

June marks the end of the school year for most students in Kindergarten through 12th grade and the beginning of summer break. Unfortunately, with summer break also comes a growth of academic achievement gaps and often means children aren't receiving important nutrition assistance normally found in free and reduced price school meals.

Summer Break Contributes to Education Achievement Gaps

On average, students lose about a month of skills and knowledge from the end of one school year in the spring to the beginning of the next in the autumn. This is not particularly surprising, as students are often not practicing the skills or using the knowledge gained throughout the school year during the summer as often as when they are in class, if they are using them at all. But the average masks revealing disparities between certain groups of students. On average, students from low-income families lose substantially more skills and knowledge than students in higher-income families; while both low- and high-income students lose ground in math, high-income students stay the same or even gain in reading while low-income students typically lose ground in reading as well as math.¹

Unfortunately, due to the lack of access to affordable summer learning programs, the summer learning gap is not surprising. Research reveals that factors outside of the classroom have a major impact on classroom learning and can be more important even than factors found in the classroom. During the summer, many students from low-income families can't afford summer learning programs or summer camps and can't access publicly funded summer programs. As a result, these students are exposed only to factors outside the classroom and have none of the positive classroom or school factors that improve academic outcomes.

The disparity that manifests during the summer months appears to be a primary driving force of the overall academic achievement gap. The academic achievement gap begins before children enter kindergarten, remains roughly unchanged during the school year, and grows during summer months.² This gap is cumulative each summer, making the summer learning gap a primary impediment to closing the academic achievement gap. In fact, it is estimated that two-thirds of the ninth grade academic achievement gap in reading that can be explained by unequal access to summer learning programs.³

STUDENTS OFTEN MISS MEALS OVER THE SUMMER

With nearly 50 percent of students across the country eligible for free or reduced price school meals,⁴ it is unsurprising that summer, when students are not in school to receive their meals, often leads to increased levels of hunger for students. The federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) attempts to fill the summer meals gap by providing funding to nonprofit entities to serve meals in congregate settings to low-income children during summer breaks.

Making sure that all children get access to food in the summer is important to their health and well being. In addition, most summer child nutrition programs occur in tandem with educational and enrichment programs that keep children learning, engaged, and safe during the summer months.

While some areas of the country see great success with the SFSP, many barriers to participation in the program remain including families' unfamiliarity with the program or sites, lack of transportation, and limited food distribution hours.

SUMMER PROGRAMS CAN REDUCE THE SUMMER ACADEMIC GAP

There is an excellent opportunity to turn summer learning into an asset for students from low-income families. Summer learning programs with diverse characteristics have all shown positive impact on academic achievement, including voluntary and mandatory programs, and initiatives that encouraged reading at home.⁵ Certain characteristics lead to more successful programs, including individualized instruction and engaging community based organizations. Also important is that summer programs complement the school year rather than act as an extension or operate entirely independent. Summer learning is an excellent opportunity for students to experience different forms of instruction and have increased access to subjects that may be unavailable during the school year, including music and art.

Unfortunately, state and district budget cuts often result in the elimination of summer learning initiatives. With overall funding for education falling it is likely that there will be fewer summer learning initiatives available to the students who would most benefit from them.⁶ Federal initiatives such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers provide important resources for summer and afterschool programs. Expanding these initiatives can increase access to summer programs for students from low-income families and ultimately improve academic outcomes.

STUDENTS SHOULDN'T GO HUNGRY IN THE SUMMER

Luckily for many children summer nutrition programs can help ensure that low-income children have access to healthy food and don't fall behind in health and development throughout the summer.

Currently communities that have 50 percent of their children in the area eligible for free or reduced-price school meals can participate in Summer Food Service Programs. This means that communities with significant numbers of low-income, hungry children are able to help children receive meals and continue learning throughout the summer. Many public agencies and private nonprofit organizations that operate summer programs also provide high quality afterschool programming and afterschool nutrition during the school year.

As important as current SFSP sites are, unfortunately less than 15 percent of children who participate in free- or reduced-price meals during the school year participate in the Summer Food Service Programs.⁷ Recognizing the importance of making sure that all children have access to food in the summer, many local and federal officials are currently working towards improving access to the summer meal programs.

Some initiatives that are being looked at are initiatives to better help summer food service sites reach kids through transportation assistance, changing the area of eligibility from 50% low income to 40%, and reducing the paperwork barrier that some public and private organizations face in needing to fill out multiple applications in order for them to provide children meals after school, on weekends, and during school holidays.

In addition, there are proposals in Congress that would allow families to receive an electronic benefits transfer card in the summer months for their children that are eligible for the Summer Food Service Program. All communities and their challenges in serving children meals in the summer are different, but it is important to explore various options so that our country reaches more children in the summer months and no child faces hunger when school is out.

STUDENTS NEED MORE OPPORTUNITIES DURING THE SUMMER

Summer should not be a time of worry for children and youth. Though school is out, learning can and should continue, and no child should ever go hungry just because school is not in session. The country can and should do more to ensure that all children can have a safe, healthy, and productive summer recess.

¹ Jennifer Sloan McCombs et. al. (2011). Making Summer Count: How summer programs can boost children's learning. The RAND Corporation, available: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1120.pdf.

² Harris Cooper et. al. (1996). The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 66, 227-268. Harris Cooper et. al. (1996). *The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review*. *Review of Educational Research*, 66, 227-268.

³ K. Alexander, D. Entwisle and L. Olson (2007). *Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap*. *American Sociological Review* (72, 167-180).

⁴ Southern Education Foundation (2013). *A New Majority: Low-income students in the South and nation*. Southern Education Foundation (2013). *A New Majority: Low-income students in the South and nation*.

⁵ McCombs et. al. (2011). *Making Summer Count: How summer programs can boost children's learning*.

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau (2014). Public Education Finances: 2012. Available: <http://www2.census.gov/govs/school/12f33pub.pdf>.

⁷ Food Research Action Center (2014). *Hunger Doesn't Take A Vacation*. Report Food Research Action Center, June 2014. Available: http://frac.org/pdf/2014_summer_nutrition_report.pdf.