

Policy Brief

School's Out, Now What?: How summer programs are improving student learning and wellness

“Summer vacation” often conjures up images of family vacations, camps and sports, arts or music programs. However, for many students, particularly students from low-income families, summer vacation does not offer activities that challenge their minds or build their bodies. When students come back to school in the fall, they have lost ground both academically and physically.

Availability of organized summer programs for students varies widely across school districts and communities. The length and quality of programs are also inconsistent. While most school board members, administrators and educators would agree that summer programs are a good thing, there may not be a sense of urgency to develop and implement such programs, especially when districts are searching for ways to save money.

This policy brief focuses on the role of the governing board in promoting and facilitating the provision of summer programs. To help inform board decision-making, this brief also presents research findings on the negative impacts of summer break on student learning and wellness, examines the extent to which summer programs are currently being offered throughout California, and describes characteristics of effective programs and possible sources of program funding.

Impact of summer break on student learning

“Summer learning loss” is what happens when students not only fail to learn anything new during the summer but actually slip backward and lose knowledge and skills gained during the previous school year. In 2011, the Rand Corp. published a comprehensive review¹ of research conducted over several decades which repeatedly documents that learning can decay over summer and that summer learning loss disproportionately affects students from low-income families. Furthermore, the effects of summer

learning loss are cumulative, putting disadvantaged students further and further behind. Studies have found that:

- By the end of the summer, students’ academic knowledge is, on average, one month behind where they left off in the spring. For low-income students, it is two months behind.²
- The differential in achievement rates in reading skills between students from high-income and low-income families widens over the summer.³⁻⁴ Students from low-income families lose ground in reading skills over the summer while middle-income students maintain reading achievement levels and high-income students show improvement.⁵ Specifically, students from lower-income families lose more learning in reading comprehension and word recognition than students from higher-income families.⁶
- Over the summer students are more likely to forget what they have learned in mathematics than they are to lose literacy skills.⁷ This may be because families are less likely to practice mathematics skills at home and/or because mathematics skills are more likely to decay over time if not practiced.⁸⁻⁹
- Summer learning loss varies by grade level, with more detrimental effects occurring at higher grade levels. One study found some gains (though nonsignificant) over the summer among first- and second-graders, but significant summer losses in fourth grade and beyond.¹⁰
- Repeated episodes of summer learning loss result in low-income students falling further behind their higher-income peers each year, contributing substantially to the achievement gap.¹¹

The good news is that summer learning can be enhanced through effective summer programs. Research provides evidence that summer learning programs have the potential to help students maintain or improve their skills and

achievement relative to the average loss associated with summer.¹² A recent evaluation of three summer programs in Fresno, Sacramento and Los Angeles found that students improved their grade-level vocabulary skills, confidence and interest in reading (reading efficacy), school attendance, transition from elementary to middle school, academic work habits and social skills.¹³

Summer programs currently offered in California

To determine the extent to which summer programming is supported by school districts across the state, CSBA and the Partnership for Children and Youth conducted a survey of board members in 2012. Out of 167 respondents, 68 percent of districts said they offered district-supported summer programs or summer school. Among those that did not offer summer programs, 93 percent stated that it was due to the lack of funds.

Highlights of the survey findings include:

- While the majority of programs have more than one content focus, the strongest focus is on remediation (70 percent of programs). About half of the programs focus on literacy while over a quarter focus on credit recovery or Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) activities. Only 5 percent address health and wellness.
- Programs are focused on low-achieving or special needs students in 56 percent of the districts. Grade levels served include elementary (71 percent), middle school (69 percent) and high school (43 percent), with over half of the districts serving more than one age group.
- Most summer programs run for two to four weeks, although 42 percent provide programming for a substantial portion of the summer (more than four weeks). Of the programs that run more than four weeks, 60 percent serve high school students.

Characteristics of effective summer learning programs

Summer programs vary in purpose, length and structure and should be designed to meet the needs of district students. Districts might offer educational/cognitive programs that promote academic achievement, high school completion or college preparation; enrichment and recreation programs; and/or career development programs.

Traditional summer school programs tend to focus on remediation and test preparation. They are often half-day sessions targeted on serving low-performing students

or high school students who have failed or are at risk of failing the high school exit exam, and may be mandatory for those students. Although such programs serve an important function, it is difficult for students to be engaged in programs that they view as punitive.

The National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) promotes a new vision for summer school that is a blended approach of both academic learning and enrichment activities.¹⁴ Such programs provide hands-on, engaging programming that fosters critical 21st Century skills, including collaboration, innovation, creativity, communication and data analysis.

Instead of or in addition to summer school, many districts and communities organize other learning opportunities to engage students during the summer. Examples include summer reading programs (offered in conjunction with public libraries or through reading lists sent home to parents), sports programs, job training, community service and occasional “fun days” related to art, music, science, technology or other subjects.

Regardless of the program focus, successful programs share common characteristics. The most effective programs, according to the Rand Corp. report, are those that have small class sizes, individualized and high-quality instruction, alignment of summer and school-year curricula, curriculum that goes beyond remediation to include engaging enrichment opportunities, incentives that maximize participation and attendance, parent involvement, regular evaluations of program effectiveness and sufficient duration to achieve desired outcomes.

Consistent with the research, the NSLA has developed “quality standards” to help guide program development. These standards address program infrastructure (i.e., mission and goals, finance and sustainability, planning, staff recruitment and retention, professional development, community partnerships) and points of service (i.e., standards for an individualized, intentional, integrated program with a unique “summer culture”).

To increase the number and quality of programs in California, a statewide coalition of educators, policymakers, advocates, school district leaders and foundations joined together in a statewide Summer Matters campaign. Overseen by the Partnership for Children and Youth, the campaign has been building a network of trainers to strengthen program quality and piloting innovative summer programs in 12 communities across the state. Based on this work, Summer Matters has identified core elements of a high-quality program that are consistent with research and the NSLA standards. This work reinforces the importance of engaging, meaningful programming; skilled staff; management by visionary, knowledgeable leaders; and tangible support from families, community-based organizations and civic leaders partnering with schools.

When planning summer learning programs, districts are encouraged to consult these resources and to involve students, parents/guardians, city and county agencies, community organizations, child care providers, and/or other interested persons.

Funding sources

Guides from the Partnership for Children and Youth (*Funding to Support Summer Programs*) and NSLA (*Moving Summer Learning Forward: A Strategic Roadmap for Funding in Tough Times*) provide a list of funding sources that can support summer programs and case studies of districts that successfully use these funds. Available funds may include, but are not limited to:

- **District general or special education funds.** General funds of the district are unrestricted and may be used for any purpose which the superintendent or designee recommends and the board approves. Special education funds may be used to support summer programs that are targeted to meet the needs of students with disabilities.
- **21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) funds.** These federal funds are used to establish or increase expanded learning activities for K-12 students and focus on three primary areas: improved academic achievement, enrichment services that complement academic programs and family literacy. While the majority of 21st CCLC funds are for after-school programs, a small portion of the funding—called “supplemental”—can be used for summer learning programs.¹⁵

21st CCLC grants are available through a competitive proposal process, managed by the California Department of Education (CDE). Applicant agencies must be serving students from schools that are eligible for Title I schoolwide programs, which in most cases means at least 40 percent of the school’s population is enrolled in the free and reduced-price lunch program.
- **After School Education and Safety (ASES) funds.** Some districts have “supplemental” ASES funds from the state for after-school programs. While there are no new dollars for summer through ASES, many districts were allowed to “grandfather” existing supplemental ASES funds when Proposition 49 was implemented in 2006.
- **Hourly intervention funds.** These state funds provide support to instructional programs like remedial reading and summer school, particularly for students at risk of not succeeding in school. However, this program is one for which categorical program flexibility was granted under SBX3 4 (2009), ABX4 2 (2009) and SB 70 (2011). Through the 2014-15 fiscal year (unless extended), districts may temporarily suspend program requirements and use the funds for “any edu-

cational purpose.” Therefore, the extent to which these funds are available for summer programs is dependent upon whether or not the board accepted this flexibility and explicitly identified how the funds will be used.

- **Title I, Part A funds.** For schools with high concentrations of economically disadvantaged students, federal Title I can be used to promote student achievement, staff development and parent and community involvement. In recent years, funding restrictions have been loosened to allow greater use in summer learning programs.
- **Title I, Part C, migrant education funds.** Districts that receive this funding are required, as part of their program to support migrant education programs, to conduct summer school programs for eligible migrant children. Education Code 54444.3 requires that such districts use the federal funds for this purpose, to the extent funds are available, and specifies required program components.
- **School Improvement Grants.** School Improvement Grants are earmarked for implementation of four specified school intervention models. Both the “transformation model” and the “turnaround model” require the use of extended learning time, which may include summer programs.
- **Community Development Block Grants.** Local government entities may offer these grants to support community services, including summer learning programs, to low- and moderate-income residents. Eligibility criteria vary by locality, and most funds are awarded to nonprofit and public organizations that support low- or moderate-income individuals.
- **City or county funds.** Districts may be able to partner with the city or county recreation department or other local agency to add recreation, career and job preparedness or other enrichment activities. Some cities designate funds for summer youth programming and then contract with local schools or nonprofits to operate the programs.
- **Foundation funds.** Numerous foundation and private organizations, large and small, support or advocate educational goals, which may include summer learning. Eligibility criteria and degree of financial support range widely. Most foundations have specific funding guidelines, which may include geographic, population or programmatic considerations. The length of support may be months, years or ongoing.
- **Fees.** When not prohibited by the funding source, summer programs can charge a fee to participating families to help cover gaps between other funding and total program costs. They can include sliding scales to help low-income families. Under state law, entities that receive 21st CCLC and ASES supplemental grants for

summer programs can charge fees, but no student can be turned away because of an inability to pay.

In the CSBA survey cited above, the majority of respondent districts reported that they rely upon multiple funding sources: 60 percent of the districts use general funds, 36 percent use special education funds, 32 percent use Title I grants, 23 percent use migrant education funds, 21 percent use ASES and 21st CCLC supplemental funds, and 23 percent turn to other sources, such as private grants, School Improvement Grants or regional occupational program funding.

Summer wellness

In addition to the learning loss experienced by many students over summer break, research shows that summer break often impacts student wellness in a negative way.

Increased consumption of non-nutritious foods and beverages, coupled with limited opportunities for structured, regular physical activity for some students, contributes to increased rates of weight gain over the summer. A 2007 Ohio State University study¹⁶ found that children gained weight two to three times faster during summer months than during school years. Children who were already overweight and who belonged to particular minority groups experienced the most significant weight change.

Similarly, a study of overweight middle school students found that gains made during the school year in cardiovascular fitness, insulin levels and body composition due to participation in a lifestyle-focused physical education class were essentially undone during the summer break.¹⁷

Some children have the benefit of receiving nutritious meals through subsidized meal programs over the summer. According to the CDE,¹⁸ 444 districts in California participated in either the federally funded Seamless Summer Feeding Option or the Summer Food Service Program in 2010-11. However, this number is much lower than the number of districts participating in the National School Lunch Program (1,029) or National School Breakfast Program (893) in the same year. Furthermore, only 16 percent of the students receiving free or reduced-price lunches during the school year also participate in a subsidized summer lunch program,¹⁹ indicating that for many low-income students, summer breaks may also be a break from healthy nutrition.

Since poor student health is a significant, well-known impediment to student learning, it is imperative that efforts be made to address student wellness over summer. Summer meal programs, recreation programs and other summer programs that include a nutrition and/or physical activity component may help overcome the poor eating habits, food insecurity (i.e., the limited or uncertain availability to

acquire foods) and sedentary behavior that characterize the summer vacation for many students.

Role of the board

Through each of the governing board's major responsibilities, there are opportunities to address the need for summer learning and wellness programs.

Setting direction

The board should set direction for summer programs in the district by establishing clear goals and priorities based on an assessment of student needs. Development of these goals provides an opportunity to raise the profile of summer programs as a key reform strategy rather than an add-on program. The board should express its expectation that planning for summer programs will be integrated into other educational planning processes.

Establishing an effective and efficient structure for the district

In fulfilling its responsibility to establish an effective structure for the district, the board should make policy, curriculum, budget and facilities decisions that are aligned with its goals for student learning and wellness.

Adoption of policies is one of the primary ways that the board establishes structure in the district. The governance team is encouraged to review CSBA's sample policies BP 6177 – Summer Learning Programs, BP/AR 3552 – Summer Meal Program, BP 5030 – Student Wellness and other policies relevant to the district's program and tailor them to meet district needs and goals.

Developing or selecting the curriculum for summer school programs is largely a staff responsibility, but the board must ensure that there are effective processes in place and will adopt the curriculum and instructional materials that will be used. In this way, the board can ensure that the final product reflects the district's expectations and priorities for student learning.

The board is also responsible for adopting a district budget that is fiscally responsible and aligned with the district's vision and goals. Therefore, any proposed use of district resources to provide summer programming must be approved by the board within the budget-setting process. The board should encourage the superintendent and staff to be creative in exploring and combining alternative funding sources.

Opening district facilities and grounds for use during the summer has implications related to costs, facilities maintenance, safety and accessibility. When it is not feasible to offer summer programs at each school site, the district

should consider the accessibility of proposed sites, especially for students from low-income families, since state funding is not available for transportation to summer school and families will need to provide their own transportation. Some districts rotate the school sites at which summer sessions are offered.

When district facilities will be used by other agencies or groups during the summer, or when the district will use nonschool facilities for its summer programs, the board should ensure that a joint use agreement, contract or memorandum of understanding is in place which clearly identifies the responsibilities and liabilities of the district and the other entity.

Providing support to the superintendent and staff

The board has responsibility—through its behavior and actions—to support the superintendent and staff as they carry out the direction of the board. The board can provide support by continually demonstrating its commitment to student learning, upholding policies that have been adopted by the board, providing professional development as needed to ensure that staff in summer programs have the tools and knowledge they need to be successful, and publicly recognizing program accomplishments.

Ensuring accountability for program effectiveness

The board should regularly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of its policies and programs. Toward this end, the board should work with the superintendent to determine the indicators that will be used to measure the effectiveness of summer school, summer meals and other summer programs.

For instance, the district might look at summer school enrollment figures for the current year and previous year, as a whole and disaggregated by grade level, school and student population (e.g., students from low-income families, students with disabilities, English learners). The district might also evaluate the extent to which students successfully achieved the academic outcomes established for the program (e.g., rate at which program participants recovered credits or subsequently passed the high school exit exam).

Reports on summer meal programs could include the number of meals served at each site and the extent to which the meals complied with applicable nutrition standards.

When possible, it is useful to obtain feedback from students, parents and staff about program quality.

Engaging in community leadership

In their role as community leaders, board members can help initiate, strengthen and expand partnerships with community-based organizations and public agencies to identify the needs of children and youth, align and leverage existing resources, and plan, implement and evaluate summer programs. The board's community leadership role also involves informing and educating the community about the district's programs.

Resources

CSBA

www.csba.org

CSBA is producing a special Summer Learning Series focused on issues related to summer learning and wellness. CSBA also provides related sample board policies and administrative regulations, including BP 6177 – Summer Learning Programs, BP/AR 3552 – Summer Meal Program and BP 5030 – Student Wellness. For further information about summer meal programs, see CSBA's policy brief *Providing Access to Nutritious Meals During Summer* (2010).

California Department of Education

www.cde.ca.gov

CDE's website provides information about state and federally funded after-school programs and summer meal programs.

California Food Policy Advocates

<http://cfpa.net>

CFPA provides resources and data on summer nutrition, including *School's Out, Who Ate? A Report on Summer Nutrition in California*.

California Summer Meal Coalition

www.summermealcoalition.org

A program of the Public Health Institute, this statewide network is dedicated to combating hunger and obesity by helping California's children access meals through the federally funded summer nutrition programs. The coalition provides webinars, newsletters, case studies and other resources on summer meal programs.

Food Research and Action Center

www.frac.org

Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2012 presents national data on participation in summer meal programs.

National Summer Learning Association

www.summerlearning.org

Publications include *Moving Summer Learning Forward: A Strategic Roadmap for Funding in Tough Times* (2013), *Healthy Summers for Kids: Turning Risk into Opportunity* (2012) and *New Vision for Summer School* (2010).

Partnership for Children and Youth

<http://partnerforchildren.org>

This California-based nonprofit organization provides technical assistance and advocacy support for summer learning and after-school programs. Publications include *Funding to Support Summer Programs: Lessons from the Field* and *Senate Bill 429: Expanding Access to Summer Programs for Low-Income Students*.

Rand Corp.

www.rand.org

Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning (2011) reviews the research literature on summer learning loss and the effectiveness of summer learning programs and presents information about the costs of summer programming and lessons from the field.

Summer Matters

www.summermatters2you.net

Overseen by the Partnership for Children and Youth, this statewide collaboration works to increase access to quality summer learning and enrichment programs for low-income children and youth. Resources include examples of program designs, budgets and a summer learning planning timeline.

End Notes

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