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Summer Counts

Making Summer Programs Part of the Learning Equation

Summer vacation takes a toll on students’ knowledge and skills. When they report to school in the fall, they 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.

Summer learning programs have the potential to help children and youth improve academic and other outcomes. This is especially true for children from low-income families who might not have access to educational resources throughout the summer months and for low-achieving students who need additional time to master academic content. However, summer learning programs are often an afterthought of school districts or not offered at all, especially in restrictive funding environments.

The Wallace Foundation is encouraging the establishment of district-supported summer learning programs, particularly for urban students in elementary and middle grades. To support this effort, the RAND Corporation conducted a study to assess both the need for summer learning programs and the existing evidence on effective, viable, and sustainable summer learning programs in urban districts.

Summer Programs Benefit Students

Increasingly, educators and policymakers consider additional learning time to be key in improving the achievement of low-performing students. The RAND study showed the following:

Abstract

Summer learning programs can prevent the loss of knowledge and skills that occurs over the summer for many students and especially low-income students. School districts, providers, policymakers, and funders should

- make planning a year-round effort
- start early to hire quality staff and recruit students
- incorporate best practices from successful programs
- establish partnerships
- seek and support stable funding
- expand the research base on the long-term and cumulative effects of programs.

- Summer learning loss, which is disproportionate and cumulative, contributes substantially to the achievement gap.
- Many types of summer programs benefit students who participate, including voluntary programs, mandatory programs, and reading-at-home programs.
- Strategies for maximizing quality, enrollment, and attendance are critical to achieving benefits.
- Partnerships among districts, community-based organizations, government agencies, local funders, and others can strengthen summer learning programs.
- Despite the clear benefits of these programs, some district leaders question the cost-effectiveness of summer learning programs, and many have discontinued them in response to budget cuts.

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Cost Is the Major Barrier

Interviews highlighted concerns about the cost of summer programs. Although summer programs tend to be less expensive than those offered during the school year, they represent an additional cost to districts. Collecting cost data from seven programs, the research team found that a high-quality program can cost between \$1,109 and \$2,801 per student per summer, including food, transportation, and facilities. They also highlighted several points about these costs:

- They are about two-thirds the cost of education during the school year.
- The key cost driver is staffing; therefore, lowering the student-to-instructor ratio, which is associated with higher-quality programs, has significant cost implications.
- Districts with strong programs draw on multiple sources of funding at the federal and state levels and cultivate community support from nonprofit organizations, local foundations, and city agencies. However, districts noted the challenge of weaving together multiple sources of funding.

Recommendations for Districts

Districts and communities must decide for themselves whether the potential value of these programs is worth their investment. But the existing research and the RAND study suggest that summer learning programs should be seriously considered as a method of reducing the achievement gap. For districts that decide to take this step, the authors make several recommendations:

- *Invest in high-quality staffing and early planning.* 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 to devote to planning, programming, early hiring of summer teachers, and early recruiting of students.
- *Incorporate practices that will help ensure the success of programs.* Best practices include arranging smaller classes, involving parents, providing individualized instruction, maximizing students' attendance, providing structures that support high-quality instruction, aligning the school-year and summer curricula, including content beyond remediation, and tracking effectiveness.
- *Maximize the benefits of partnerships and a variety of funding sources.* Partnerships between school districts and community-based organizations led to a wider variety of

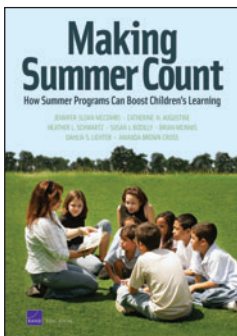
programming options and more varied funding sources. However, a number of other partnerships may be beneficial, as several types of organizations have an interest in promoting summer learning experiences for youth.

- *Think creatively about funding.* Districts can draw from several pots of funding. More than 100 programs can support summer learning. The National Summer Learning Association provides guidelines for funding summer learning programs on its website. Districts can hire AmeriCorps students and teachers who need administrative hours to serve as summer site coordinators. Partnering with local community-based organizations can also result in economies of scale.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Funders

The study's findings resulted in the following recommendations for policymakers and funders:

- *Support stable funding for new and existing programs.* Federal, state, and local policymakers can work to provide funding for summer programs by specifying that existing funding for high-need youth can be used for summer programs, establishing new funding, and raising funds specifically for summer programs.
- *Provide clear guidance regarding how funding sources can be combined to support summer programs.* State policymakers could support district efforts by providing clear guidance on how federal and state funding sources can be combined to support summer programs.
- *Extend the research base on the efficacy of summer learning programs.* Research has not tested several aspects of summer learning programs when they are 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, such studies should
 - measure nonacademic as well as academic outcomes
 - examine whether programs can be constructed to attract high levels of participation in multiple, consecutive years of programming
 - rely on rigorous methods, such as randomized controlled trials, to measure the longitudinal effects of consecutive years of summer program participation
 - examine the cost-effectiveness of summer programs. ■



This research brief describes work done for RAND Education documented in *Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning*, by Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Catherine H. Augustine, Heather L. Schwartz, Susan J. Bodilly, Brian McInnis, Dahlia S. Lichter, and Amanda Brown Cross, MG-1120-WF (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1120.html>), 2011, 118 pp., \$24.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-5266-7. This research brief was written by Shelley H. Wiseman. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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