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Getting to Work on **Summer Learning**

Recommended Practices
for Success

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Summary

Summer learning programs have emerged as a promising way to address the growing achievement gap between children of the poorest families and those of the most affluent. Research shows that during summer, low-income students suffer disproportionate learning loss and those losses accumulate over time, contributing substantially to the achievement gap between low- and higher-income children. In addition, summer programs can benefit struggling students of all backgrounds by providing additional time to learn material they did not master during the school year. Many school districts offer mandatory summer programs to students at risk of grade retention, but fewer districts offer summer learning programs to a broader population of students as a means of stemming summer learning loss and boosting academic performance.

The Wallace Foundation is funding a multiyear demonstration project to determine whether district summer learning programs can stem summer learning loss for low-income students. This report distills the lessons learned so far from evaluations of programs offered in summer 2011 in six districts selected for the demonstration project. These districts—Boston; Cincinnati; Dallas; Duval County, Florida; Pittsburgh; and Rochester, New York—have committed to offering such programs to large numbers of at-risk elementary students. These are all voluntary programs that offer reading, mathematics, and enrichment activities (such as arts, sports, and science exploration); operate for a full day; provide transportation to students; are free of charge; and share a goal of maintaining or improving student achievement. They all served students rising from third into fourth grade (the focus of our evaluations), and most districts served other grade levels as well.

To gather information for our evaluations, we interviewed summer program stakeholders, such as district leaders and summer site leaders and teachers; surveyed teachers, parents, and students; observed program training, instruction, and logistics; engaged professors of elementary education reading and mathematics to review the curricula; gathered program cost data; and analyzed district data on attendance. Our analysis of all this information, combined with our review of education research (including studies of the characteristics of strong summer programs), led to a diagnosis of the key strengths and weaknesses of each program, as well as recommendations for improvement tailored to each district. The detailed evaluations that went to each dis-

trict were designed to help them improve their programs before the summer of 2013, when we will conduct a randomized controlled trial to answer the key question: Are these programs improving student outcomes?

Although the demonstration project is not yet complete, we synthesized the key lessons we have learned so far and developed a set of recommendations. Because there is demand for information on how to set up and manage such programs, we did not want to wait until the end of the study to share what we have learned about what works and what does not. Although the recommendations we make here are not proven practices—we do not yet have student outcome data from the randomized controlled trial—they are based on an enormous data-gathering effort that included more than 1,800 surveys, 325 interviews, and about 400 hours of direct observations of classroom and enrichment activities. We are confident that these recommendations offer the best guidance on summer programs currently available.

In the accompanying box we list these recommendations, organized around the key challenges of starting up and managing a summer learning program.

Recommendations

Planning

Launching a summer program is akin to starting a new school year, but with less time for planning and execution. A good planning process may be the most important characteristic of a strong program: It reduces logistical problems and increases instructional time for students.

1. Start early and be inclusive.

- Commit to having a summer program by January.
- Include both district and site-level staff in the planning process.
- Centralize some decisionmaking.
- Deliver planning templates to site leaders.

2. Meet regularly and be comprehensive in scope.

- Conduct regular and productive meetings before the program starts.
- Plan for enrichment activities as well as academics.

3. Clearly delineate roles.

- Among program leaders, external partners, and summer site leaders, determine who will plan for what and who will be responsible for what during the summer.

4. Establish firm enrollment deadlines and keep electronic student records.

Curriculum and Instruction

Summer programs are short and often provide little time for teachers to plan their lessons. To maximize the effectiveness of instruction, teachers must have high-quality curricular materials, matched to student needs and small class sizes. These strategies, which characterized the best curriculum and instruction across districts, are likely to lead to stronger student outcomes.

1. Anchor the program in a commercially available and evidence-based curriculum.

2. Standardize the curriculum across district sites.

3. Include strategies for differentiation in curriculum materials to accommodate at least two ability levels.

4. Structure the program to ensure sufficient time on task.

5. Instruct students in small classes or groups.

6. Provide support to students with special needs.

Teacher Selection and Training

According to the research, teaching quality has the largest school-based impact on student outcomes of any factor. Hiring effective teachers and giving them the support they need are critical steps to maximizing student achievement.

1. Recruit and hire the right teachers.

- Develop rigorous selection processes to recruit motivated teachers.
- Take teachers' school-year performance into consideration.
- Hire teachers with grade-level and subject-matter experience and, if possible, familiarity with the students.
- Negotiate with teachers' unions, if necessary, to establish a competitive selection process.

2. Give teachers sufficient training and ongoing support.

- Familiarize teachers with the summer curriculum and how to teach it.
- Help teachers tailor the curriculum for students with different aptitudes.
- Provide ongoing support to implement the curriculum.
- Include all instructional support staff in academic training sessions.
- Give teachers time to set up their classrooms in advance.

Enrichment Activities

All districts included fun and engaging enrichment activities such as the arts, sports, and science exploration to differentiate their programs from traditional summer school and to attract students and promote attendance. Some good practices characterized the most well-organized and engaging activities we observed in the districts.

1. Keep class sizes small and select providers with well-qualified staff who have experience in behavior management.

2. Conduct careful planning if enrichment is supposed to be integrated with academics.

Attendance

Research has confirmed the common-sense notion that in order for students to benefit from summer programs, they must attend regularly. In addition to offering enrichment activities, some districts adopted other effective strategies for maintaining good attendance.

- 1. Set enrollment deadlines.**
- 2. Establish a clear attendance policy.**
- 3. Provide field trips and other incentives for students who attend.**
- 4. Keep in mind it is not necessary to disguise academics to boost attendance.**

Time on Task

The ultimate goal of summer learning programs is to improve academic achievement. Besides providing high-quality instruction and achieving good attendance, a program needs to be structured to provide a sufficient amount of time on academics to improve performance.

- 1. Operate the program for five to six weeks.**
- 2. Schedule three to four hours a day for academics and focus on academic content during those hours.**

Program Cost and Funding

Cost is a key barrier in creating and sustaining summer learning programs. However, districts can better estimate and minimize costs—as well as maximizing value from an investment in summer learning—by following these recommendations.

- 1. Design the summer program with costs in mind.**
 - To control fixed costs, avoid assigning small numbers of students to many sites.
 - Use enrichment providers to help leverage additional funds and provide a full-day program.
 - Hire staff to achieve desired student-to-adult ratios based on projected daily attendance, not the initial number of enrollees.
 - Operate full-day programs for five to six weeks.
- 2. Put resources into tracking and boosting attendance.**
- 3. Use effective cost-accounting practices.**
 - To understand costs per student served, express costs on not just a per-enrollee basis, but also on a per-attende, per-hour basis.
 - Set up data procedures to enable cost tracking on a per-attende, per-hour basis.