



Expanding
minds
and Opportunities

Leveraging

the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success

This article is an excerpt from the groundbreaking book, ***Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success***. This landmark compendium, edited by Terry K. Peterson, PhD, is composed of nearly 70 research studies, reports, essays, and commentaries by more than 100 researchers, educators, community leaders, policy makers, and practitioners.

Collectively, these writings boldly state that there is now a solid base of research and best practices clearly showing that quality afterschool and summer learning programs—including 21st Century Community Learning Centers—make a positive difference for students, families, schools, and communities.

Together, the collection of articles demonstrates the power of quality expanded learning opportunities to:

- **promote student success and college and career readiness;**
- **build youth assets such as character, resilience, and wellness;**
- **foster partnerships that maximize resources and build community ties; and**
- **engage families in their children's learning in meaningful ways.**

For information on how to order the full book, download sections and individual articles, or explore the topic areas, visit www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds.

About the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project

The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project is a 50-state initiative harnessing the power of networks and leaders to help schools and communities leverage the time beyond school to accelerate student achievement. A partnership of funders led by the C.S. Mott Foundation support the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project. More information about the book and the project, as well as additional resources, can be found at www.expandinglearning.org.

Gary Huggins

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The Promise of Summer Learning

Summer vacation from school is a long-cherished American tradition, associated with images of freedom, relaxation, play, and imagination. But for many low-income youth, summer is actually a time of boredom and atrophy, when academic skills slide and basic needs fulfilled during the school year may not be met. Important knowledge gained during the year is likely to be forgotten, and children also may be left on their own during the day because their parents cannot afford to pay for their basic supervision, much less the engaging learning opportunities, camp activities, and vacations that middle-class children typically take for granted when school is out. In addition, many neighborhoods and communities lack accessible summer learning opportunities.

Most children, regardless of socioeconomic status, lose 2 months of grade-level equivalency in math computational skills each summer (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996). In addition, low-income children lose more than 2 months in reading achievement, while middle-income peers make slight gains in reading (Cooper et al.). This learning gap widens over time, research from Johns Hopkins University shows, so that by ninth grade, summer learning accounts for two-thirds of the achievement gap in reading between low-income students and their middle-income peers. The same students most affected by summer learning loss were also more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to attend college (Alexander, Entwistle, & Olson, 2007).

Summer learning loss means that, all across our country, teachers must spend a good part of the first 2 months of school on review. In a 2012 survey of 500 teachers in summer learning programs in 15 cities, 66% said it typically takes them at least 3 - 4 weeks to reteach the previous year's skills at the beginning of a new school year. Another 24% said reteaching takes them 5 - 6 weeks. (National Summer Learning Association [NSLA], 2012c).

Until all children in a given classroom are offered the same kinds of summer learning experiences, these reteaching estimates are likely to persist. That translates into millions of dollars in public education funding wasted each year.

Ignoring the summer months also wastes incredible opportunities for innovation in instructional approaches and curriculum development during a season that offers great flexibility for students and teachers to pilot new learning models. With the arrival of the Common Core State Standards, school districts will need to harness not only the extra time summer provides but also this space for innovations that can help all students meet higher targets.

Recent research from the RAND Corporation has demonstrated that high quality, engaging, low- or no-cost summer learning programs can prevent summer learning loss and even boost student achievement (McCombs et al., 2011). Voluntary, mandatory, and home-based summer programs all were found to have positive effects, and the benefits endured for 2 years after a student engaged in a summer program.

In order for programs to produce these benefits, they must be of high quality. Research indicates that certain program characteristics are associated with achievement gains. Important quality indicators include the following:

- *Regular student attendance*
- *Individualized instruction*
- *Smaller class sizes*
- *Parent involvement*
- *High quality instructors*
- *Alignment of school year and summer curricula*
- *Inclusion of content beyond remediation*
- *Tracking of effectiveness (McCoombs et al., 2011)*

In recent years, some large school districts have started innovative summer learning programs that are adopting more of these characteristics of quality and transforming the remedial summer school model of the past. This kind of sea change is taking place even in the nation's largest school district. After attending a citywide forum on summer learning in 2011, Dennis M. Walcott, chancellor of the New York City Department of Education, and Jeanne B. Mullgray, commissioner of the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, joined forces with the Fund for Public Schools to implement the first-ever coordinated summer learning initiative in New York City involving both the schools and community-based organizations. The initiative, called

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Summer Quest, provided more than 1,000 children with small-group reading and math instruction, project-based learning, enrichment activities, and field trips through full-day programs.

As part of NSLA's New Vision for Summer School Network, now 24 district members strong and growing, districts like New York City are sharing best practices and learning together with high quality community partners about how to provide summer learning that is both academically challenging and highly engaging for more students. These initiatives often blend public funds from sources such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative and Title I with private philanthropic support and strategic use of partner resources to operate.

One increasing focus for summer learning is on the middle grades, when students are especially vulnerable to achievement dips and other off-track indicators (Bottoms, 2010; NSLA, 2012b). Since 2011, NSLA's Smarter Summers project has brought together nonprofit providers with school district partners and local intermediaries to provide 20,000 slots for middle-school summer learning and build summer learning systems in 10 cities nationally. Beginning in 2012, NSLA funded an additional five school districts—Houston, Oakland, Pittsburgh, Providence, and Duval County (Jacksonville, Florida)—to expand their middle grades summer learning programs.

In addition to providing summer learning opportunities, these initiatives also are providing information about the cost of summer learning loss and the benefits of summer learning programs.

Along with data on reteaching skills after summer break, survey results from 2012 included the following:

- *Students in these programs not only avoided summer learning loss, but built on their skills. Rising sixth graders showed as much as 5.5 months' growth in grade level equivalency skills in reading during summer 2012.*
- *Among teachers surveyed, 72% agreed or strongly agreed that the professional development they received during the summer would help improve their school year practices. Ninety-three percent said that teaching in the summer learning program enabled them to build more personal relationships with students, and 88% said summer learning is an important part of the overall plan to support student success in school (NSLA, 2012c).*

In its visits to dozens of summer learning programs each year, NSLA documents numerous effective practices and promising program models. The annual Excellence in Summer Learning Award recognizes some of the best of those programs serving low-income children at little or no cost to their families.

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2012 Excellence in Summer Learning Award Winners

Fun in the Sun Initiative (FITS). Drawing on an array of community partners, United Way of Santa Barbara County's Fun in the Sun Initiative (FITS) serves 250 young people ages 7–18 for 7 weeks each summer. The FITS program is designed for participants willing to make a multisummer commitment and offers a daily emphasis on reading and writing. Afternoon enrichment opportunities include activities in science, technology, engineering, arts, math, service learning, and field trips. In 2011, 82% of participants showed gains of 2.1 grade levels in reading comprehension, phonics, and vocabulary skills, according to tests administered at the beginning and end of the program (NSLA, 2012a).

Summer Advantage. In 2012, Summer Advantage in Indianapolis worked with an initiative called Journey World, a program of the Girl Scouts of America (GSA). Scholars took over a "sim city" by being assigned specific functions in the community such as city government, media, commerce, banking, the culinary arts, and a host of other careers. GSA shared learning resources with Summer Advantage students so they could study the careers they would take on in the simulation. These activities were just part of the 2012 Summer Advantage program, in which scholars gained an average of 2.1 months in reading and 4.1 months in math (NSLA, 2012a).

LiFE Sports Camp. Operated through a partnership between the Ohio State University Department of Athletics and the College of Social Work, the free LiFE Sports Camp serves 600 Columbus, Ohio, youth ages 9–15 for 4 weeks each summer, focusing on teaching participants vital life skills and social competence through sports. During the culminating LiFE Sports Olympics, young people develop a team name, team banner, advertisements, posters, family invitations, and radio announcements for the Olympics. In addition, the youth work together to assign roles to their team during the Olympics. In 2011, 74% of the participants reported that they were interested in going to college because of LiFE Sports (NSLA, 2012c).

Conclusion

As part of a multiyear evaluation commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, RAND researchers have been studying the challenges and best practices associated with the work of six school districts that have committed to offering summer learning programs to large numbers of struggling elementary students (Augustine, 2012). Based on early lessons from this work, researchers recommend interested school and community groups consider the following approaches for successful summer learning:

- *Commit to having a summer program by the end of December, with early planning sustained through regular meetings.*
- *Develop a teacher selection process that encourages effective, motivated teachers to work in the program.*
- *During teacher training, provide teachers with the curriculum and with opportunities to practice instructional techniques such as mock run-throughs of the lessons.*
- *Consider enrichment activities and field trips that can help build skills and background knowledge and provide students "camp-like" experiences similar to higher-income peers.*

- *Recruit students early, publicizing the goals of the program clearly to students and parents and establishing clear attendance expectations.*
- *Consider ways to maximize academic time on task in the program. (Augustine)*

Effective summer learning programs have followed diverse models for success, but they have in common a focus on continuous planning and assessment and on seizing the summer setting and culture as a means to helping students acquire and retain skills while keeping them engaged. They demonstrate the promise of summer learning, often with community partners, to help educators and young people achieve performance targets and ignite a passion for learning that can last all year.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gary Huggins is chief executive officer of the National Summer Learning Association. Huggins has more than 15 years of experience in leading education and environmental policy organizations and served as executive director of the Aspen Institute's Commission on No Child Left Behind, a bipartisan effort to identify and build support for improvements in federal education policy to spur academic achievement and close achievement gaps, for nearly 5 years.

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