Why Summer Learning Deserves a Front-Row Seat in the Education Reform Arena

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Introduction
For a long time, summer learning programs have taken a back seat to more mainstream education reform efforts. Rather than rethink how summers could be used to support student success, policymakers have devoted their time and money to efforts to improve the traditional school day and year. Recently, though, summer learning has moved into the spotlight. With high-profile champions like President Obama and Secretary of Education Duncan, summer learning is beginning to get the attention it deserves – and it’s starting to take a new shape. Transcending the punitive and remedial model of summer schools past, summer learning’s new form is an artful blend of core academic learning, hands-on activities, skill-building, arts, sports, and meaningful relationships. This new vision stems from a strong desire to use summers more strategically – as a natural time of year to pilot innovative partnerships, teaching and assessment strategies while helping youth living in poverty to get a leg up on their middle class peers.

The Evolution of the School Calendar and the Purpose of Summer

While many believe that the current school calendar is a relic of our agrarian past, that’s not entirely the truth. In fact, summer vacation has taken many forms throughout history.
• Early 1800s: summers were part of the school year, with young people attending school primarily during the winter and summer to allow for spring and fall planting and harvesting.

• Mid- to Late-1800s: school calendars were lengthened yet rearranged to eliminate schooling in the summer completely. Influenced by the aristocratic elite, summer was designated as a time for family vacations and a break from the mental taxation of school.

• Early 1900s: Vacation Schools arose in urban areas, with the expressed purpose to “decongest and decriminalize crowded neighborhoods, assimilate immigrant children, and provide practical skills and a natural environment to urban children that lacked them.” Vacation schools were largely nonacademic, nonpublic, unregimented, and prioritized enrichment and the pursuit of interests over core curriculum.

• After the 1920s: Vacation Schools slowly morphed into summer schools. Summer schools have primarily served to remediate for academic credit or advancement to the next grade.


Why the new vision?
Put simply, kids need it. Without ongoing opportunities to learn and practice essential skills, kids fall behind on measures of academic achievement over the summer months. Research dating back over 100 years confirms the phenomenon often referred to as “summer slide” (White, 1906). Most youth lose about two months of grade level equivalency in mathematical computation skills over the summer months. More importantly, however, low-income youth also lose more than two months in reading achievement, despite the fact that their middle-class peers make slight gains (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, & Greathouse, 1996). This disparity has grave consequences for disadvantaged young people. Differences in a child’s summer learning experiences during his or her elementary school years can impact whether that child ultimately earns a high school diploma and continues on to college (Alexander, Entwistle, & Olson, 2007).

Schools have additional reasons to adopt the new vision for summer learning. Contending with ever-higher benchmarks and bleak international comparisons,
schools need creative solutions to narrowing the achievement gap. Summer presents an untapped opportunity – a time of year when youth and families seek programs that look and feel different from the traditional school year; teachers have the flexibility to be innovative and creative in their teaching and assessment; and community partners with specialized expertise in arts, recreation, sports, and youth development abound.

The purpose of this article is to summarize key research studies that underscore the need for summer learning, and identify a few strategies that can help educators to bring a new vision for summer to the masses.

**Summarizing the Research**

**Participation**

Large numbers of American youth participate in summer programs each year. As families have become increasingly reliant on two incomes, with both adults working outside of the home, summer programs have become more and more a necessity. Despite significant participation, very few nationally representative databases collect any information on summer activities. Those that do use varying terminology (for example, “summer activities” vs. “summer camp”) and lack critical information on the focus and intensity of programs and activities. Bearing in mind the detrimental impact of summer learning loss on the academic success of low-income youth, there is a great need to understand how participation in summer opportunities is related to educational attainment and later life success.

Our best estimates suggest that one in four kids participate in some type of summer program (Wimer, Bouffard, Caronongan, Deering, Simpkins, Little, & Weiss, 2006). Another way to examine participation is by looking at two particular types of summer programs:

"**Schools**

About 10% of public school children, or roughly six million kids, attend school-sponsored programs each summer, and the number of public schools offering summer programs has doubled over the past 25 years (Borman, 2001). Many of these programs are remedial summer school programs, offering credit for failed classes or extra
time in order to be promoted to the next grade. Other school-sponsored programs may include specialized arts programs, sports programs, gifted and talented programs, or services for youth with disabilities or special needs.

**Camps**

The American Camp Association (ACA) (2009) estimates that more than 11 million youth attend camp each year. Enrollment in camps has been steadily increasing over the past five years, with 65-77% of camp directors reporting the same or better enrollment each year through summer 2008 (Bialeschki, & Malinowski, 2009).

While these numbers are encouraging, there are also some discouraging trends:

- Children and youth from higher income families are more likely to participate (Wimer et al., 2006). One study estimates that only 4% of youth from the lowest income bracket participate in summer camps, as compared to 18% of the highest income youth. Tutoring programs and summer school are the exception – these programs include disproportionate numbers of low-income and minority youth.
- Parents cite summer as the most difficult time to ensure their children have productive things to do (Duffet, Johnson, Farkas, King, & Ott, 2004).
- Kids spend more hours per week in self-care over the summer than during the school year (10.3 vs. 4.8 hours per week) (Capizzano, Adelman, Stagner, 2002).

**Summer Learning and the Achievement Gap**

During the summer months, young people living in poverty often don’t have access to essential resources that support their academic performance and healthy development. As a result, they experience well-documented setbacks in academic skills which contribute to growth in the achievement gap. Since 1906, there have been more than 40 empirical studies that have found incontrovertible evidence of a pattern of “summer learning loss”, particularly for low-income youth. Together, these studies offer a compelling reason to focus education resources on providing summer opportunities in high poverty communities.

Findings from Key Studies

- Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap.  
  K. Alexander, D. Entwistle and L. Olson, American Sociological Review,
2007 (72, 167-180).

What did the study examine?
Launched in 1982, the Beginning School Study (BSS) monitored the educational progress of a representative random sample of Baltimore school children from first grade through age 22. The BSS tracked testing data, learning patterns, high school placement, high school completion, and college attendance, among other indicators.

Key Findings:

- Better-off and disadvantaged youth make similar achievement gains during the school year; but during the summer, disadvantaged youth fall significantly behind in reading.
- By the end of fifth grade, disadvantaged youth are nearly three grade equivalents behind their more affluent peers in reading.
- Two-thirds of the ninth grade reading achievement gap can be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities during the elementary school years; nearly one-third of the gap is already present when children begin school.
- Early summer learning losses have later life consequences, including high school curriculum placement, whether kids drop out of high school, and whether they attend college.

Disadvantaged, By Year
Better-Off, By Year
The graphs above show cumulative gains on California Achievement Test in reading.

Source: Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (1997). Table 3.1

Note: From ‘summer Learning and its Implications: Insights from the Beginning 50’ by Entwisle et. al. Copyright 2007. Reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.


What did the study examine?
This meta-analysis uncovered 39 research reports that contained
descriptions of empirical studies meant to test the effect of summer vacation on school achievement. Thirteen of those studies were examined together to determine the effect of summer break on student achievement.

**Key Findings:**

- At best, students showed little or no academic growth over the summer. At worst, students lost one to three months of learning.
- Summer learning loss was somewhat greater in math than reading.
- Summer learning loss was greatest in math computation and spelling.
- For disadvantaged students, reading scores were disproportionately affected and the achievement gap between rich and poor widened.

**Summer Nutrition**

While the research on summer learning loss is clear and compelling, newer research brings attention to additional “summer setbacks.” When compared to the school year, many more kids are going without meals, as access to federally subsidized meals declines significantly during the summer months.

According to the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), in July 2007, only 17.5 children nationwide received Summer Nutrition for every 100 low-income students who received free or reduced-price lunch during the 2006-2007 school year (Food Research and Action Council, 2008). Kids in some states fare better than others. Only eleven states managed to reach one-quarter of their low-income children, while thirteen states served less than one-tenth of their low-income children population through summer nutrition. The report states, “In July 2007 if every state had reached the goal of serving 40 children in Summer Nutrition for every 100 receiving free and reduced-price lunches during the 2006-2007 school year, an additional 3.7 million children would have been served each day, and the states would have collected an additional $222 million in child nutrition funding.”

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<tr>
<th>Highest Rate of Summer Food Service Participation:</th>
<th>District of Columbia 95.9 / 100:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lowest Rate of Summer Food Service Participation:</td>
<td>Oklahoma 4.9/100:</td>
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**So What Can Educators Do To Prioritize Summer Learning?**
Even with the compelling and extensive research on summer learning and health gaps, the issue of summer learning has garnered little political attention — until recently. Now that the policy window is open, educators have an opportunity to think creatively about summer learning. Using research as a guide, the National Summer Learning Association has identified specific strategies that schools and community organizations can use to move toward a New Vision for Summer:

1. Increase the duration and intensity of programming to a six-week, full-day model
2. Expand participation to all students in Title 1 schools, or all youth living in poverty
3. Change the focus from narrow remediation and test preparation to one that blends academic learning in core subjects, hands-on activities and enrichment
4. Strengthen and expand partnerships between schools, community-based organizations and public agencies to leverage resources, identify gaps and improve programs
5. Provide incentives to students that improve attendance and engagement with enrichment activities such as arts, music, sports and free breakfast and lunch
6. Provide innovative professional development for educators and youth development professionals, and pilot promising curricula and assessment systems
7. Include innovative approaches to learning for older students, including college and career readiness opportunities
8. Engage in rigorous evaluation of implementation and impact to strengthen the evidence base for “what works”
9. Move summer programs from the periphery to the core of school reform strategies through better planning, infrastructure, data collection and accountability

The research on summer learning loss is unequivocal. Now our challenge is collecting equally strong evidence of the impact of high-quality summer programs. If more districts and community partners begin to implement a New Vision for Summer and evaluate the success of this approach, we will be well on our way to building the evidence base that we need to inform future programming.

References


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