



Summer: A Season When Learning is Essential

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"Summer presents a unique and essential opportunity to provide children with fun, engaging learning experiences—something every child deserves."

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For some children, summer vacation means camp, family trips, visits to museums, parks and libraries and a variety of enriching activities. But other children find that, when schools close for the summer, healthy meals, medical care and fun and engaging learning activities are out of reach, and many children are unable to partake in additional learning in the summer that can strengthen academic achievement and provide opportunities to explore new interests. In fact, each summer in America, an estimated 43 million children in the U.S. miss out on expanded learning opportunities.

While many of those estimated 43 million children are likely benefiting from time with their families, enjoying trips to the beach or national parks and learning by exploring, too many others are left without the engaging, enriching activities that they need to keep learning and growing in the summer months. The parents of an estimated 24 million children report that they are interested in enrolling their children in a summer learning program.¹ Yet, currently, too few children are enjoying additional enrichment in the summer. These children who are without summer learning program activities are at particular risk of losing the academic, social and emotional gains that they have accrued during the school year.

In recent years, researchers have been shedding new light on when and where learning takes place and highlighting the connection between summer experiences and success in school and beyond. Studies show that non-academic experiences during the summer can support success during the school year, including higher grades and test scores.² The summer months can offer children the chance to expand their horizons, master new skills and build relationships, fostering learning and development. For older youth, these opportunities include participating in service learning projects which give them valuable first-time experience in the labor market as well as connections to employers.

So many kids can lose so much during the summer, and I wanted them to keep up that momentum of learning on a daily basis.

-- Andrea Rohm, Parent

Addressing the summer learning gap

All children experience learning losses if they do not engage in summer learning opportunities. Studies dating back to 1906 find that all children score lower on standardized tests at the end of summer vacation than they do when it begins.^{3,4}

- Most students lose about two months of grade level equivalency in math skills over the summer months.⁵
- In addition, low-income students lose more than two months of reading achievement, despite the fact that their middle class peers make slight gains.⁶
- More than half of the 9th grade achievement gap between lower and higher income youth can be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities during the elementary school years. As a result, low-income youth are less likely to graduate from high school or enter college.⁷

The benefits of summer learning programs are well-documented. One analysis of summer program evaluations found that they measurably increased the knowledge and skills of participants.⁸ The most beneficial programs address the needs of the whole child and offer innovative approaches to learning.⁹ Instead of traditional remediation, the best programs offer fun, hands-on activities with a connection to both the real world and the school year. These programs not only boost student achievement, but also improve self-esteem and confidence. Well-designed summer learning programs increase achievement, enhance motivation for and engagement in learning, and develop and nurture new skills and talents. Examples of successful summer programs include summer reading interventions, newly-envisioned summer school sessions, summer camps and hybrid youth development-academic enrichment programs.

- Located in rural West Virginia, **Energy Express** is a program designed to

prevent learning loss and promote nutrition during the summer, especially for the over 50 percent of enrolled children who are eligible for free or reduced price meals. The day is sandwiched between a family-style breakfast and lunch. AmeriCorps members and volunteers work on reading with groups of eight students in between meal times, focusing on six weekly themes. Students engage with the theme by making books or performing plays, among other activities. Toward the end of the program, students participate in a community service project in which they can donate their books or record radio public service announcements. Each Energy Express site relies on partnerships between the schools, families and community organizations.

- The **Summer Dreamers Academy**, run by Pittsburgh Public Schools, is a free, five-week program designed to stimulate kids both academically and creatively. In the morning, students can pick either "McDonald's, Mars and Flying Cars: Spectacular Science" or "Let Your Creative Juices Flow: Exploring the Arts," as a literary theme to explore. In the afternoon, students can choose between 39 hands-on programs such as Carnegie Museums Artists and Scientists Camp, Ultimate Frisbee: Catch the Spirit! or NASA: Journey into Outer Space. The school system partners with 27 community organizations to offer these enrichment activities, ensuring that kids get a learning experience that is aligned with yet distinguishable from the traditional school day.
- **Project Morry**¹⁰ is a year-round program in White Plains, New York, that focuses on academic enrichment, recreation and youth development for children from disadvantaged communities in New York City. The linchpin to this notable program is Camp Morry, a tuition-free summer sleep-away camp. Since it began in 1996, all of the Project Morry graduates have completed high school, 80 percent have enrolled in institutions of higher education, and 100 percent of those who enrolled in college remained in college.¹¹
- **SuperKids Camp**¹² has served more than 16,000 Baltimore City children since 1997. In addition to sailing in Baltimore's Inner Harbor and visiting museums, elementary students in the six-week program hone their reading skills. Evaluations confirm that more than 80 percent of participants maintain or improve their literacy skills.¹³

My son had a wonderful summer and we had a wonderful fall, when he started the second grade reading above his grade level.

-- Shaquill Truesdale, Parent of Participant in Baltimore City's SuperKids Camp

Keeping kids healthy

Good nutrition is a key to the healthy growth and development of children. It is a vital component of a child's education because it stimulates learning, improves school attendance and behavior, and contributes to cognitive development.¹⁴ Children need access to nutritious meals and snacks all year round, but when schools close for summer, the free and reduced-price school meals available through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) that millions of low-income children depend on are no longer available, and many families struggle to fill the gap.

- On an average day during the 2008-2009 schoolyear, 17.5 million children relied on the NSLP for a free or reduced-price lunch. ¹⁵
- Yet in July 2009, an average of only 2.8 million children participated in federally funded summer nutrition programs—this represents only 16.1 percent of children served by the free or reduced-price lunch program during the school year.¹⁶

Since 1980 the number of young people who are overweight has more than tripled, with 31 percent of school-age children overweight or obese. Obesity is linked to lower academic achievement, depression and chronic health problems.¹⁷ Many children are vulnerable to excessive weight gain over the summer, especially minority children and those who already are overweight.¹⁸ Inactivity and poor quality meals can be the norm for children who do not have access to healthy meals and snacks and summer programs that incorporate physical activity into the program day.

Summer programs enable children to receive the same nutritious meals and snacks during the summer that they receive during the school year. A federal program—the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)—does just that. This program supports meals served at local summer education and enrichment programs, recreation centers, schools, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, parks and churches. In addition to providing nutritious food, these meals draw children into summer programs that promote their health and development, and offer engaging and fun experiences while their parents are working.

- **The Travis Air Force Base Youth Center** in California serves breakfast, lunch and a snack to 190 children during the summer. The center has a large garden where it grows many of its own fruits and vegetables which are incorporated into the menu whenever possible. Children in the program help in the garden and grow plums, apples, herbs, strawberries, corn, pumpkins, zucchini and more, gaining an appreciation of nature and learning about nutrition and healthy eating.¹⁹

Our mission is to help children reach their full potential by providing a safe place to learn, grow, and play.

-- Brenda Hervey, Director

Providing a safe place for children in the summer

Schools keep children safe during the day. During the summer months, however, many low-income families are without childcare and one in ten children regularly spends time in self-care, either alone or with a sibling younger than 13.²⁰ Further, the number of hours children spend in self-care increases from 4.8 hours per week during the school year to more than 10 hours per week during the summer.²¹

Beyond the Bell, Sioux City, Iowa

Although lower income families spend a higher percentage of their income on childcare than more affluent families, many cannot afford the high fees charged by many summer day and overnight camps that provide enrichment in the arts, technology and sports. Consequently, children from low-income families receive lower quality summer childcare and engage in fewer enrichment activities.²²

Neighborhood characteristics also play a role in limiting opportunities for low-income youth. Children in poor urban areas with high levels of violence are often kept indoors for their safety.²³ Housebound children may spend many of their summer hours in front of the television, which can contribute to obesity and learning loss.²⁴ Summer programs can provide a safe place for children to explore, learn and grow while their parents are at work.

- Students in the **21st Century Redhound Enrichment**²⁵ summer program run by Corbin Independent Schools in Corbin, Kentucky go fishing, navigate National Guard obstacle courses, create music videos, learn digital photography and broadcast live from a local radio station. These interactive, real-world projects are fun, but also incorporate learning and academics. Students in grades K-8 are served in the program that operates Mondays through Fridays from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. during the summer months. The program begins the first day school is out for summer, and continues until school starts in the fall.²⁶
- Students enrolled in **Bridges to a Brighter Future** attain a true college experience during the summer months of their sophomore, junior and senior years of high school. The program allows high school participants to stay in dorms at Furman University in Greenville, North Carolina for four weeks each summer and take core subject and elective classes taught by Greenville County masters teachers. While enhancing their knowledge in core subject areas, students are also able to explore music, learn video production, create pottery and participate in improv theater classes through electives. While first-years go on field trips, rising juniors and seniors are able to tour five to seven colleges every summer. Bridges to a Brighter Future guides students along a path to college success that many of its low-income participants might have never discovered alone.

Conclusion

Children eagerly anticipate summertime—it gives them a break from the school year routine and can be filled with fun and games. Parents want their children to be safe, to learn new skills and explore their interests. Employed parents want all of these things for their kids, along with childcare that will allow them to work free from worries about their children's safety.

Summer programs can meet all of these needs, while also providing academic enrichment that mitigates the summer learning gap, which is felt most acutely by lower income families. Summer programs can round out a child's education and offer experiences that aren't available during the school year. They offer lower income families a way to level the playing field, to give their children enrichment activities and learning opportunities that are otherwise more readily available to affluent families. Summer programs have the potential to help reverse summer learning loss and increase educational equity. They are good for children and families, and help make schools more successful. Investing in summer learning programs pays off in myriad ways.

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³White, W.S. (1906). Reviews before and after school vacation. *American Education*, 10, 185-188.

⁴Cooper, H., Nye, B., Charlton, K., Lindsay, J., Greathouse, S. (1996). The effects of summer vacation on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 66, 227-268.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

- [7](#)Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., Olson, L. (2007). Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. *American Sociological Review*, 72, 167-180.
- [8](#)Cooper, H., Valentine, J. C., Charlton, K., & Nelson, A. (2003). The effects of a modified school calendar on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 73, 1–52.
- [9](#)Halpern, R. (2005). *Confronting the big lie: The need to reframe expectations of afterschool programs*. New York: Partnership for After School Education.
- [10](#)Project Morry received the Excellence in Summer Learning award from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Summer Learning in 2007, recognizing it as one of the nation's best.
- [11](#)Center for Summer Learning. (2008, February). *Doesn't every child deserve a memorable summer?* Retrieved April 21, 2008, from <http://www.sumerlearning.org/media/researchandpublications/Memorable.Summer.Fact.Sheet.Final.2.26.08.pdf>
- [12](#)SuperKids Camp received the Excellence in Summer Learning award from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Summer Learning in 2007, recognizing it as one of the nation's best.
- [13](#)Ibid.
- [14](#)Fairchild, R., McLaughlin, B., Costigan, B. (2007, Spring). *How did you spend your summer vacation? What public policies do (and don't do) to support summer learning opportunities for all youth*. New York: The Robert Bowne Foundation.
- [15](#)Food Research and Action Center. (2010, June). *Hunger doesn't take a vacation: Summer nutrition status report 2010*. Washington, D.C.
- [16](#)Ibid.
- [17](#)Food Research and Action Center. (2008, January). *Fresh from the farm: Using local foods in the afterschool and summer nutrition programs*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- [19](#)Ibid.
- [20](#)Capizzano J., Adelman, S., & Stagner, M. (2002). *What happens when the school year is over? The use and costs of childcare for school-age children during the summer months*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.
- [21](#)Ibid.
- [22](#)Ibid.
- [23](#)Miller, B.M., O'Connor, S., Sirignano, S., & Joshi, P. (1996). *Out-of-school time in three low income communities*. Wellesley, MA: Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College.
- [24](#)Fetler, M. (1984). Television viewing and school achievement. *Journal of Communication*, 34, 104-118.
- [25](#)21st Century Redhound Enrichment received the Excellence in Summer Learning award from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Summer Learning in 2008, recognizing it as one of the nation's best.
- [26](#)Email correspondence with Karen West, Special Projects Curriculum Supervisor, Corbin Independent Schools. March 31, 2008.