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Making Summer Count

How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning

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Summary

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. Of course, not all students experience “average” losses. 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.

Because many students lose learning over the summer and some students need more time on task to master content, participation in summer learning programs should mitigate learning loss and could even produce achievement gains. Indeed, educators and policymakers are increasingly promoting summer learning as a key strategy to improving 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 to the summer learning community. In 2010, President Obama noted, “Students are losing a lot of what they learn during the school year during the summer.”¹ Earlier that year, 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 (White House, 2010).

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 both the need

¹ The remark was made during an interview on NBC’s *Today Show*, September 27, 2010.

for summer learning programs and the existing evidence on effective, viable, and sustainable summer learning programs in urban districts.

In this monograph, 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 summer programs?
3. How much do summer learning programs cost?
4. What are the facilitators and challenges to implementing summer programs?

Data and Methods

To answer our first two research 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 summer learning programs, and determined their costs and the primary reasons for the variation among them. To address the final question, regarding facilitators and challenges to implementing such programs, 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 (more than 60 interviews in total). In four of the cities, we had the opportunity to observe summer learning. Cities selected for interviews and site visits were those that had a long history of providing summer programs or were considered by the national organizations to have particularly innovative programming or a particular context of interest, such as city-led programming or high proportions of English language learners.

Limitations and Contributions

This monograph does not include any independent analyses to determine the nature of summer learning loss or summer program effectiveness. Instead, it summarizes and draws out lessons from a set of existing research. While our independent cost analysis provides much-needed information for the field, it is limited to seven cases of academically oriented summer programming that operate at scale. Thus, it does not capture the cost range of all types of summer learning programs. In addition, because our findings and recommendations are drawn from a limited sample of summer programs that are

not representative of all summer learning program contexts, they are not generalizable to all programs. In particular, by design, we spent more time studying programs provided by school districts than we did studying those provided by national or community-based summer learning providers. We also made no attempt to assess the quality of the summer programs that we visited.

Despite these limitations, this monograph makes an important contribution to the field by addressing both the value and the cost of summer learning programs. We synthesize evidence from the research about summer learning loss and the effectiveness of summer learning programs in preventing that loss. We also estimate the potential costs of such programs and provide lessons learned from districts and other providers about how to fund, implement, and sustain such programs.

Key Findings

Summer Learning Loss, Which Is Disproportionate and Cumulative, Contributes Substantially to the Achievement Gap

Research indicates that, on average, students lose skills over the summer, particularly in mathematics. However, not all students experience “average” losses, and 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, over time, these periods of differential learning rates between low-income and higher-income students contribute substantially to the achievement gap in reading. It may be that efforts to close the achievement gap during the school year alone will be unsuccessful.

Students Who Attend Summer Programs Have Better Outcomes Than Similar Peers Who Do Not Attend These Programs

Rigorous studies of voluntary summer programs, mandatory summer programs, and programs that encourage students to read at home in the summer have all found positive effects on student achievement. The combined evidence from these studies suggests that all of these types of summer learning programs can mitigate summer learning losses and even lead to achievement gains. Moreover, 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. (No studies have examined whether effects last beyond two years.)

Strategies for Maximizing Quality, Enrollment, and Attendance Are Critical to Achieving Benefits

Not all summer learning programs result in positive outcomes for enrollees. Programming needs to be high-quality, and students need to enroll and attend regularly.

Research points to several practices that are 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 among enrollees. Several effective strategies were offered by the program staff we interviewed. 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, were noted as methods of increasing enrollment and encouraging high attendance rates.

Cost Is the Main Barrier to Implementing Summer Learning Programs

Providing a high-quality summer learning 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 (on a per-slot, per-week basis), 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

Interviewees from the National Summer Learning Association indicated that, given the costs, districts are uncertain of the value they would get from a summer learning program. Furthermore, some of our interviewees who are currently offering summer learning programs questioned the extent to which the benefits of the program outweigh the costs. In fact, the recent economic downturn has created such severe shortfalls in state education budgets that many districts across the country have cut what little summer school programming they have offered. However, district leaders who are committed to such programs have found creative ways to fund them.

Partnerships Can Strengthen Summer Learning Programs

The majority of the summer learning programs examined in this study were provided by or operated in partnership with districts, and we found benefits from these partnerships. 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) for such programs, creating a greater likelihood of sustainment. We also found that partnerships between districts and community-based organizations (CBOs) 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—steps

critical to program effectiveness. We also found that CBO instructors were less expensive than certified teachers. Thus, partnerships between these two types of organizations resulted in lower costs overall. Further, in one city, provision of enrichment opportunities attracted local foundation funding for summer programs.

Developing and Sustaining District-Based Voluntary Summer Learning Programs Is Challenging but Feasible

Interviewees reported that launching a summer learning program that serves a high proportion of low-performing students is challenging. Early implementation challenges include establishing consistent expectations for the program, navigating internal district bureaucracies, and partnering with local CBOs. Ongoing challenges to maintaining a summer learning 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 summer program. Interviewees also reported that the lack of evaluations and teacher contract rules threatened the quality of their programs. Despite these challenges, some urban districts have long-standing summer learning programs, and others have launched new 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 for summer learning programs.

Recommendations for Districts and Providers

Districts and communities must decide for themselves whether the potential value of these programs is worth the cost and effort of establishing and sustaining them. But our analysis suggests that they should be seriously considered within the context of the needs and resources available to districts and communities. 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 previous school year.

Here, we offer a set of recommendations for districts and other providers that want to invest in summer learning programs. Specifically, we recommend that districts and 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

Developing high-quality summer programs can be challenging. 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. Early planning 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

Research shows that 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 to these programs to ensure value for their investment, such as print and radio advertising; advertising at community meetings, summer learning 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

Partnerships may enable the creation and sustainment of high-quality voluntary 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. We encourage leaders to consider all local resources and build appropriate partnerships when developing these programs.

Think Creatively About Funding

There are several pots of funding from which districts can draw to support summer learning programs. Researchers have documented, 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. This monograph provides other funding ideas, such as 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 on the efficacy of summer learning programs and support stable funding for new and existing 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 make the following recommendations:

- 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 of programming. If so, the studies should evaluate the effects of consecutive years of participation on a range of student outcomes.
- 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 to providing summer learning programs is a lack of stable funding. Policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels can work to provide funding for summer programming by specifying that existing funding targeted to high-need youth can be used for summer programming, by establishing new funding for programs, 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.