



RESEARCH IN BRIEF

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

Summer Can Set Kids on the Right—or Wrong—Course

Study Links a Lack of Academic Achievement, High Dropout Rate, to Summertime Learning Loss

When school doors close for the summer, what do kids face? For some, it's a world of interesting vacations, music lessons, and library trips. For others without enriching summertime opportunities, the break can lead to serious academic consequences—and the disparity can be dramatic.

Research conducted by Johns Hopkins sociology Professor Karl Alexander and his colleagues shows that low-income youth suffer significantly from a loss of academic skills over the summertime. And the losses pile up, contributing to an achievement gap that can make the difference between whether students set out on a path for college or decide to drop out of high school.

We talked to Alexander about the research, what it means for young people, and the need for a strategic and focused response.

What led you to look into the relationship between summer learning opportunities and academic success?

Initially, my colleagues and I weren't particularly interested in summer learning. That came about in a roundabout way. We were interested in early schooling and patterns of social inequality. For example, we wanted to compare the school experiences of lower with higher income kids and minority with majority youngsters.

What did you find?

We discovered that about two-thirds of the ninth-grade academic achievement gap between disadvantaged youngsters and their more advantaged peers can be explained by what happens over the summer during the elementary school years.

I also want to point out that the higher performing group isn't necessarily high income, but simply better off. In the context of the Baltimore City school system, that usually means solidly middle class, with parents who are likely to have gone to college versus dropping out.

Statistically, lower income children begin school with lower achievement scores, but during the school year, they progress at about the same rate as their peers. Over the summer, it's a dramatically different story. During the summer months, disadvantaged children tread water at best or even fall behind. It's what we call "summer slide" or "summer setback." But better off children build their skills steadily over the summer months. The pattern was definite and dramatic. It was quite a revelation.

What method did you use to make this discovery?

We launched a study in 1982 where we recruited almost 800 children in Baltimore City and monitored their academic progress from first grade well into adulthood. Achievement tests were administered in the spring and fall over an extended period of time, and we tracked and analyzed those achievement test patterns. We also conducted interviews with the children and their parents.

How do you explain the achievement gap's relationship to income? What do higher income children get over the summer that lower income children don't?

We didn't look at specific programs, but we did explore some possible explanations, and we found some definite differences.

I don't want to break it down into a checklist, but some differences seemed relevant. For example, better-off children were more likely to go to the library over the summertime and take books home. They were more likely to engage in a variety of enrichment experiences such as attending museums, concerts and field trips. They were more likely to take out-of-town vacations, be involved in organized sports activities, or take lessons, such as swimming or gymnastics lessons. Overall, they had a more expansive realm of experiences.

What are the implications of this research?

It helps us to realize how important summer learning—or the lack of it—is to academic achievement. And it helps us to recognize that this often breaks down along social lines. In the more recent work, we were able to pose questions about the consequences of this achievement gap. We found that summer learning loss accounts for about two-thirds of the difference in the likelihood of pursuing a college preparatory path in high school. And that matters a great deal in terms of what happens later on. Forty percent of the children we picked up as first graders left high school without diplomas. It's a problem of monumental proportions. So these early patterns of out-of-school learning have profoundly important repercussions that echo throughout the years.

DID YOU KNOW?

- During the school year, lower income children's skills improve at close to the same rate as those of their more advantaged peers.
- Over the summer, middle- and upper-income children's skills continue to improve, while lower income children's skills do not.
- Summer learning shortfall experienced by low-income children over the elementary grades has consequences that reverberate throughout children's schooling, and can impact whether a child ultimately earns a high school diploma and continues on to college (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007a).

Can summer programs help?

We need to provide children with strategically planned, structured summer experiences, and that's especially true for those who don't have access to enriching, home-based learning. And, of course, summer programs can be an important part of that strategy by providing a variety of experiences that challenge children, develop their talents, keep them engaged, and expand their horizons.

What are the next steps?

I'd like to see the work we've done motivate others to carry the torch forward and try to help us understand what sorts of summer experiences best support year-round learning for all children—and there's a particular need to help understand the conditions that will help disadvantaged children.

We need a detailed, on-the-ground perspective. We know that children need enriching summertime experiences, but we need to know what makes up the best mix of experiences. Then we need to act, develop resources, and move ahead.

Any final words?

I'd like to thank my colleagues and co-workers Doris Entwisle and Linda Olson, as well as the families and children who participated in the study. They indulged our inquiries over many years, and without their cooperation, this study would not have been possible.

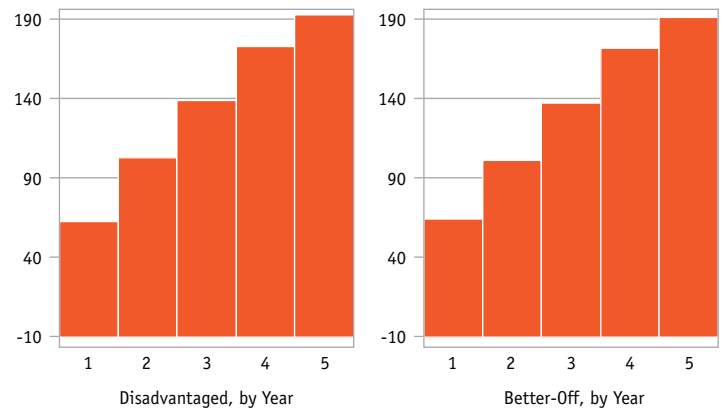
WHAT PROGRAM PROVIDERS CAN DO

- Use the research. When reaching out to funders, decision-makers, and partners, share the research to demonstrate the need for and effectiveness of high-quality summer learning.
- Get the word out. Work with the media and parents to share the issues young people face during the summer and how your program is designed to make a difference.
- Enlist support from community partners. Host meetings to discuss how you can work together to support young people in your community during the summer.

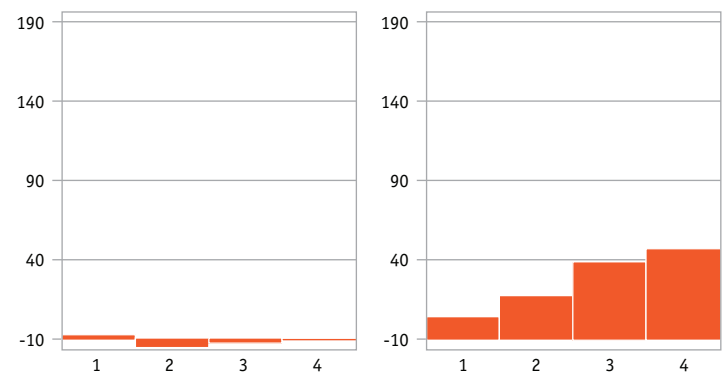
PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE—SUMMERBRIDGE PITTSBURGH

- Students at Summerbridge Pittsburgh take six weeks of summertime classes in math, reading, writing and public speaking.
- The program uses a high-energy and hands-on approach to learning and leadership.
- Summerbridge recruits youth from under-performing schools in low-income neighborhoods with high drop out rates. However, 92 percent of Summerbridge youth graduate from high school and 80 percent go on to college.

School Year Cumulative Gains



Summer Cumulative Gains



The graph shows cumulative gains on California Achievement Test in reading over elementary school years and summers. Sample consists of Baltimore Public School students who entered first grade in 1982. Test "scale scores" are California Achievement Test scores calibrated to measure growth over a student's 12-year school career.

Source: Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (1997), Table 3.1

Note: From "Summer learning and its implications: Insights from the Beginning School Study," by K. L. Alexander, D. R. Entwisle, and L. S. Olson, 2007b, *New Directions for Youth Development*, 114, p. 18. Copyright 2007. Reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



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- Alexander, K. L., Entwisle D. R., & Olson L. S. (2007a). Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. *American Sociological Review*, 72, 167-180.
- Alexander, K. L., Entwisle D. R., & Olson L. S. (2007b). Summer learning and its implications: Insights from the Beginning School Study. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 114, 11-32.