Summer Learning

Summer learning loss is now an accepted fact, based on a preponderance of studies attesting to what happens when students stop studying during the summer months. To mitigate the effects of this loss, educators and policymakers have sought ways to extend learning time beyond the traditional agrarian school calendar to keep students from falling behind, which often leads to a downward spiral of lower achievement levels and eventually dropping out of school.

During the standard summer break from June through the end of August, students lose about one month of academic knowledge gained during the school year. Unfortunately, low-income students show much greater losses—and these effects are cumulative over multiple summers, so that learning gaps between middle-income and low income-students become greater throughout the years. Countering this in the regular classroom means either a) students and teachers start the new school year going over previously learned material and are then compelled to cram an extra month's worth of lessons into their current school year or b) teachers go straight into new material and students who are behind must find a way to catch up to understand the new content. Either way, students lose. Further, given new testing and evaluation regimes, educators and administrators also stand to lose funding, tenure and perhaps jobs as a result.

In an effort to address these problems, state and local officials and researchers have been looking at implementing summer learning programs. These programs should not be confused with a year-round academic calendar or with traditional summer school for students who failed particular subjects during the school year. Rather, the rapidly growing area of summer learning is focused on high-quality learning opportunities blended with engaging and enriching activities.

The table below offers a quick look at the major differences between summer school and summer learning programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summer School</th>
<th>Summer Learning Program</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on academic instruction</td>
<td>Engages students in academic enrichment and recreation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasizes remediation</td>
<td>Combines academic enrichment/advancement with some remediation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended by struggling students</td>
<td>Attended by students having a variety of skill levels and backgrounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often compulsory</td>
<td>Usually voluntary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half day of activities</td>
<td>Full day of activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Benefits of Summer Learning

Pinpointing the benefits of summer learning programs in terms of long-term academic gains was initially difficult due to the lack of high-quality or targeted studies. But today, significant amounts of research have shown that quality programs can at minimum be a hedge against summer learning loss, with the best even eliminating the problem. While most of the research reports focus on specific programs rather than the collective phenomenon of summer learning, there has been some uniformity in the findings. They also concluded that students (and their parents) are as responsible for their own success in these programs—and beyond—as the programs themselves.

That last point, which deals largely with attendance, is critical. As with classes during the school year, students must first actually attend summer learning programs if they are to gain any benefit from instruction and/or participation. Unlike school and remedial summer school, participation in summer learning programs is not compulsory. To underscore the importance of active participation, one study reported that there was no statistically significant difference in achievement among students who attended summer learning programs less than 39 percent of the time and students who did not attend at all.3

However, when students do regularly attend such programs, they find success. In one study, the average academic benefit actually surpassed the rate of summer learning loss.4 Further, the longer students participated, the better they did on fall reading tests.5 While researchers noted that more investigation needs to be done, fewer summer programs focusing on math and high school completion had statistically significant positive results.6

Ensuring Quality and Participation

Several research teams looked at the results delivered by successful programs and were able to dis-
till some broader common practices that contributed to greater student achievement and participation, as success is followed by attendance and vice versa. These include:

- Smaller classes taught by experienced, well-trained teachers. Classes of no more than 20 students saw the best results.
- Individualized instruction.
- Content aligned to school-year curricula and grade level. Alignment can be contiguous from the preceding school year (for remediation) or to the coming school year (for advancement). Such alignment provides a significant policy lever for state and local boards.
- Encouraging attendance, which may be through transportation, comprehensive, full-day programming, and engaging and fun hands-on activities combined with academic content.
- Parental involvement, which is not in itself different from any successful educational program.

The State Board Role

For state boards of education, a greater issue may be defining their role in summer learning programs, as the programs themselves are often designed and administered by school districts and private foundations. As noted above, aligned program curriculum is one specific policy lever for states, as boards are the authority on academic standards.

The National Summer Learning Association has made the support and development of high-quality programs its mission and has examined successful, state-level actions to determine how policymakers can play a greater role. One path it recommends for state boards is to encourage or even require districts to partner with community groups and universities to develop and provide such programs. The creation of such partnerships could also help provide stable funding streams for the programs developed and to consider summer program quality as distinct from the school year.

To deal with summer learning comprehensively, state boards will likely need to ask a series of questions grouped around each stage of policy development, beginning with defining their vision for summer learning. This may include examinations of system-wide challenges and of existing policies to support summer learning programs already in place.

The next stage could be the creation of standards for summer learning, beginning with determining whether the state already has standards governing summers or for any out-of-school time learning programs and, if so, when they were last updated.

This discussion should necessarily be followed by defining quality summer learning. That is, how can policymakers determine what makes a program high-quality and how to evaluate its success or lack thereof? It could also be incumbent on state boards to look into summer learning for special student populations, including students in low-income families, who exhibit the greatest amount of summer learning loss.

Resources


The Wallace Foundation Knowledge Center—Making Summer Count and other Resources and Research, www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/summer-and-extended-learning-time/summer-learning/Pages/default.aspx. Making Summer Count (commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and prepared by RAND Education) examines the research on summer learning loss and the effectiveness of summer programs, identifies obstacles to providing them, analyzes costs, and offers recommendations.

Endnotes

7. Ibid., 3.
8. Cooper et al., “Making the Most of Summer School.”
11. Sun, Summer Learning, 8.
13. Ibid.; McLaughlin and Pitcock, Building Quality in Summer Learning Programs.