

## SUMMER LEARNING:

# ACCELERATING STUDENT SUCCESS

**A**s numerous studies from 1906 on have confirmed, children lose ground in learning if they lack opportunities for building skills over the summer.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, summer learning loss comes up but rarely in the national discussion of education reform.

By the end of summer, students perform on average one month behind where they left off in the spring.<sup>2</sup> Summer learning loss is most acute for low-income children and youth, who do not have access to the same formal and informal learning opportunities their higher income peers enjoy. While most students lose math skills without practice in the summer, low-income youth also lose about two months in reading achievement, while their higher income peers actually make slight gains.

These losses are cumulative and can lead to significant consequences later in life. Consider that by the end of third grade, four out of five low-income students fail to read proficiently, making them four times more likely to drop out of high school than children who do read proficiently by third grade. Other consequences of a summer without learning include placement in less rigorous high school courses, higher high school dropout rates, and lower college attendance.<sup>3</sup>

There is a burden on teachers and budgets, too. Where students have experienced summer learning loss, teachers report using much of the first two months of the fall term to reteach the previous year's material.<sup>4</sup>

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The traditional summer break presents real challenges to the success of public schools, as well as to the general well-being of young people. With half of the children in the United States living in poverty, the idealized vision of summer as a time to explore, rest, and have fun is far from the norm. Far too many young people lose access to meals, books, adult mentors, meaningful enrichment, and a sense of safety for three months of the year every year. For those three months, communities simply turn off the tap of resources to half of their children and families. No matter what schools do during the school year, no matter how long the school day or how great the after-school programs, if students do not have meaningful summer learning opportunities, they are likely to lose a significant amount of what they have learned. Yet the best available data suggest that only about one-third of low-income youth participate in an organized summer activity at all, let alone one designed to help them maintain and build critical skills.

In short, a large-scale summer break from learning is counterproductive in terms of both educational equity and excellence. But summer school conjures up few positive images. Often remedial in nature, traditional summer school is typically seen as punishment for poor performance and a less-than-ideal way to spend the summer. However, these images need not limit what schools and communities do now and in the future.

## A NEW VISION FOR SUMMER SCHOOL

Summer learning can be accelerating, enriching, and engaging for both students and teachers. Recent studies point to the characteristics of high-quality summer learning programs that succeed in these aspects.<sup>5</sup> A new vision for summer school is not a fantasy. Many summer learning programs, including those in more than 30 urban school districts, have embraced this vision.

Based on research and field evidence, the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) has developed nine principles of the New Vision for Summer School (NVSS) designed to provide comprehensive, engaging summer programming that transcends the remedial and punitive model of the past:

- **Increase the duration, intensity, and scope** of the traditional summer school model to a comprehensive, research-based, six-week, full-day model that makes summer an essential component of district school reform strategy.
  - **Expand participation** from only those students struggling academically to all students in schoolwide Title I programs and consider expanded-year programs that include all students in participating schools.
  - Change the focus from narrow remediation and test preparation to a **blended approach of academic learning in core subject areas and enrichment activities** that provide hands-
- on, engaging programming in order to foster critical skills such as collaboration, innovation, creativity, communication, and data analysis.
  - **Strengthen and expand partnerships** with community-based organizations and public agencies that provide summer activities to align and leverage existing resources, identify and meet gaps in service, improve program quality, and develop shared outcomes for summer success.
  - **Improve student attendance and engagement** by providing healthy food, field trips, recreation, and comprehensive supports.
  - **Provide innovative professional development** for educators and ensure summer programs offer teachers a chance to test new models of teaching and gain valuable leadership experience.
  - **Include innovative approaches to learning for older students**, including proficiency-based learning, flexible credit recovery, internships, college visits, and other college- and career-readiness opportunities that provide targeted interventions and work force development skills that prepare students for future success.
  - **Target key transition periods such as kindergarten, middle school, and high school** to ensure students are prepared for success in new environments.
  - Move summers from the periphery to the center of school reform strategies **through sustainable and stable funding**,

## **long-term planning, robust assessment and evaluation, and improved infrastructure and data collection.**

Since 2009, urban districts around the nation have invested over \$200 million in summer learning programs that embrace these principles. And the 31 districts that are part of NSLA's NVSS Network exchange ideas with peers across the nation, share best practices, and have access to the latest tools, resources, and policy developments in summer learning.<sup>6</sup> These districts meet regularly to discuss development and implementation of evaluation and assessment, staffing, curriculum, technology, partnership building, and sustainability.

## **SUMMER LEARNING ON THE STATE POLICY AGENDA**

Education leaders at the state level can play a key role in integrating summer learning into education policy. At the federal level, education reform (particularly Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization), like much else, has stalled in Congress, and the gridlock is likely to continue. In addition, the general orientation of Congress to be less prescriptive toward states suggests that there are more opportunities for new summer learning policy at the state and local levels, even if ESEA reauthorization moves forward.

State budgets are generally tight, of course, but state policies, politics, and fiscal situations vary. There is, therefore, the potential for opportunities to move summer learning to the fore in state policy in various ways

(with or without short-term appropriations), thereby increasing the prospects for local summer learning initiatives to obtain resources.

Recent state policy initiatives on summer learning have taken several forms, sometimes reflecting the challenge of tight budgets. For example:

- In 2014, New Mexico appropriated \$1.1 million for a new afterschool and summer grant program, and Massachusetts increased funding for its out-of-school time quality grant program by 15 percent.
- Rhode Island appropriated summer-targeted funds in both 2012 and 2013.
- Kentucky passed unfunded summer learning legislation in 2012 and Texas passed legislation in 2013 creating a summer program with a focus on teacher induction, but failed to appropriate funds for it.
- The Massachusetts, Texas, and Washington legislatures have established commissions to make policy recommendations on expanded learning opportunities, including summer.
- Task forces in California and Rhode Island in recent years offer models of action steps that have had positive policy outcomes.

State policy agendas will be unique in each state, taking into account political climate, existing or pending legislation, current regulations, and local district policies that impact summer learning. States are likely to address some issues administratively, primarily through the state educa-

tion agencies (SEAs). Other issues will likely require new legislation, while still others may fall into either or both of these categories. However, certain priority opportunities are likely to provide a platform for summer learning in multiple states.

Fiscal stress at every level of government makes new appropriations for summer learning a challenge. Much of what we propose here does not require additional funding, relying instead on using existing funds to support summer learning as a tool (among others) to address existing objectives.

Based on recent conversations with staff of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) and others, NSLA believes the following issue areas deserve priority consideration for advancing summer learning policy at the state level. Two of these—use of Title I funds and use of 21st Century Community Learning Centers funds—likely require primarily administrative action.

## **TITLE I**

Title I of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (currently known as No Child Left Behind) provides funds to school districts to support improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged. Summer learning is often an allowable use in various sections of Title I, even if it is not explicitly recognized in the federal statute. State education agencies have considerable influence on use of these funds by districts within their states. SEAs could clarify the allowability and even explicitly autho-

# EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

1

**The Boston Summer Learning Project**, which serves more than 1,700 low-income youth, has been helping students avoid summer learning loss since 2010. An evaluation from the National Institute on Out-of-School Time in 2011 found students' English language arts (ELA) skills improved by 12 percent while their math skills improved by 17 percent. In 2012, English language learners demonstrated particularly impactful academic gains—32 percent in ELA and 33 percent in math.

2

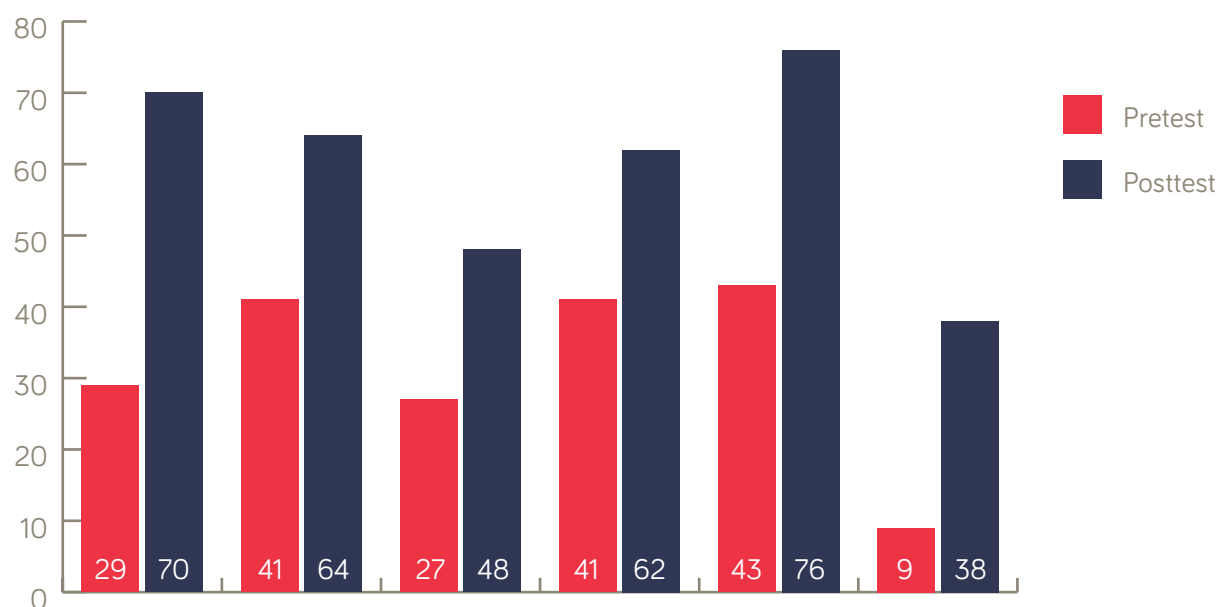
**In Grand Rapids**, a 2011 evaluation of the Summer Learning Academy (SLA) found that participants experienced significantly better math outcomes over the summer when compared with peers from similar demographics who did not participate in the program, with average gains equivalent to 6.7 weeks of school-year instruction in math. Middle school SLA participants benefited the most, with average gains equivalent to 14.1 weeks of school-year instruction in math. SLA is a partnership of the school district with foundations and community partners.

3

**Pretest and posttest data from Duval County (Florida)** summer programs show strong positive results in K-2 reading, K-5 reading and math, and other categories. For example, the K-5 Superintendent's Academy math test scores showed 70 percent of kindergarteners scoring at grade level at the end of the summer, compared with 29 percent at the start of summer (see figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Students Scoring at Grade Level in Math Before and After Summer Program in Duval County, Florida (percent)



size and encourage school district use of some of these funds for summer learning to close achievement gaps. This could have a significant impact in districts with concentrated poverty yet would require no new funding.

## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTERS (21<sup>ST</sup> CCLC)

The 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC is a federal education program providing formula grants to states for afterschool and summer learning programs. Each state establishes specific criteria for awarding competitive grants to school districts and community-based organizations. Some states have established regulations requiring that specific characteristics of high-quality summer learning programs be incorporated into grant applications. Additional states could be more directive in

addressing the proportion of 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC funds that ought to support high-quality summer programs and in determining key characteristics for those programs. This requires no additional funding.

Two other priority issues—grade-level reading and teacher induction—may benefit from some combination of legislative and administrative action on summer learning.

## GRADE-LEVEL READING

Early learning has become an education policy priority at the federal and state levels. Most states already have legislation in this arena, without necessarily identifying summer learning as a strategy. The national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading recognizes summer learning as a core strategy to help young people read at

grade-level by the end of third grade. State legislation could authorize and fund summer literacy programs for young students. State-funded pilot programs with strong program evaluation components could move the field forward significantly. Where states already have legislation addressing grade-level reading, state boards of education and SEAs may have leeway to use summer learning as a core strategy.

## TEACHER INDUCTION

The quality of teaching has also been a major policy issue at the federal and state levels. Summer learning programs offer tremendous opportunities for teachers in training or in their first years of practice to learn by doing in conditions generally less pressured than during the school year

because of better teacher-student ratios and other factors. Summer programs can incorporate intensive mentoring by experienced teachers as well as regular—even daily—debriefing and reflection activities. School districts should take advantage of summer not only to combat summer learning loss, but simultaneously provide professional development. States could support such efforts by targeting some existing or new teaching quality funds to summer programming.

In addition to these four priorities, other important areas for state policy development may include:

- Summer as an opportunity for experienced teachers to develop innovative approaches to addressing the Common Core State Standards;
- Supporting effective student data sharing among schools and out-of-school time programs;
- Collection of data on investment in and outcomes of summer learning—both traditional remedial programs and innovative programs reflecting New Vision for Summer School principles—to ensure that investment follows high-quality programs;
- Developing or strengthening incentives for school-community partnerships that can facilitate summer learning;
- Using summer learning to develop and pilot digital learning methods and digital student portfolio strategies, e.g., badging;
- Enhancing professional development for—and innovation by—

teachers, principals, and other education professionals;

- Supporting STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) initiatives, especially the role that summer programs can play in providing time and space to have scientists, engineers, accountants, and others work with youth in classrooms and laboratories, as well as through internships and summer job opportunities for older youth;
- Using summer to facilitate smooth student transitions into kindergarten, middle school, high school, and postsecondary education;
- Creating commissions to make recommendations for state policy on summer learning (or expanded learning opportunities more generally); and
- Integration of summer learning into policies aimed at improving on-time high school graduation rates and postsecondary student success.

Summer learning loss presents a significant challenge to educators' and policymakers' efforts to ensure equity and excellence in public education. There are, however, numerous opportunities for constructive policymaking to make summer an asset rather than a liability, even within the context of an education board's strategic plan and current state and local initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup>Karl L. Alexander, Doris R. Entwisle, and Linda Steffel Olson, "Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap," *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 2 (2007): 167–80; H. Cooper et al., "The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A Narrative and Meta-Analytic Review," *Review of Educational Research* 66 (1966): 227–68; D. Downey, P. von Hippel, and B. Broh, "Are Schools the Great Equalizer? Cognitive Inequality during the Summer Months and the School Year," *American Sociological Review* 69 (2004): 613–35; W. White, "Reviews before and after vacation," *American Education* (1906), 185–88.

<sup>2</sup>Jennifer Sloan McCombs et al., *Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011), xiii. Available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1120.html>.

<sup>3</sup>Alexander et al., "Lasting Consequences" and Cooper et al., "The Effects of Summer Vacation."

<sup>4</sup>Gary Huggins, "The Promise of Summer Learning" in T.K. Peterson, ed., *Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of After-school and Summer Learning for Student Success* (Washington, DC: Collaborative Communications Group, 2013).

<sup>5</sup>McCombs et al., *Making Summer Count*; Catherine H. Augustine et al., *Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013). Available at [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR366.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR366.html).

<sup>6</sup>Thirty-one NVSS districts collectively serve more than 2 million students: Atlanta (GA), Austin (TX), Baltimore (MD), Birmingham (AL), Boston (MA), Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC), Chicago (IL), Cincinnati (OH), Council Bluffs (IA), Dallas (TX), Duval County (FL), Fairfax County (VA), Fresno (CA), Grand Rapids (MI), Houston (TX), Milwaukee (WI), Minneapolis (MN), Newark (NJ), New York City (NY), Oakland (CA), Philadelphia (PA), Pittsburgh (PA), Providence (RI), Racine (WI), Rochester (NY), Sacramento (CA), Seattle (WA), Springfield (MA), St. Paul (MN), Washington (DC), and Wausau (WI).