

Untapped strategy for ed reform: summer learning

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An important strategy that would help us make the most of our investments in education remains largely untapped — summer learning. And the absence of summer learning from the reform conversation ignores a significant body of research that documents the critical losses students face when the school year ends.

Most youth lose about two months of grade-level equivalency in math computational skills over the summer. Students from low-income families fall even further behind, losing more than two months in reading achievement while their middle-income peers maintain or make slight gains.

The effects of this “summer slide” are cumulative and lead to a widening achievement gap, placement in less rigorous high school courses, higher high school dropout rates, and lower college attendance. In fact, summer learning loss accounts for two-thirds of the achievement gap in reading by the ninth grade, according to a Johns Hopkins University study.

We know the potential risks. We also know how to combat them.

Recent research from the RAND Corporation shows that high-quality summer programs with individualized instruction, parental involvement, and small classes can help boost student achievement. Thankfully, even as some school districts are slashing summer programming, a number of forward-thinking school districts, including Houston, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Oakland, have heeded this body of evidence and are revamping their approach to summer school -- with encouraging results for their students. The National Summer Learning Association also recognizes and works with exemplary programs and communities every year that are providing enriching summer experiences for children that mix fun with learning in innovative ways.

At Chicago’s Project Exploration, for example, low-income students start their summer in University of Chicago classrooms, learning about science and paleontology. They then take what they learn to conduct hands-on field research with scientists, collecting and analyzing specimens at Mammoth Site in South Dakota. A 10-year study of Project Exploration found that 95 percent of participants graduated or were on track to graduate from high school – double the overall rate of Chicago Public Schools.

These results are consistent with the results we are seeing from high-quality programs across the nation. Beyond the academic gains, we are seeing rich summer learning experiences boost young lives in other meaningful ways.

Kevin Thompson enrolled in a Horizons program in Connecticut at age 12 — his first year in a summer learning program. At Horizons, Kevin not only strengthened his math and reading skills, but also saw his first Broadway show and learned how to swim and dive. In high school, he went on to become a champion diver and earned a college scholarship. Now, Kevin is an inspiring young role model who coaches diving and teaches at a private school that offers Horizons.

This week, as we officially welcome the start of summer and celebrate Summer Learning Day on Thursday, let’s seize the opportunity to recognize summer learning as an integral part of education reform strategy.

No matter how much other school reforms accomplish, the traditional school calendar sorely underutilizes summer. At a time when budgets are tight and resources are strained, we simply cannot afford to spend nearly 10 months of every year devoting enormous amounts of intellect, energy and money promoting student achievement, and then walk away from that investment each summer.

We must support high-quality programs so that all youth like Kevin have a fighting chance to overcome the summer slide and achieve success.

All of us can agree that we need to do a better job of helping students reach their fullest potential. So let's take advantage of a promising season for education, and talk about how summer makes a difference.

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