a critical lifeline for low-income students and families. When they are open, students of different income levels—rich, poor, and middle class—achieve at roughly the same rate. When they are closed, achievement gaps widen

and a variety of academic, health, and social-emotional outcomes decline. So why are schools closed in the summer?

A Brief History

It’s a question we hear journalists and commentators discuss from time to time. Many claim that the school year’s origins lie in our outdated agrarian school calendar, that our summer break is a vestige of a past when children’s responsibilities to the family farm trumped their educational needs. It turns out this is one of many myths associated with summer vacation. In reality, crops are planted in the spring and harvested and sold in the fall, making summer and winter historically good times for children in rural areas to attend school, which they did until the early 20th century.

Instead, the summer break as we know it today came from a desire to reconcile what were very different school calendars for urban and rural students. In 1842, New York City schools were open 248 days a year, significantly more than the 180 days or so they are open today. In many cities, school was essentially open

Sarah Pitcock is the former chief executive officer of the National Summer Learning Association and coeditor and coauthor of The Summer Slide: What We Know and Can Do About Summer Learning Loss.

year-round. Children came when they could; it was difficult to mandate attendance.

By the late 19th century, a variety of social and economic factors made standardizing the calendar seem prudent. The summer heat made schools uninhabitable in many parts of the country. Affluent and middle-class residents often left cities during the sweltering summer months, resulting in schools closing while they were away.¹ In addition, public health advocates at the time said it was unhealthy to be inside so much. President Teddy Roosevelt was pushing the benefits of exercise and getting outside, and the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts were taking root in the United States, adding to the nation's growing interest in nature and exploration.

So a compromise was made to standardize urban and rural calendars around a long summer break. The time would give teachers an opportunity to train and students a chance to get outside and recover from the school year.

With more students on the same calendar, it didn't take long for the issue of summer learning loss to arise. In 1906, William White tried to determine how much students forget academically during their summer break. White, a math teacher in New Paltz, New York, tested seven fourth-graders and eight seventh-graders on their recall of math facts before and after summer break. He found decreases in their learning, but didn't attempt to explain the decline, writing that "neglect for three months may blur the memory; but three months of open-air life may give an increased vitality that quickens the memory."²

White was the first known researcher of what is now called the "summer slide." Since he completed his small experiment, many researchers have taken on the issue in a similar way, comparing students' knowledge and skills before and after summer.

Barbara Heyns is one such researcher. With her 1978 book *Summer Learning and the Effects of Schooling*, she demonstrated that the achievement gap widens when disadvantaged children are cut off from the learning resources available to them at school. Her research of Atlanta schoolchildren from low-income families found that poor African American children came close to keeping pace with their more-advantaged counterparts during the school year but fell back during the summer months.³

As Karl Alexander, Matthew Boulay, and I wrote in the introduction to our edited volume, *The Summer Slide: What We Know and Can Do About Summer Learning Loss*, Heyns's "findings fundamentally altered our understanding of the forces that impinge on poor and minority children's learning."⁴

In 1996, Harris Cooper's meta-analysis of 39 summer school program evaluations first quantified summer learning loss in terms of months of grade-level skills. He found that all students lost at least a month of math skills every summer, with an average loss of 2.6 months. Cooper's findings confirmed what Heyns found: that children in lower-income families lost more than their middle- and higher-income peers.⁵

Cooper revealed a personal impetus for the work in a published interview:

While I was serving as a school board member, there was a threatened federal reduction in summer school support. I didn't think that seemed like a good way to save money, so after the meeting, I talked to some graduate students and said, "Let's look at what happens over the summer." ...

... Across the board, all kids lose some math skills. In reading, the middle class holds its own, but the poor lose reading and spelling skills, and that pattern emerged as a possible explanation for the academic achievement gap between those who have financial resources and those who don't. We also found that summer learning programs have a significant positive effect, and those positive effects are greater for middle-class kids than for poor kids.⁶

Researchers have observed that the difference in reading and math outcomes over the summer is likely related to the fact that reading is more naturally embedded in a child's life and that parents are natural reading teachers. On the other hand, math may not be a naturally occurring part of day-to-day life in many households, making math knowledge and skills more difficult to practice and quicker to decline.

When public schools are open, students of different income levels achieve at roughly the same rate.

As researchers such as Cooper have pointed out, middle-class students experience better outcomes from summer learning programs than their less-affluent peers. One reason is attributed to the "faucet theory": public schooling creates a flow of resources to all students during the school year—books, meals, teachers, and organized activities, among others—that keep all students learning and growing. In the summer, the faucet continues flowing for middle- and higher-income students because of their home environment and/or the enrichment their families provide. But the faucet runs dry for lower-income students, who lose access to critical services altogether when the school doors close. That inequity at home makes it harder for low-income students to keep up academically in the summer, even if they attend the same programs as their higher-income peers.

Three researchers at Johns Hopkins University, Doris R. Entwisle, Karl Alexander, and Linda Steffel Olson, introduced the faucet theory in their book, *Children, Schools, and Inequality*, published in 1997.⁷ Based on spring and fall test scores from their longitudinal Beginning School Study in Baltimore, they found that the difference in reading comprehension abilities between low-income children and middle-income children grew from half a school year in the fall of first grade to three school years by the spring of fifth grade. The real revelation, however, was that almost all of the increase in the achievement gap over the elementary school years could be traced to differences across social lines in

summer learning experiences. They found that two-thirds of the ninth-grade reading achievement gap could be attributed to how students spent their summers in elementary school.⁸

In 1992, Matthew Boulay, one of Alexander’s students, founded Teach Baltimore, a summer reading program, which paired Johns Hopkins undergraduate students with low-income elementary students from Baltimore City Public Schools. An evaluation of Teach Baltimore showed that participating students returned to school in the fall with a learning advantage instead of the typical learning loss. With growing recognition of the issue, Teach Baltimore became the Center for Summer Learning in 2001, known today as the National Summer Learning Association.



Research and Advocacy in Recent Years

In 2009, the National Summer Learning Association began convening school districts as part of the New Vision for Summer School (NVSS) Network, a group of districts committed to transcending the remedial, punitive model of summer school. Spurred by stimulus funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, member districts were ready to use the summer months to serve more students in more innovative ways and test out teacher professional development and new curriculum and instructional strategies. New strategies included testing project-based learning* approaches in the summer, partnering with community-based organizations to co-deliver programs, and pairing new teachers with veteran teachers for mentorship and training.

In 2011, five urban school districts, some of them members of the NVSS Network, joined with the Rand Corporation and the Wallace Foundation to answer two important questions: Can voluntary summer learning programs combining academics and enrichment help students succeed in school? And if so, how?

By reviewing existing research and interviewing providers, Rand found several aspects critical to successful summer programming. These included offering small class sizes and individualized instruction, engaging students in fun enrichment activities, providing transportation to and from the program, offering full-day program options, and notifying parents early before they

make other plans for the summer. Rand also found that partnerships between school districts and community-based organizations were mutually beneficial and cost less than separate programs.⁹ (For more from Rand’s researchers on summer learning, see the article on page 10.)

In 2013, Rand began conducting a randomized controlled trial in five school districts—in Boston; Dallas; Duval County, Florida; Pittsburgh; and Rochester, New York—to evaluate summer learning outcomes. There were 5,600 third-graders who applied to summer programs and were randomly assigned to one of two groups—those selected to take part in the programs for two summers (the treatment group) and those not selected (the control group). The study analyzed outcomes for 3,192 students who were offered access to the programs.

The programs combined academic instruction from certified teachers with a variety of enrichment offerings from community partners, including dance, theater, martial arts, swimming, woodworking, cooking, and kayaking. Program leaders received substantial support from the Rand team through formative feedback that enabled them to strengthen and enhance their programs each summer.

Researchers found that students who attended a five- to six-week summer program for 20 or more days in 2013 (deemed “high attenders”) performed better on state math tests than similar students in the control group. This advantage was statistically significant and lasted through the following school year. The results were even more striking for “high attenders” in 2014: they outperformed control-group students in both math and English language arts (ELA) on standardized tests in the fall and spring. The advantage after the second summer was equivalent to 20 to 25 percent of a year’s learning in math and ELA. Regardless of attendance rate, students who received at least 25 hours of math or 34 hours of ELA instruction during the summer did better than control-group students on tests in fall 2013 and fall 2014.¹⁰

Rand’s work has contributed tremendously to the research base on summer learning. The findings qualify as promising evidence, also known as “Tier 3” under the Every Student Succeeds Act. The Every Student Succeeds Act offers many funding streams that are only available to districts if used to support activities that are evidence-based, which the law defines in four tiers based on the rigor of the research. The availability of qualifying research on which to base program design should make it easier for states to use federal funding for this kind of summer learning.

Additional research shows us that summer learning loss involves more than math and reading. When students do not attend engaging and enriching summer programs, the summer months can result in losses in health and well-being, college and career opportunity, and the support needed to break cycles of intergenerational poverty and move young people and their families forward.¹¹

In fact, 84 percent of young people who qualify for free and reduced-price meals do not access them in the summer.¹² Reasons may include lack of availability, stigma associated with going to meal sites, or lack of awareness. In addition to hunger, food insecurity has other consequences. For example, some young people gain weight twice as fast during the summer. A recent analysis of the *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010–11*, shows a stark difference between school year and summer weight gain. The prevalence of both obese and overweight children increased signifi-

*For more on project-based learning, see “Project-Based Instruction” in the Fall 2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/fall2016/duke.

cantly between the start of kindergarten and the end of second grade, with all of the increase occurring during the summers.¹³

For many youth ages 14 and up, particularly those from low-income homes, earning an income in the summer is a necessity. Subsidized summer jobs were once an accessible reality for many, but the primary federal funding stream for such programs was eliminated in 2008, leaving cities to take up much of the responsibility. This loss of funding has contributed to a nearly 40 percent decline in youth employment in the last 12 years and a deficit of 3.6 million teen summer jobs. The decline has most affected low-income and minority youth. In 2013, white male teens from high-income families were five times more likely to be employed than African American male teens from low-income families.¹⁴

In addition to the loss of funding for summer jobs, other factors have made summer as much about family economic success as academic success. On July 6, 2009, then President Barack Obama declared the first National Summer Learning Day. His declaration reads, in part: “Families and community members play the most important role in the lives of their children. Demands at work and home mean that many parents have less time to spend with their children, but this time, care, and instruction is critical to children’s academic success.”¹⁵

Indeed, the composition and well-being of families and our workforce have changed dramatically, with major implications for summer learning, health, and safety. Today, more children are living with single parents. The share of children born outside of marriage now stands at 41 percent, up from just 5 percent in 1960. Since 1996, most recipients of public assistance must work in order to qualify for benefits, taking them out of the home year-round. Minimum wage has not kept pace with inflation, so parents are working longer hours for less pay. In short, there is no one home to care for kids in the summer and less money to pay for care inside or outside the home.¹⁶

Former Massachusetts Secretary of Education Paul Reville has been a vocal advocate for a radical reimagining of public education to catch up to the changing family and economic circumstances. Citing the growing achievement and opportunity gaps, Reville writes:

I believe we need a national campaign for a new concept: making summer learning, in effect, a third education semester each year. ... This concept is not about prescribing more formal schooling, but rather about providing enrichment, stimulation, and learning opportunities that are often, though not always, aligned with academic goals. ... Such an entitlement would ... guarantee that every child, irrespective of financial means, would have access to at least 6 weeks of high-quality summer learning and enrichment. ... We can no longer treat summer learning as incidental, an accident of birth; rather, we must see it as an essential ingredient in achieving student success at scale.¹⁷

Why Summer Learning Is Not a Priority

The Hatcher Group, a public affairs and communications firm, has been tracking coverage of summer learning loss in the media for a decade. What started as 1,000 stories on the issue in 2007 grew to more than 30,000 stories in 2015, a more than tenfold increase in just eight years. The term “summer slide” is increas-



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ingly well understood and used to describe the phenomenon. Perhaps as a result of steady media coverage, educators and parents seem to recognize the importance of the issue.

The Afterschool Alliance, a policy and advocacy organization,[†] conducts its *America After 3PM* national survey every five years to document participation in and perceptions of afterschool and summer programs among a representative sample of households. In the most recent survey, from 2014, 85 percent of families said they support public funding for summer learning. The figure is no surprise, given that the average reported cost of a summer program nationally was \$288 per week—putting fee-based programs out of reach of many low- and middle-income families.¹⁸

Where does that leave us? Research tells us that summer learning loss is a problem and a considerable factor in the achievement gap. Yet despite growing understanding of the issue and support for summer learning, it is still not a priority.

Why? One (unsurprising) answer is funding. It’s no secret that school districts have struggled to fully fund their schools since the Great Recession. From 2007 to 2009, state funding fell sharply, and local funding didn’t make up the difference. Most states still provide less support per student for elementary and secondary schools than they did prior to 2007. Even today, some states continue to make cuts.

[†]For more on the Afterschool Alliance, an AFT partner, see www.afterschoolalliance.org.

Regardless of state and district budgets, the lack of dedicated federal funding for summer learning makes the issue easy to ignore. Most offices within a school district and agencies within a city or state are directly tied to a public funding stream. As the saying goes, what gets measured gets done.

A variety of federal funding streams allow—but don't require—money to be targeted to summer learning, so such spending is rarely prioritized or tracked. One step in the right direction: nearly half of states now require or prioritize summer learning for their



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federal 21st Century Community Learning Center programs, which are partnerships between schools and community-based organizations to offer academic enrichment programming before and after the school day and during the summer. Still, little local infrastructure exists for summer learning. For instance, in many districts, summer programs are often run by teachers on special assignment with little time for preparation or coordination across departments or agencies. Although summer learning is really everyone's problem, in practice, it's no one's responsibility.

Another common challenge for expanding access to summer learning involves physical infrastructure. Today, many schools still lack air conditioning, making them too hot for use in the summer. Moreover, summer is the favored time for improvements, repairs, and upgrades to be made to facilities, also taking many schools out of consideration for summer programming.

In his 2010 article for *Time*, writer David Von Drehle points to yet another common barrier to expanding summer learning programs: "Leaders in a number of states have tried to add days or even weeks to the academic calendar, but they quickly run into barriers of cost and culture. ... Entire industries depend on the rhythms of summer—think travel, camping, sports and theme parks. They use their influence to keep summers as long as possible."¹⁹

Indeed, a simple Google search for "tourism lobby and school calendars" yields news stories from multiple states covering the struggle between school systems and powerful tourism interest groups for more local control over school calendars. North Carolina has had a particularly hard-fought battle since the state passed a school calendar law in 2004. The law requires schools to start on the Monday nearest August 26 and end on the Friday closest to June 11. In that time, districts must fit 185 school days, nine teacher work days, several weeks of holidays, and makeup days for weather.

The superintendent of the Vance County Schools in North Carolina, Anthony Jackson, has criticized the calendar law, pointing out that an earlier start date would reduce summer learning loss and enable the district to align the calendar to the local community college, which, in turn, would help high school students enroll in classes there.²⁰ And he is not alone. In Virginia, a school calendar law was signed in 1986, and school administrators have been trying to overturn it ever since.²¹ A 2005 law requires Michigan schools to start after Labor Day, and a 2016 Maryland executive order that went into effect in 2017 requires the same.²²

While these laws exemplify the cultural value and perceived economic value of summer, they are ultimately shortsighted. The achievement gap, to which summer learning loss makes a significant contribution, suppresses high school graduation and college completion rates. It also results in long-term economic and social costs to society that far outweigh the benefits of one or two additional weeks of summer break.

With a swing toward more local control of federal education funding and meaningful evidence to support summer learning, perhaps more districts will take a serious look at the potential of these overlooked months. After all, young people who are behind need more time for learning, and more time during the school year alone will never solve the complex inequities of summer or close the achievement gap.

School districts should look to the wide-open space of the summer months to test their new approaches and partnerships, and they should have help along the way. Fortunately, parents overwhelmingly support summer learning, and community-based organizations* stand ready to support districts in this cause. With more than 100 years of research on the academic setbacks related to students' unequal summers, and newer research on the employment and health implications of this disparity, it's clear that the summer slide is everyone's problem. Still, we'll only make progress against this outdated cultural and institutional norm when school districts, parents, employers, and state and local leaders agree that the summer slide is also everyone's responsibility. □

(Endnotes on page 39)

*For more on community schools, see "Where It All Comes Together" in the Fall 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/blank_villarreal.

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