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COMMENTARY

Is Summer School the Key to Reform?

By Ron Fairchild & Jeff Smink

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Summer school conjures up many images, few of them positive. Often remedial in nature, it is typically seen as punishment for poor performance, and a less-than-ideal way to spend the summer for both students and their teachers. No wonder dozens of districts across the country, and several states, are taking an ax to their summer school programs this budget season, as they struggle to deal with crippling deficits and pressing mandates. Summer school is too often seen as an easy cut.

But by re-envisioning this maligned institution, those same districts could make summer school an investment in improved student achievement later on—a way to extend learning, provide effective intervention, and offer enrichment opportunities, particularly for those students who have few other good options during those months out of school.

Imagine, for example, a summer school program that would provide accelerated and engaging instruction in the morning, fresh local food for breakfast and lunch, and afternoon enrichment activities in which students could choose to canoe down the Mississippi River, create their own video games, or display self-made projects in local museums.

This vision for summer school represents a sharp departure from the past and is already a reality in several forward-looking school districts nationwide. While it may seem an unlikely source, this kind of summer learning program could be just the type of change—what the Harvard Business School professor Clayton M. Christensen might describe as “disruptive innovation”—needed to fuel successful school-year reform.

In many ways, the summer months are the last frontier of school reform. Despite extensive research confirming the existence of a “summer slide” in learning among all students, and a recent study showing that two-thirds of the achievement gap in reading is directly related to unequal summer learning opportunities, the summer months have been largely ignored by policymakers and reformers alike.

Recently, though, there has been a significant shift in thinking among many educators, politicians, and advocates that views summer as a time of great potential for closing achievement gaps through innovative programming. This notion challenges the value of a traditional, remedial model of summer school, and embraces instead a seamless blend of core academic learning and hands-on enrichment activities that shows much greater promise for supporting and engaging students as well as educators.

President Barack Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, along with many state and local leaders, have expressed support for this new vision, fueling the momentum for change. Secretary Duncan has described summer learning loss as “devastating,” and calls summer programs “one of the best investments states and districts can make.” At the local level, innovators such as Mark Roosevelt, the superintendent of the Pittsburgh public schools, are using federal stimulus money to create progressive programming that embodies this new vision.

In an age of research-based strategies and data-driven accountability, these programs are remarkably well-positioned for increased investment, even in the current economic climate. Since 1906, there have been at least 39 empirical studies that have found evidence of a pattern of summer learning loss, particularly for low-income youths. One of the most compelling of these, a study led by Karl L. Alexander of Johns Hopkins University, demonstrates the impact of this loss on the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers.

Alexander’s study, which tracked students in Baltimore, beginning in 1982, found that low-income elementary school students lost ground in reading each summer, compared with their higher-income peers, who made progress. By the time the students reached 9th grade, the accumulated learning loss accounted for two-thirds of the achievement gap between the groups, and played a significant role in whether students graduated from high school and went on to college.

The literature is clear and compelling on the fact that summer is a season of huge risks and setbacks for low-income youths.

To address the disconnect that exists between evidence and policy, the [National Summer Learning Association](#), with support from the Atlantic Philanthropies, is leading a [campaign](#) to increase public investment in summer programs and make them an essential component of school reform. Districts such as Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Minneapolis, and Baltimore, as well as those of several communities in California supported by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, are making new investments in summer programs that are academically rich, yet look and feel different from those in the regular school year.

Pittsburgh, for example, is investing more than \$10 million in Title I funds under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to support its Summer Dreamers Academy, a free, comprehensive program open to all middle school students in the district. In addition to literacy

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"The literature is clear and compelling on the fact that summer is a season of huge risks and setbacks for low-income youths."

instruction, the program includes a variety of enrichment activities provided by 27 community partners.

The Pittsburgh academy, designed to improve academic achievement, student engagement, and graduation rates, is part of a growing trend toward using summer learning opportunities as part of a strategy for comprehensive high school reform. In fact, the association, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is working to identify best practices in summer high-school-transition programs that prepare students for the critical 9th grade year.

While these developments are encouraging, much work remains if summer learning is to become a policy priority nationwide. There are currently no federal programs that exclusively target the summer months as part of a strategy to close achievement gaps, and many states and districts are cutting or eliminating their summer programs because of budget shortfalls. Moreover, despite the Obama administration's rhetoric on summer learning, both its fiscal 2011 budget proposal and its blueprint for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act have been quiet on the role of summer learning programs.

As part of our campaign, we are urging policymakers and other stakeholders to consider the following recommendations:

- **Improve data collection.** At present, the federal government and many states are unable to determine how much funding is going to summer programs because of poor data-collection requirements. Improved collection would inform future decisions and help planners better determine the impact programs have on student outcomes.
- **Encourage and increase the use of existing funding streams.** Title I and many state education programs are prime vehicles for funding summer programs, but are underutilized. The U.S. Department of Education and its state counterparts should require or encourage that these funds be used for summer learning programs.
- **Align and collaborate.** Summer programs may be funded through various sources, including education, workforce-development programs, libraries, parks and recreation, and juvenile justice. Policymakers at all levels must work together to ensure collaboration and alignment for greater efficiency during these difficult economic times.
- **Integrate with school turnarounds.** Given the extensive research on summer and achievement gaps, summer programs should be a critical component of any school turnaround effort. The federal government should require or encourage schools receiving school improvement grants to include summer learning programs.
- **Innovate.** Districts and schools should use the summer months to test innovative strategies in teaching and learning that better engage both students and teachers. The federal Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation, or i3, programs provide an excellent opportunity to fund and scale up successful summer programs that can be used to inform future policy.

By adopting these recommendations, educators nationwide can begin to ensure that all students have access to high-quality summer learning that will help close achievement gaps and promote student engagement. We are confident that innovative summer learning programs can provide a blueprint for broader reforms. After all, why should learning only be fun in the summer?

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