

SUMMER LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Opportunities for Investing in Equity

MARCH 2021

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Summertime brings thoughts of warm weather, lazy days, and time off from work and school. But many young children do not take a break from learning during the summer months. They spend their time engaged in school-based programs, summer camp, and activities with their families or caregivers such as visiting zoos, libraries, and museums. Out-of-school learning that occurs in the summer months can [support child development in profound ways](#) and may be particularly important for a child's crucial transition to elementary school and for sustaining the [long-term benefits of prekindergarten](#) (pre-K).

Access to early childhood summer learning opportunities varies greatly, however. Underserved groups such as children from families with low incomes—particularly children of color and dual language learners—[lack equitable access](#) to quality summer programs. Depending on the location and the curriculum, these programs, [with price tags that can run \\$1,200 or more per month for private programs](#), can be prohibitively expensive. They may not be located in areas where low-income families live and work, or offer schedules that align with the needs of parents who work full-time or nontraditional hours. Further, many summer learning programs do not accept child care subsidies to cover the cost of tuition.

In recent years, states, cities, and school districts have dramatically expanded their investment in pre-K to promote more equitable access to [high-quality learning in early childhood](#). These investments [appear to be paying off](#). There is ample evidence that pre-K programs have substantial impacts on children's academic and social-emotional skills at the start of kindergarten. But policymakers have yet to turn the same level of attention to the summer between pre-K and kindergarten. Continued disparities in access to summer learning may blunt the impact of publicly funded pre-K programs over time.

This brief summarizes recent findings that show how a lack of access to high-quality summer learning programs may contribute to disparities in children's learning and development during that critical transition to kindergarten. The brief highlights different factors that contribute to inequitable access and identifies lessons from the findings that can guide future research and technical assistance needed to ensure that equity-focused investments in summer learning pay off for children from underserved groups.

ACCESS TO SUMMER LEARNING

MDRC, in partnership with the Boston Public Schools (BPS) Department of Early Childhood, the University of Michigan, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education, [is studying](#) how children's learning experiences during the summer between pre-k and kin-

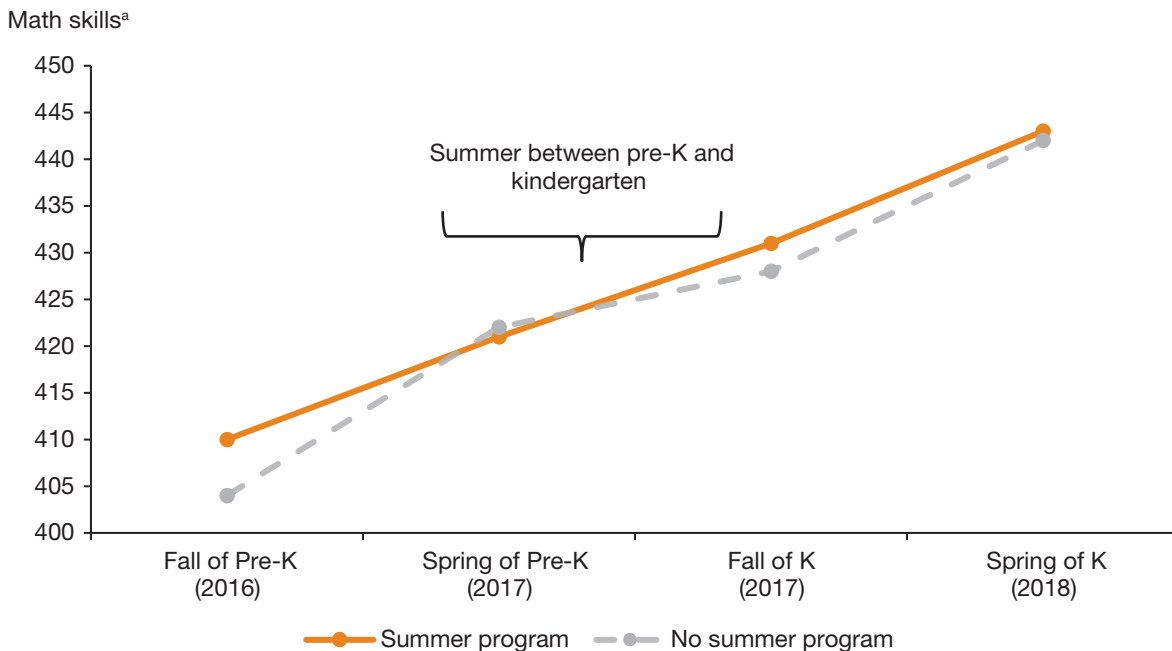
dergarten influence their development. The team enrolled a sample of students from the BPS prekin-dergarten program and followed them across pre-K and kindergarten from 2016 to 2018.

On average, students in the sample continued to grow in their language and math skills across the summer, and the team did not find any evidence of summer learning *loss* for these young children, although growth in skills during the summer was *slower* compared with the pre-K and kindergarten academic years.

However, inequities emerged when the data were disaggregated by family income and race. During the pre-K and kindergarten school years, children from different racial, ethnic, and income groups tended to learn at the same rate. During the summer break, however, White children and children from higher-income households showed faster growth in language and math skills than non-White children and children from lower-income households. These findings mirror [prior research](#) on the seasonal pattern of achievement and inequality among students in elementary school.

Participation in a formal summer learning program appeared to benefit students overall. As illustrated in Figure 1, children who enrolled in center-based summer care showed faster growth in math

FIGURE 1. VARIATION IN CHILDREN’S DEVELOPMENT OF MATH SKILLS ACROSS PRE-K AND KINDERGARTEN, BY ENROLLMENT IN A SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAM

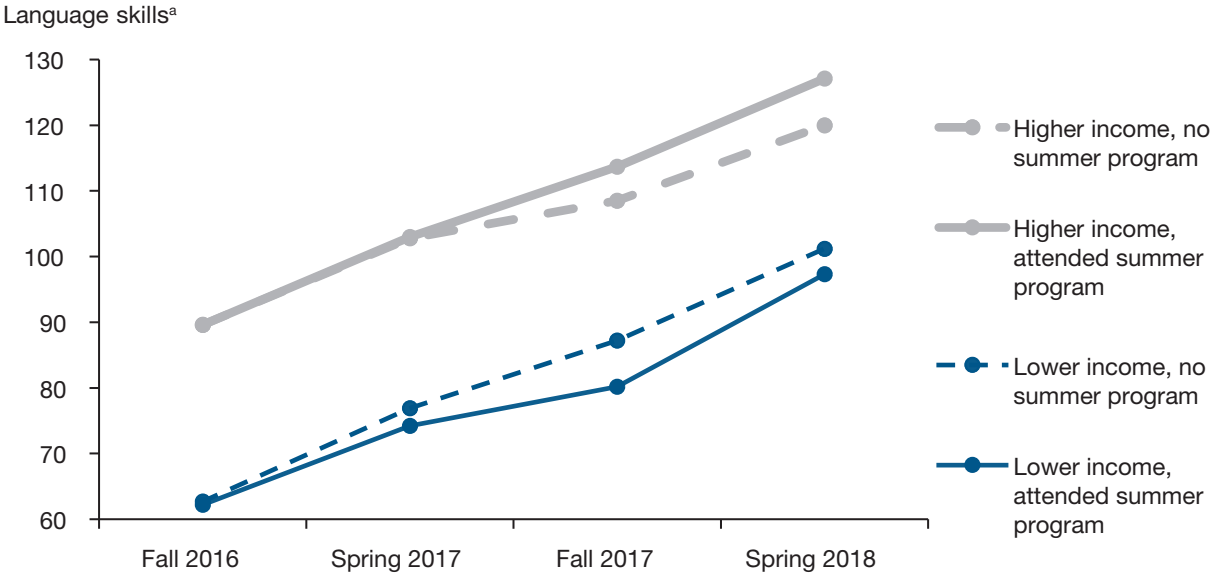


SOURCE: ExCEL P-3 Longitudinal Dataset.

NOTE: ^aThese numbers refer to children’s predicted scores on the Woodcock Johnson Applied Problems, which is an assessment of early math skills.

skills between the end of pre-K and the start of kindergarten than children who stayed at home with a parent, family member, or babysitter. However, not all groups accessed summer learning at the same rates. Students from low-income households and students of color were less likely than their higher-income and White peers to enroll in any formal summer learning program between pre-K and kindergarten. Even when access was available, for children from lower-income households, attending a summer learning program was associated with *less* growth in language skills versus staying at home, as shown in Figure 2, suggesting that the programs may not have been of the same caliber as the ones attended by more economically advantaged children.¹ Findings from MDRC’s work in Boston suggest that the lack of access to *quality* summer programs can reinforce and even widen inequities in children’s learning during the transition to kindergarten based on family income, race, and ethnicity.

FIGURE 2. VARIATION IN CHILDREN’S DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE SKILLS ACROSS PRE-K AND KINDERGARTEN, BY FAMILY INCOME AND ENROLLMENT IN A SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAM



SOURCE: ExCEL P-3 Longitudinal Dataset.

NOTE: ^aThese numbers refer to children’s predicted scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test IV, which is an assessment of children’s receptive vocabulary.

BARRIERS TO ACCESSIBILITY

In a related research project, MDRC conducted a national review [to identify free summer programs designed to support kindergarten readiness](#) and to help children who did not attend a formal pre-K program “catch up” to the academic skills of their pre-K–attending peers. The team identified 20 promising programs and explored the barriers administrators faced in implementing their models and the strategies they used to overcome those barriers. During the summer of 2017 and 2018, the team also had the opportunity to observe program activities and provide technical assistance to two district-run summer learning programs for rising kindergarteners. Insights from these efforts can help inform future investments in early childhood summer learning.

Some of the summer programs faced challenges recruiting children who had not enrolled in a formal pre-K program during the prior academic year. Among those challenges:

- Key structural barriers to promoting program enrollment, such as availability of transportation and physical location.
- A lack of clear information for families about the availability of programs and little support for how to navigate the enrollment process. Programs that targeted children who had not previously enrolled in pre-K reported difficulties sharing information with families about the summer learning opportunities available to them. Some publicly funded programs included in the search had cumbersome enrollment processes that required layers of paperwork and complicated procedures for determining eligibility.
- Difficulties in a program’s ability to identify and reach out to families who might benefit from summer learning because information was not available about age-eligible children who were not yet connected to a school system in the winter and spring prior to kindergarten.

Programs may be most successful in overcoming access challenges when their design matches parent needs and preferences. Observation of the Pittsburgh summer learning program Little Dreamers revealed a number of insights for designing interventions that can overcome enrollment barriers, particularly those related to location, as described in Box 1.

There was somewhat limited information available to the research team to help determine the quality of the summer programs that are accessible to young children from underserved populations. An examination of how these children’s experiences in summer learning compare to the experiences of White and more economically advantaged children is needed, in order to understand whether summer learning has the potential to enhance equity. It is possible that continued work to incorporate parents’ perspectives into early childhood summer learning programs will support the broader goal of ensuring that these programs are not only high-quality but are directly responsive to the needs of the children and families they are designed to serve.

BOX 1. LESSONS FROM THE LITTLE DREAMERS SUMMER PROGRAM

Little Dreamers, which launched in the summer of 2018, is an extension of the Summer Dreamers Academy, a no-cost, out-of-school time academic and enrichment program operated by Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS). In its debut summer, Little Dreamers served approximately 300 children who were entering kindergarten the following fall. Supported by MDRC in partnership with PPS and local foundations, the program was offered at six locations that ranged from the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh to a high school that also hosted Summer Dreamer students. Although MDRC’s planned study of the program was not completed due to sampling issues, the research team was able to collect some anecdotal and descriptive data on Little Dreamer participants and their families to help inform future summer programs.

- The two most popular Little Dreamers programs were hosted at the children’s museum and a science and technology school. Parents reported being interested in these programs because they were located in visually stimulating, enriching, and aesthetically pleasing spaces.
- Parents were less interested in enrolling their children in the program hosted at a local high school. They reported being nervous about their four- and five-year-old children attending school with middle- and high school-age students in a setting that had experienced violent incidents in recent months.
- Parents also preferred summer programs that were within walking distance of their homes versus those located farther away—even if the program offered transportation—because they were concerned about putting their young children on a bus to travel across the city.

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TARGETING INVESTMENTS IN SUMMER LEARNING

MDRC’s work to date on early childhood summer learning suggests a number of areas for future investment. As noted above, in exploring the Boston data, the team found that children from higher-income households who enrolled in a summer learning program showed faster growth in skills than their similarly advantaged peers who stayed at home during the summer. However, the opposite was true for children from lower-income households: Attending a summer learning program was associated with *less* growth in language skills versus staying at home. Although more research is needed, this finding suggests that access alone is not sufficient. Future research can help pinpoint key intervention opportunities aimed at improving equity in access to *quality* summer learning experiences.

Such an equity-focused agenda also requires that programs use a strengths-based approach that tailors content to the unique needs and experiences of the children they serve. Programs that use deficit models that directly target particular skills or even employ a one-size-fits-all approach may be equal but not equitable. For example, in the review of existing summer learning programs, the research team found variations in the amount of time each one spent on enrichment activities such as music,

art, drama, and sports, in addition to academic instruction. Enrichment activities have been shown [to improve](#) elementary students' academic and social-emotional skills. Further work that is focused on designing equitable summer programs may want to consider how both enrichment *and* academic activities can be incorporated to address the particular needs and preferences of the children they target. Implementation research and rigorous evaluation are also needed to document whether and how models use an equity focus to target programming and to estimate the effects of these interventions on children's learning and development.

While MDRC's review did not explicitly examine the extent to which families were involved in program design and delivery, there is a clear imperative for future work in this area. Incorporating families' lived experiences into the development of summer models can inform both the choice of activities offered and how they are provided, in a way that aligns more closely with parents' preferences and needs. Such efforts can also encourage higher levels of participation by the families the programs seek to engage.

Expanding universal pre-K, especially during the academic year, has strong bipartisan support. To help ensure that this investment pays off equitably for children of all backgrounds, more research is needed to understand how the variations in access to and quality of out-of-school summer learning experiences affect children's outcomes. These investments will have significant costs—a critical factor that will likely limit some localities' ability to mount summer programs. However, by explicitly designing summer learning programs that promote equity in access *and* outcomes, localities will be better poised to provide key opportunities to enhance the learning and development of historically underserved children. ■

NOTES

- 1 Meghan P. McCormick, Mirjana Pralica, Paola Guerrero-Rosada, Christina Weiland, JoAnn Hsueh, Barbara Condliffe, Jason Sachs, Catherine Snow, "Can Center-Based Care Reduce Summer Slowdown Prior to Kindergarten?" *American Educational Research Journal* (July 2020).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writing of this brief would not have been possible without a number of current and former MDRC research staff members, including Mirjana Pralica, Desiree Alderson, Ilana Blum, Rama Hagos, Sharon Huang, Michelle Maier, Marissa Strassberger, Marie-Andree Somers, Sharon Rowser, Roxana Obregon, Sonia Drohojowska, and Kelly Terlizzi. Jill Kirschenbaum edited the brief and Carolyn Thomas prepared it for publication. Special thanks to JoAnn Hsueh and Barbara Condliffe, who reviewed the brief and provided several rounds of helpful feedback. The work reflected in the brief has also benefited enormously from our relationships with research partners from other institutions, including Robin Jacob, Christina Weiland, Amanda Weissman, Lillie Moffett, and Paola Guerrero-Rosada from the University of Michigan. We are grateful to Catherine Snow, Sibyl Holland, and a large team of data collection staff from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who supported our work in Boston. We would like to thank Jason Sachs, Brian Gold, Anne Taylor, and the instructional coaches from the Boston Public Schools Department of Early Childhood. Finally, the work highlighted in this brief would not have been possible without the generous cooperation of the children, families, teachers, and administrators who participated in the studies.

This brief was made possible with funding from Arnold Ventures as part of the Expanding Children's Early Learning (ExCEL) Initiative.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following organizations and individuals that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Arnold Ventures, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Daniel and Corinne Goldman, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The JPB Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Sandler Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

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