

What Works for Third Grade Reading

NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Working Paper

Summer Learning: High Quality Birth to Eight Learning Environments with Regular Attendance

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I. Pathways Measure of Success

Percent of children who maintain literacy gains over the summer.

II. Definitions

The following terms are referenced in this brief:

Compensatory summer learning programs are those that aim to offset student learning deficits in math, reading and science over the summer.ⁱ

Every Student Succeeds ACT (ESSA) requires states to include quality measures in the plans they must submit to the federal Department of Education. Ten states and the District of Columbia submitted by April 14, 2017. The most common indicator in plans submitted to date is chronic absence.ⁱⁱ A draft of North Carolina plan was released on June 26, 2017.ⁱⁱⁱ

High summer program attenders are defined by The Wallace Foundation as those who attended for five- to six-weeks and for a total of 20 or more days.^{iv}

Summer learning program, as defined by the Education Commission of the States, is an intentional, organized program that operates over the summer months to “build skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors that promote academic achievement and healthy development.” They are often designed to meet a specific need, such as narrowing the achievement gap.^v

Summer school is defined as a formal period of academic activity that is either remedial or enrichment-oriented and occurs over the summer when school is not in regular session.^{vi}

Summer learning loss is defined as the experience of losing academic skills and knowledge gained during the school year over the months when school is not session.^{vii}

III. Summer Learning: Why it Matters

Children learn best and retain information more when learning is uninterrupted.^{viii} Low-income children fall behind by as much as two months of reading and math achievement each summer, while their middle-income peers make slight gains in reading.^{ix} Children and youth who live in low-resource, urban neighborhoods are more likely to lose ground in reading over the summer than their middle- and upper-income peers.^x On average, children experience greater summer learning loss in mathematics than in reading.^{xi}

Summer learning loss has accumulating consequences. These year-over-year compounding losses leave lower-income children up to three grade levels behind their higher-income peers by fifth grade. Summer slide in these early grades is a predictor of high school course placement, drop-out rates, and college attendance rates.^{xii} Some research suggests that summer learning loss may account for as much as 80 percent of the income-based achievement gap.^{xiii}

Summer learning programs can help children gain and retain math and reading skills, if they are high-quality and children attend regularly,^{xiv} but those most likely to gain the most from such programs (children from low-income households) are the least likely to have access to them.^{xv}

IV. Summer Learning: Connections to Other Pathways Measures of Success

Just like the domains of child development, the Pathways Measures of Success are highly interconnected. The table and text below outline the measures that *influence or are influenced by* Summer Learning.

Health and Development on Track, Beginning at Birth	Supported and Supportive Families and Communities	High Quality Birth-through-age Eight Learning Environments with Regular Attendance
Social-Emotional Health	Formal and Informal Family Supports	High Quality Birth-through-age-Eight Early Care and Education
Physical Health	Safe at Home	Promotion to Next Grade
	Positive Parent-Child Interactions	
	Reading with Children	

Social-Emotional Health

High-attending children enrolled in multi-year expanded learning opportunities through formal summer programs demonstrated greater social-emotional competencies, including executive function and self-regulation skills, than children in control groups.^{xvi}

Physical Health

Twenty-one million students across the nation are enrolled in the school meals program.^{xvii} Because they cannot access the school-based federal meals program over the summer, six out of ten low-income students lose their access to healthy meals for those months.^{xviii} Research shows that children tend to gain as much weight over the summer as they do during the entire school year. African American and Hispanic students who may be prone to obesity maintain healthier weight gain when enrolled in school-based meals.^{xix} Summer programs that provide healthy meals and structured activity periods can reduce summer weight gain.^{xx}

Formal and Informal Family Supports

Participation in K-12 education is an important form of childcare for many working parents. School districts that support or provide afterschool activities and summer programs enable parents to continue to work.^{xxi}

Safe at Home, Positive Parent-Child Interactions, and Reading with Children

Summer learning loss disparities are closely linked with socioeconomic status. Researchers attribute the socioeconomic summer learning gap to differences in families' resources and in parents' attitudes

toward school and learning.^{xxii} The everyday stresses experienced by low-income families can be compounded in the summer when children are out of school but parents must work, making it even more difficult for parents to read, talk and play with their children during those months.

High Quality Birth-through-age-Eight Early Care and Education

Students enrolled in summer programs who received at least 25 hours of mathematics “time on task” and/or 34 hours of language arts time on task performed significantly better than control students.^{xxiii} Students who attended two or more years of summer learning programs outperformed those who attended only one year.^{xxiv}

Promotion to Next Grade

Research has shown that summer programs focused on remedial or accelerated learning increase the skills and knowledge of participants, especially when remedial programs serve small numbers of children and when the content is individualized. Students in the earliest grades and in secondary school appear to benefit the most.^{xxv} A recent random control trial in four major urban sites funded by The Wallace Foundation revealed significant gains in both mathematics and reading,^{xxvi} thus lessening the likelihood of grade retention.

V. Policy Options to Mitigate and Minimize Summer Learning Loss

A Research to Policy Partnership to Advance Knowledge of and Access to Effective Summer Learning Programs. *Establish a Research to Policy Partnership to gather information and new data on the characteristics and costs of effective summer learning programs in North Carolina, publish results and create online access points for parents and teachers to enroll in effective programs. A first step will involve creating a common vocabulary of types of programs.*

At the periphery of education for many years, summer learning programs—in all their varying forms—have taken center stage in the past few years, particularly in the face of persistent data on summer learning loss and the desire to narrow the achievement gap between students from lower-income families and those with greater financial security.^{xxvii} Costs for summer programs vary wildly, with some news reports estimating that Americans spend upwards of \$16 billion annually, or about \$1000 per child per summer, although the costs of some summer camps can be two or three times that much.^{xxviii}

A Research to Policy Partnership could examine summer learning program offerings in North Carolina through the lens of core characteristics shared by effective programs. A RAND review of effective programs has identified a set of core program characteristics, including: students in attendance at least six hours a day for at least five weeks during the summer, small group sizes, instruction matched to student needs and interests, curricula aligned across the school year and the summer program, and a program of both enrichment and remediation.^{xxix} Both compensatory summer programs and specialized summer reading programs should be examined.

Compensatory Summer Programs. A recent review of compensatory summer learning programs^{xxx} reveals that evidence-based programs can reliably increase reading and math skills but generally have limited effectiveness in social-emotional, self-esteem and behavior skills. Effective programs include a core of characteristics that line up with those identified in the RAND study, referenced above:

- They are well-structured and aligned with curriculum content employed during the school year.
- Content is delivered by qualified teachers.
- The length and intensity (i.e., dosage) of the experience tends to be at least five weeks, five days a week for a whole day.
- Group size is smaller than that of the school-year classroom.
- They incorporate enrichment with remediation.
- Mentoring and individual tutoring sessions are included, as is student involvement with families and the community.

Specialized Summer Reading Programs. A 2013 meta-analysis of research on summer learning reading outcomes reveals challenges in both the design and delivery of these programs as well as design challenges in the research itself.^{xxxix} Challenges highlighted in the study include:

- While the use of research-based instruction practices by teachers may increase reading comprehension, few research studies on summer reading programs measure the nature of the teacher-student interaction in the summer classroom.
- There are few cost-effectiveness evaluations of summer reading programs.
- Some studies have shown a benefit from programs with small class sizes and longer summer hours of operation. Other studies did not find this effect, but it is not clear that all programs employed the same level of intensity (class size and duration) during implementation.
- While some reading intervention summer programs may result in short term gains, in general these gains decline over time unless reinforced during the school year.

Despite these challenges, authors of the meta-analysis report that “the implementation of research-based instruction and resource intensive programs may enhance effects on student reading outcomes.” The authors acknowledge the role of “parenting practices and family resources” during the summer months and suggest including both parents and teachers in the process of reading remediation programs over the summer. The authors recommend that future summer learning research focus on the impacts of both parents and teachers.

The five city Wallace Foundation/RAND summer learning research and evaluation project confirms the positive academic and social-emotional gains that urban students can derive from high attendance in intentionally structured summer learning programs, especially if they attend for more than one year.^{xxxix} RAND will return in 2017 to assess the academic, behavioral and social-emotional outcomes of these students four years after summer learning participation.^{xxxix}

In 2011, the cost of providing a high quality intentional summer learning program was between \$1,000 and \$2,800 per child for a five week, six-hour long program.^{xxxix} There are opportunities currently for school districts to use federal funding to expand and integrate summer learning programs aligned with the K-12 school curricula. (See the next policy option below.)

A search of online resources related to summer learning experiences in North Carolina, conducted as part of the creation of this working paper, reveals no single gateway resource for parents, with consolidated information by school district, community, county or state. The North Carolina United Way 211 website does not include a category for summer learning resources.^{xxxix}

Inclusion of Summer Learning in State ESSA Plan and Other Federal Funding Sources. *States and Local Education Agencies can blend and braid existing federal Title I, II, III and IV funds to increase summer*

learning offerings, as well as access other federal resources available to the State, counties and communities within North Carolina.

ESSA, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, makes explicit reference to summer enrichment and learning, including references to “out of school time” and “periods when school is not in session.” Detailed guidance on including summer learning in state ESSA plans is available from the National Summer Learning Association,^{xxxvi} which also provides a comprehensive listing of federal resources from which funding may be appropriated for use in summer learning (available here as Appendix A).^{xxxvii}

Guidance on strategic planning for the expansion of summer learning opportunities across funding sources is offered in the *2016 Action Toolkit: Expanding Summer Learning, Meals and Jobs for America’s Young People*.^{xxxviii}

Summer Nutrition. *Monitor access to the Summer Food Service Program and explore options to expand access to healthy summer food programs for low-income children.*

In 2014, one in six children eligible for the Summer Food Service Program nationwide received meals during the summer. Lack of access and low program participation leaves children hungry, contributes to poor health and development, and leaves millions of federal dollars unused.^{xxxix} The Summer Food Service Program, administered by the United States Department of Agriculture and managed by states, offers free and reduced price lunch-eligible children free and nutritious breakfasts and lunches during the summer. Use of the USDA’s extensive *Summer Meal Toolkit* can guide community and county efforts. Topics covered include hosting and recruiting sites, partnerships, policy and administration, sponsor operations and statewide administration.^{xl}

VI. Promising Practice Options to Mitigate and Minimize Summer Learning Loss

Improving Coordination of and Access to Summer Learning Programs

The National Summer Learning Association recommends five strategies to improve access to and coordination of summer learning programs.^{xli} The following recommendations are cited directly from the source.

Incentivizing partnerships and improve partner alignment. Partnerships between summer providers serving similar groups of students ensure complete access to a broader range of services and less duplication of efforts. These partners may include summer meals sites and sponsors, schools, community-based and faith-based organizations, libraries, museums, parks and recreation centers, youth employment sponsors, and other agencies, service providers, and organizations that touch the lives of youth during the summer. The result: a community-wide network for anywhere, anytime learning.

Promoting sustainability. Funding for summer learning doesn’t always require a new grant program. Many existing funding streams are able to support summer learning either as they currently stand or with more explicit expansion into the summer months. Smart use of existing pools of funding and greater collaboration between youth-serving sectors can greatly increase impact during the summer.

Improving and promoting flexibility of resources. Summer service providers have access to many public funding streams already targeted to youth, especially those who are struggling academically or are considered at-risk. Policymakers should clearly define allowable use of these funds for summer activities.

Investing in structural supports and systems. Community-wide systems promote coordination of summer services with each other and with school-year programs that serve the same students, leading to greater efficiency and better outcomes for youth. These structures also create mechanisms for monitoring and maintaining quality of programs through evaluation and professional development.

Expanding the knowledge base. The research community continues to explore effective strategies and best practices for many aspects of summer learning opportunities, including through summer school, youth employment, nutrition programs, enrichment programs, and more. The field continues to explore significant questions around program quality, access to programs, and program outcomes, determining “best fit” approaches for different kinds of students and communities. Better data on how youth spend their summer will help inform equity implications of summer investments. This expanding knowledge base is critical to ensuring smart investments in activities that make a real difference in the lives of youth.

Providing Books Matched to Students’ Reading Levels

Improving access to books for children over the summer can result in learning gains over the summer. While further research on access and outcomes from summer learning is required,^{xlii} review of research reveals that the amount of summer reading is “positively related to fall reading achievement independent of prior reading and writing skills and student background characteristics.”^{xliii}

One multi-year study found that allowing first and second grade children to self-select 15 books each summer for three consecutive years conferred the same benefit as attending summer school for three years, at a fraction of the cost. A no-books control group was created for comparative outcomes analysis.^{xliv} The benefit was an increase in participating students’ reading achievement by 35-40 percent of a grade level, or about two months.^{xlv} A study of fifth-grade Hispanic students found that reading-challenged students who could self-select books from a set of books aligned with their reading levels made greater gains than similar students with a mismatch of text to reading levels.^{xlvi}

Other research confirms that books made available to children should match their reading levels and interests to increase the likelihood that children will read over the summer.^{xlvii} When parents or other adults read with children, using either dialogic reading or shared reading practices, children’s reading comprehension can improve.^{xlviii}

VII. Promising Program Options to Mitigate and Minimize Summer Learning Loss

Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL)

BELL is a six-week program aimed at improving academic achievement, parent involvement, and self-esteem for children in low-income, urban communities. In a randomized control trial study of over 1,000 children, the BELL participants showed statistically significant gains of one month of reading skills compared to their control group counterparts. BELL parents were more likely to encourage reading.^{xlix}

Implementation of this program in some locations may no longer follow the structure and practices evaluated in the randomized control study, and readers are cautioned to examine the model now being implemented to determine if it comports with the original design.ⁱ

Freedom School Partners

Freedom School Partners in Charlotte, North Carolina employs the Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools® program to serve 1,200 K-12 students, many from lower-income families. The morning program includes breakfast, a pep rally and literacy-focused classes. These classes are led by college students who employ a social action, conflict resolution and problem-solving curriculum. In the afternoons, activities include STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math) projects. Evaluations by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte reveal that more than 90 percent of children who spend their summers in Freedom School maintain or improve their reading levels, often gaining nearly a year of progress. (Note: The evaluation was a pre- and post- design without a control group.ⁱⁱ However, national research shows that low income children on average tend to lose 2-3 months of progress over the summer.ⁱⁱⁱ) In 2013, the program was awarded one of three national best in class awards from the National Summer Learning Association.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Appendix A. Opportunities for Summer Learning Explicitly Established Within the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

The National Summer Learning Association compiled the following designations within ESSA.^{liv} The following information is cited directly from the source.

Title I

- Summer programs are an allowable activity for Targeted Assistance Schools (Sec 1009(b)(2)(B)).
- Summer programs are an allowable activity for the Education of Migratory Children (Sec 1301(1)).

Title II

- The definition of “comprehensive literacy instruction plans” described in Sec. 2221 (Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation (LEARN)) includes partnership with private and nonprofit partners, and notes that “it is not required that these activities be carried out in a classroom setting.”
- When designing comprehensive literacy plans, local entities may include activities that “are augmented by after-school and out-of-school time instruction” (Sec 2224(c)(1)(C)).
- An explicitly allowable use for these local sub-grants is “connecting out of-school learning opportunities to in-school learning in order to improve children’s literacy achievement” (Sec 2224(e)(2)).

Title III

- Community-based organizations are specified in several places as key partners for these activities, and community engagement as a strategy for engaging ELL and immigrant students and connecting families to learning.
- Community-based organizational personnel are included for professional development under this Title. Shared professional development is a key strategy for aligning school-based and community-based programming over the summer months and connecting learning year-round.

Title IV

- The 21st Century Community Learning Center program is preserved for programming that takes place “during non-school hours or periods when school is not in session (such as before and after school or during summer recess)” (Sec 4201(b)(1)(A)).
- Community based (“external”) organizations that may be partners to LEAs and schools under this program should be those “with a record of success in running or working with before and after school (or summer recess) programs and activities” (Sec 4201(b)(4)(A)).
- Requirement of meaningful partnerships between schools and community programs ensures seamless integration of learning activities across different settings.
- Reauthorization of the Promise Neighborhoods program includes references to expanded learning time and the Summer Food Service Program (Sec 4624).
- The definition of a “full service community school” includes “access to services ... during the summer” and required services include “out-of-school-time programs and strategies” (Sec 4622).
- The Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program mentions summer programs as one type of “innovative methods and strategies” to serve these students (Sec 4644(c)(2)).

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