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:

- 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.
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**

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**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 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.
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