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Editor-in-Chief

**NEW DIRECTIONS FOR  
YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**

*Theory  
Practice  
Research*

summer

2007

**Summertime**

Confronting Risks,  
Exploring Solutions

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*issue  
editors*

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*The research is clear: All children need summer programs to prevent learning loss. But how do we find the resources to pay for them?*

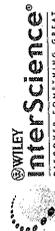
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## Finding the resources for summer learning programs

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AS OTHER CHAPTERS in this issue make clear, there is abundant research identifying and quantifying the summer learning losses that result from the long American summer vacation. We have known for one hundred years that students without learning opportunities lose academic ground in the summer months.<sup>1</sup> And because poor children tend to have fewer opportunities to keep learning over the summer, their summer learning losses are greater than those of their more affluent peers.<sup>2</sup> Global economic competition makes these academic losses more and more expensive for our country to bear, and they are not the only negative outcome of inadequate summer programming for kids. On top of academic losses is the lack of supervision that too often occurs when parents' work puts far too many kids at risk for harmful social, emotional, physical, and physiological outcomes. And without school lunches and breakfasts, kids also suffer nutritional deficits.<sup>3</sup>

Although the research has unambiguous implications for American education—namely, that more children need learning opportunities in the summer—how and when policymakers, educators, and youth service providers will fashion appropriate programming



are much less obvious. At the root of this issue is the need to vastly increase and stabilize resources available for summer programming. As the director of the education and youth development program at a private foundation with a long-standing commitment to increased after-school and summer school programming, I have seen firsthand how inadequate and highly variable funding limits the spread of summer learning programs and contributes mightily to the continued existence of summer learning losses.

In this article, I will focus on funding; in particular, I will make the case that two key strategies necessary to secure sustainable increases in funding involve national advocacy and public will-building efforts and comprehensive, collaborative planning at the local level. More specifically, it is critical to recognize that getting to scale will require that programs do something more than chase small programmatic grants from private funders to sustain themselves. In addition and more important in the long run, they need to advocate for large investments in summer learning opportunities by public systems. The conversation about sustainability, therefore, should be less about finding grants to continue program operations and more about ensuring that summer is a public priority. This article is an attempt to bring attention to the need to think strategically about funding and to outline a set of actions aimed at reducing the summer funding shortfall.

### *Where are we now?*

The good news is that there is evidence of large and steady increases in programming and funding for both the public and private sector summer learning opportunities. In 2000, summer school for failing students was required by more than 25 percent of all school districts. More than half of the fifty largest school districts offer summer programming<sup>4</sup>; by some estimates, this represents a near doubling of public school summer programming over the past twenty-five years.<sup>5</sup> Over the eight-year period from 1991 to 1998, the percentage of Title I public elementary schools that used this compensatory funding for summer programming rose from 15 to

41 percent.<sup>6</sup> The total number of children attending public summer schools is estimated to be five million, or close to 10 percent of public school children.<sup>7</sup> Evidence about participation of children nationwide who attend summer programs run by other public agencies like recreation departments is difficult to find, as are statistics about the growth of nonprofit and for-profit summer programs. One estimate from the American Camp Association reports that the number of day camps has increased by 90 percent over the past twenty years and that currently more than eleven million children attend day and resident camps each summer.<sup>8</sup>

These trends are not surprising given increased educational standards and working parents' needs for summer supervision for children. Although summer programs are increasing, there has been scant attention to growing summer opportunities in a systematic, comprehensive, sustainable, and equitable manner. Nor have most public summer programs been designed in ways that truly address summer learning loss issues; they are remedial, rather than enriching, one-shot as opposed to multisummer, running for only a couple of weeks rather than a month or more, and with curricula that are too haphazardly planned to provide significant help to children.

In most American communities, public summer schools are remedial programs or special education efforts available to some, but not all, students. Not all of these public school programs are free: high school-level credit recovery programs, for example, often charge students fees. Elsewhere in many communities, nonprofit youth organizations like the YMCA and Boys' and Girls' Clubs develop summer programs that, depending on funding, are offered for free or at a modest fee. These programs typically vary in availability from year to year, depending on funding, and seldom have enough slots for all the children who want to participate. The summer program landscape also includes fee-based day and residential camps that provide all sorts of enrichment opportunities, but these full-fare programs can cost parents several hundred dollars a week and result in a five-figure bill for a full summer of supervision and learning.

As this sketchy description of the summer program landscape demonstrates, we do not know with any degree of precision the number and kinds of programs that exist currently, what programs are most effective, and what they cost. Nor have there been community-, state-, or federal-level efforts to assess the gap between available programs and the summer needs of children in a given city or school district. Limited documentation of the summer landscape is partly the result of educational inertia and inattention, but also stems from the difficult nature of data collection about supply and demand. As the preceding paragraph demonstrates, summer program providers are numerous, diverse, and are not linked by any one organization or network. The programs they offer vary in duration, intensity, and number of participant slots, not only from provider to provider but also from year to year.

The complexity of determining current program supply is matched by the difficulty of assessing program demand. This is because children have needs that vary depending on their family context, parental work, school performance, and personal interests. At present, some families would say that their children do not need summer programs and others would say that they need full-time supervision for their children. Thus, as is true in the current after-school arena, the number of programs needed is not simply the number of children. Instead, it is the number who want or need access to programs.

On the national level, advocacy, education, research, and training efforts are beginning to rectify these problems, but they are underdeveloped and typically subsumed within the more prominent after-school advocacy agenda. Organizations like the After-school Alliance and the National Institute on Out-of-School Time all speak to the importance of summer programs but, as a secondary agenda item, well behind the needs of after-school programming. Although total federal spending for summer is not well measured, it appears that federal funding streams mirror this hierarchy. Whereas federal Title I, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and No Child Left Behind Supplemental Educational Services are increasingly being used to fund summer programs, most of these funding streams appear to be dedicated to school-

year programming. As of yet, there is no national funding stream dedicated to summer programming, although there are the beginnings of an effort to develop such a source of funds.

In summary, there is evidence that summer programs in school districts and private recreation and camp providers are increasing in number. Some evidence also exists of increased advocacy and federal funding for summer programs. However, there is a dearth of information about the current supply of programs and the demand and funding for programs. Finally, little exists in the way of new or promising revenue streams to finance summer learning on a universal scale.

### *Building a public consensus about summer learning and a national summer learning advocacy effort*

How do we move forward given the current piecemeal, inadequate, and highly variable state of summer funding? The most critical step in increasing sustainable sources of funding for summer learning opportunities is to develop a public consensus about what it will take to make summer a time that benefits all children. Most Americans view summer as a critical part of childhood, one that gives kids time for creative, regenerative, and different-from-the-school-year experiences. Many parents see summer as a time to customize their child's education and life experiences in very personal ways: giving them time to catch their breath, catch up and move forward with school, relationships with out-of-town relatives, hobbies, other interests and passions.

I would argue that there is much to be said in favor of this summer vision from a developmental, learning, and family perspective. The problem is not so much that this view of summer is inappropriate or harmful; it is that too many children do not have experiences that match it. Furthermore, those who do not have these experiences are generally children with great academic, social, economic, or personal needs. They are the children whose families cannot or do not provide summer experiences that help them grow personally and positively. Children's summer academic losses,

nutritional deficits, and risk-taking behaviors are evidence that this wonderful notion of summer does not apply to all children.

Thus, the work of those who care about youth and summer learning losses is not to convince Americans that their views must be discarded in favor of a standardized, national summer school or program policy; it is to call for an expansion of opportunities that help all kids realize the American notion of summer. Whereas such a policy must address the issue of summer slide head-on, it must also be constructed in a way that embraces American beliefs about summer and builds on them to the benefit of children. Equally important, it must allow a diversity of programming and options for parents, adequate and equitable access to enrichment opportunities, and a way of ensuring that all kids benefit, not just those with socially or economically advantaged families.

Without a more widely held understanding of and commitment to improving summer learning opportunities, America is unlikely to improve children's summer outcomes. School systems, especially those with underperforming students, are likely to continue their too-little, too-late remedial approaches to summer learning. Youth service and summer camp providers will continue to offer summer enrichment opportunities, but are unlikely to be able to ensure access to all children in need.

Developing this message and building the infrastructure to deliver it nationwide are critically important jobs of summer learning advocates and public and private providers of summer programs. To be successful at these important and large tasks, summer learning must become the sole responsibility of a set of strong advocacy and educational organizations. Whereas education, after-school, juvenile justice, and child welfare agencies and organizations can and should be called to support this effort, these agencies alone are unlikely to help summer learning achieve the kind of prominence it requires to move policy and funding decisions. They are bound first to address their primary missions and are likely to be only ancillary supporters of summer learning. As has been the case with the after-school movement, the summer learning agenda must be carried forward by a host of national advocacy, research, training, and technical assistance organizations.

Financing for new organizations and funds to strengthen those that currently exist are both critically needed and an opportunity for private foundations that work to improve children's life outcomes. Although funding model summer camps and other summer programs are valuable endeavors with short-term payoffs, funding to support message development, program effectiveness, and efficiency research, communications, and advocacy efforts is more likely to achieve dramatic change over the longer term. If the summer learning agenda is to be successful, advocacy organizations, practitioners, and researchers must increasingly make this case to their funders.

### *Developing local plans to implement comprehensive summer programming*

While the key to vastly increasing support for summer programs is a national campaign that leads to a full understanding of children's summer learning needs, that work will not guarantee a large number of new, high-quality summer programs. In addition, American communities will need intensive local planning efforts if they are to create the necessary programs. Taking a cue from localities that have built and expanded after-school programs citywide—Boston, Baltimore and Los Angeles, for example—it is clear that community-level needs assessments and asset mapping can help to identify critical needs, unearth valuable resources, and develop an action plan. They are a first step for cities and localities trying to build and connect comprehensive sets of summer programs.

Communities must draw on all of their resources to solve the summer learning problem, rather than relying on one organization or agency. In large part, all youth-serving agencies and organizations must be a part of a local plan because no one public agency is currently equipped or predisposed to offer the range of programming that is required if we are to make the American notion of summer a reality. Schools are driven ever more exclusively by the need to produce academic results, and their summer programs typically reflect this myopia. A singular academic focus is especially common

in systems that serve a large number of poor or academically struggling children; in those systems, funding and the demands of standardized test preparation have led to shocking declines in physical education, art, music, and other course offerings beyond the core academic curriculum. This is not to say that schools have a minor role in building systems of summer programming. Schools are unique in that they are the public agency that has responsibility for reaching all children; they also typically have the largest budget and often have access to funds that other public agencies do not.

Despite their primary importance, schools cannot provide all of the educational programming that children need. Nor can other public agencies. Public departments of recreation may squeeze in a summer reading program, and libraries may schedule a physical activity period to break up the day at their summer reading camp, but none of our public agencies is in the business of providing programs with the full range of physical, cognitive, social, and recreational opportunities that are key components of an effective summer program.

Nongovernmental agencies, including youth service and summer camp providers, have similar limitations. Whereas many offer programs with a broader scope than their public agency counterparts, few of these can provide the intensive cognitive programming that some children require to stay on grade level. Perhaps even more significant is that none of these organizations can provide programs on the scale that is required if all children are to have access. With their creativity, enrichment expertise, and ability to attract diverse audiences of children, these providers have much to add to a locality's plan for summer programming. But like their public agency counterparts, they can be only a piece of the summer program quilt.

There is another practical reason that communities will need to pull all youth providers together if they are to build a comprehensive set of summer opportunities. Simply put, summer programming will require an enormous amount of human and financial capital if it is to be available to all children. Cities and other localities will need the staff and resources of both public and private youth organizations if they are to meet the needs of all of their children. And while funding must increase, it is a sure bet that it

will not increase enough to support a wholly new system of opportunities for kids. Maximizing the substantial resources that communities have already mustered to serve children in the summer makes sense from service provision and cost-efficiency standpoints. Simply put, increased summer programming will most likely be the result of a hearty "push" for additional funds and a forceful "squeeze" of existing youth programming dollars.

In making this case for extensive local planning, I do not mean to suggest that there has been no planning and partnering in American communities. In many places, and for many years, public-private partnerships, collaborations among youth service providers, and joint ventures between public agencies have been expanding summer program opportunities for children and youth. But in most places, these efforts are at best isolated ones that do not take as their mission serving all of a locality's children for the long term. The task of planning for all children throughout the summer is not an easy one, especially because the resources to do so are not in hand. And even when a city or locality decides to take on this effort, it is not easily or quickly accomplished. Nonetheless, it is essential to building a comprehensive, efficient set of programs for children.

### *An example from Baltimore*

The planning undertaken in Baltimore in 2005 is an example of the possibilities and challenges involved in a recent citywide effort to increase summer learning opportunities. The Baltimore effort began with the leadership of its public school system, the Center for Summer Learning, and the Safe and Sound Campaign, the city's leading after-school advocate. The five-year goal of this planning effort was to find a way to provide summer school to all interested children and to wrap enrichment programming around all of those school-like programs to meet children's nonacademic needs.

The process was carefully planned and began auspiciously. The group identified the leadership of the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) as critical: not only was BCPSS the sole agency

whose mission was to reach all children, it was also the most powerful and resource-rich public agency in the city. The three principal partners also invited a wide array of stakeholders to the discussions and provided a good deal of information about summer learning losses and effective program models. In addition, they scheduled a significant amount of time for group discussion and consensus building.

Despite these careful planning efforts, it was not easy sailing. There were latecomers to the process who felt excluded and did not want to buy into the group's recommendations. And although there was a good deal of consensus about the importance of summer learning and the need for more programming, there was much less agreement about program priorities, the appropriate balance between academics and enrichment, which outcomes were most important for children, and which children should be targeted to attend the first set of programs.

At the heart of many disagreements was underlying skepticism that the effort would succeed, that it was the beginning of a long-term plan to make Baltimore a place where summer programs were universally available. Thus, the question of which children should be eligible took on additional significance because participants believed that there might not be additional program slots in the future. Similarly, participants believed that the transitory nature of past summer programs would continue to plague future programs. As a result, discussions often centered on the upcoming summer, its programs and funding, rather than on a longer-term view. The short supply of current funding also figured prominently in the group's calculus. With current funding limitations firmly in mind, many participants found it difficult to plan for greatly increased levels of service in the future.

Although Baltimore did not implement universal summer programming in 2005, its planning initiative did help it move summer learning forward in a number of important ways. First, by establishing a long-term inclusive planning process, it raised the level of awareness and understanding about the need for comprehensive programming and the shared nature of the solution. Simply put, it communicated that all of the city's children needed access to pro-

gramming and all of the city's youth service providers—public and private—were a part of the solution. Second, it set a goal for comprehensive programming within five years and began the longer work of building a consensus among program providers about the characteristics and goals of summer programs. Finally, it increased 2005 programming above the level of 2004 and set priorities about who would receive these programs.<sup>9</sup>

What Baltimore did not accomplish is also instructive. Yet to be completed is a system for matching afternoon enrichment programming with school-like morning programs. This is critically important if summer programming is to meet the broader social, physical, and nonacademic needs of children. Also still on the to-do list is a public education effort that clearly communicates the importance of summer learning opportunities and the harm caused by summer cognitive, social, and nutritional neglect to Baltimore citizens.

And finally, the planning effort has yet to tackle the funding questions associated with increased programming. For example, Title I funds provided a large infusion of funds in 2004 and 2005; however, this funding stream is not likely to be used once the city moves to more universal programming. That is because Title I dollars cannot pay for programs that non-Title I children also receive. The federal logic is that once an intervention becomes universal, it is no longer targeted for at-risk children and cannot be paid for by Title I. Beyond the funding source, the planning group must also determine how much additional funding is needed and how much of current funding for summer programs can be used toward this effort. This task will involve pushing public and private sources for additional funding and squeezing dollars out of existing programs by redirecting, collaborating, and partnering.

### *Conclusion*

Although research supporting the need for universal access to summer learning opportunities is clear and convincing, there has been no clarion call for increased programming and resources. At the

root of this issue is a misconception about the summer experiences of many children. Far from being the regenerative, creative period that is so much a part of our collective American consciousness, summer is too often a period of neglect, when opportunities for children to develop new skills and talents and passions are squandered and children fall backward, instead of moving forward.

How do we get from our current piecemeal summer learning approach to one that allows us to realize the real opportunity that summer offers? My experiences in Baltimore and as a funder have led me to believe that two key strategies are essential to transforming the current state of summer programming.

The first involves a national education, advocacy, and public will-building effort. Summer learning advocates and program providers must develop a clear and convincing message that grows out of America's current notions of summer to make the case for a significant expansion of summer learning opportunities. To bolster the argument, advocates will also have to summarize and communicate the research that documents the current reality of children's summer experiences and the negative outcomes that are the result of summer neglect. In addition, they must build an organizational infrastructure that will communicate this message, putting it in front of policymakers, educators, parents, and other citizens. In short, the goal of this first step is to build a national consensus about children's summer learning needs.

Second, this national communications effort must be supplemented with local, intensive, collaborative, and long-term planning. Communities must begin a mapping process that documents available services and service gaps and that identifies resources in hand and resource needs. With a clear sense of their current summer landscapes, community stakeholders must then move on to build inclusive, public-private program and funding collaboratives. The task of these groups is to develop plans for expanded multidimensional, coordinated programs that can ultimately serve all of their communities' children. The inclusive nature of collaboratives is critical. If they do not include a wide array of youth providers

and public agencies, communities are unlikely to create summer program plans that offer a full range of learning opportunities. Broad-based groups are also more likely to pull in and efficiently use existing resources and have the clout to attract funding to support large program expansions.

Private foundations can play a key role by supporting communications and planning efforts. Funding for either or both of these strategies is an ideal investment for private foundations. Foundation dollars are not sufficient to cover the cost of large program expansions. This is not to say that direct program costs should not be supported by philanthropic funding but that investments in communications, advocacy, and planning efforts are a more likely long-term solution to inadequate program funding.

Finally, as Baltimore's experience shows, these tasks are not likely to be easily or quickly accomplished. But they have the potential to transform the summer landscape and the learning outcomes for many American children. Far from requiring that traditional American notions of summer be discarded, these efforts can help to ensure a far better match of our nostalgic—and wonderful—summer visions and our children's reality.

### Notes

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9. For 2005, BCPSS made summer school available to virtually all Title I elementary school children, to all children in transitional grades (from elementary to middle and middle to high school), and, for a modest fee, to all high school students who needed credit recovery classes to make up a failed grade.

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