NATIONAL SUMMER LEARNING ASSOCIATION

RESEARCH IN BRIEF

Researchers reflect on their work and share the results with you.

More Than a Hunch: Kids Lose Learning Skills Over the Summer Months

A personal experience can spark a theory that, in turn, prompts important research. That's what happened when Harris Cooper, then a professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia, served on the Columbia, Missouri, school board. In the early '90s, the board was asked to discuss the local implications of a proposed federal cut in summer programming. Cooper, who suspected that the cutback was not a good idea, was unwilling to rubber-stamp the summer programming cut. He launched some research into summer learning, willing to follow wherever it led, and arrived at the overwhelming conclusion that his hunch was spot on. Summer learning loss is very real and has important repercussions in the lives of students, especially those with fewer financial resources.

We spoke with Cooper, now a professor at Duke University, about his findings and how policymakers, program providers, and others should respond.

Tell us about what prompted your research originally.
While I was serving as a school board member, there was a threatened federal reduction in summer school support. I didn't think that seemed like a good way to save money, so after the meeting, I talked to some graduate students and said, "Let's look at what happens over the summer." So we collected study results, conducting what is called a meta-analysis, and came up with some definite findings.

And what did you discover?
We found that kids do forget over the summer. Across the board, all kids lose some math skills. In reading, the middle class holds its own, but the poor lose reading and spelling skills, and that pattern emerged as a possible explanation for the academic achievement gap between those who have financial resources and those who don't. We also found that summer learning programs have a significant positive effect, and those positive effects are greater for middle-class kids than for poor kids.

How do you explain the income-related results—that summer programs seemed to be more effective for middle or higher income kids?
We speculated that middle-class summer school programs may have better funding and resources. And it also may be simply that the problems of poor kids are much more entrenched and difficult to address, more remedial in nature.

Some have proposed the "faucet theory," which suggests that when summer comes around, academic resources for the poor are turned off. Middle-class and better-off parents, however, have the resources on their own to compensate to some degree and provide whatever their children might need—remediation, enrichment, or acceleration-type activities when school is not in session.

You also found that there was a larger overall negative effect on math skills than reading skills. How do you explain that?
Reading practice is more naturally embedded in a child's environment, and parents know how to pay attention to keeping kids reading over the summer. They're less likely to pay attention to math.

Isn't it really just common sense that if you don't practice a skill, you lose it, and that would apply to academic skills as well?
It seems like common sense except for the fact that so many people question the value of it and look at summer learning as something optional or disposable.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Integrate substantial math and reading components into the curricula.
- Include rigorous evaluations.
- Permit local control of curricula and delivery systems.

PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE—TIPS FOR PROGRAM PROVIDERS

- Begin summer program planning earlier in the year.
- Strive for continuity of staffing and programs across years.
- Combine summer programming with summer staff development opportunities.
- Begin integrating summer program experiences with those that occur during the regular school year.

Based upon what your research has shown, what are your personal ideas on what constitutes a high-quality summer program?

Small, individualized programs with parental involvement were all associated with greater effectiveness. Summer affords more freedom to digress from a prescribed curriculum, so you can study at a more leisurely, individualized pace, especially when dealing with younger children. Also, small programs may be more nimble, making them more efficient at planning, decision-making, and using available resources.

One of your findings was that closely monitored programs produced larger effects. What does this mean, particularly for someone running or working in a program?

That's an odd finding that suggests it's really a proxy for something else, probably the degree of conscientiousness associated with program implementation. It would involve ensuring that summer instructors have experience, training, and resources available in a timely fashion, as well as clear expectations.

Given the findings, what would you recommend that program practitioners and policymakers do to prevent summer learning loss?

We ought to start thinking outside the box about the arrangement of school day and year and try to build in greater flexibility depending upon the child's and family's needs. Summer programs should wrap up close to the beginning of the school year in order to prevent summer learning loss, and summer programs should be well-planned to complement the school year, not necessarily more of the same or an afterthought.

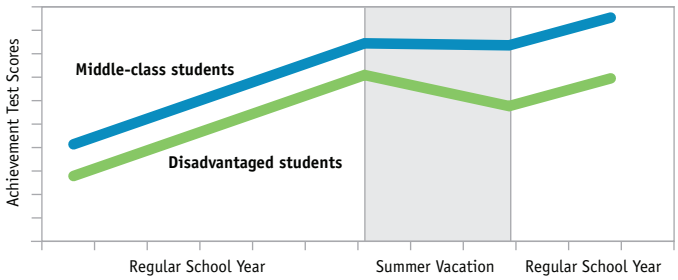
How would you answer people who say that having children attend summer programs is repressive or keeps kids from exploring and having fun?

We need to dispense with romanticized notions associated with the traditional summer break, look at what's really going on, and consider the consequences. Lots of kids get bored over summer. Poor children spend lots of time unsupervised and with limited resources for any constructive activity. Also, most summer programs are optional, so there's really no coercion, and I think that you need to build flexibility into the system.

WHAT HAPPENS TO STUDENTS OVER THE SUMMER:

- At best, students showed little or no academic growth over summer. At worst, students lost one to three months of learning.
- Summer loss was somewhat greater in math than reading.
- Summer loss was greatest in math computation and spelling.
- For disadvantaged students, reading scores were disproportionately affected and the achievement gap between rich and poor widened.

General Pattern of Reading Achievement for Students From Different Income Groups



Cooper et al, conducted a meta-analysis, which is a review and synthesis of multiple research studies. They reviewed 93 evaluations of summer school programs serving grades K through 12, and also reviewed qualitative data from the program evaluations, including interviews with teachers, parents, and administrators.

Note: The above is a generalized representation from all studies reviewed.

What kinds of local, state, and national policies should be implemented to address summer learning loss?

Harking back to my school board member experience, I would say that parents who are happy or enthusiastic about innovation are the best salespeople to other parents, so get them involved and reach out to policymakers. I would also promote rigorous evaluations, local control, and incentive funds for pilot programs.

What do you see as the biggest roadblock to making progress in the area of summer learning?

People have a vision of what summer vacation ought to be that may not coincide with the reality for most kids. The other influence could be that there are some economic interests involved in keeping the summer the way it is. Amusement parks and summer camps, for example, would need to adjust if school-based policies changed.

What do you see as the best way to address roadblocks?

Funds should be set aside to foster participation in summer programs, especially among disadvantaged youth, and we need to start funding pilot projects and put some possible solutions to the test.

Duke University Professor Harris Cooper

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