



Kids forget what they learn during the school year over the summer. They all lose some math skills, but when it comes to reading, poor and minority students fall behind their middle-class and more affluent peers. This very real loss, called the summer slide, or summer setback, continues to widen the academic achievement gap.

The research on summer learning loss points to a disturbing relationship between socioeconomic and racial disparities, and the achievement gap. Cumulative summer learning losses during the early elementary years among socio-economic groups widen the gap. Since a larger proportion of the low-income population are minorities who are less likely to be able to afford quality summer programs, summer learning loss tends to be compounded for poor and minority children.

This brief examines how taking a comprehensive approach in providing all chil-

dren with some form of continuous learning throughout the summer—with a focus on retention—is the most immediate way to close the achievement gap. We must enhance grade-level reading proficiency at the family, community, and state levels. It is vital for legislators, school officials, and community members to work together to address the issue of summer learning because focusing our efforts and supports only during the school year is not closing the gap.

Research tells us it is possible to identify high-school dropouts as early as third grade based on their reading proficiency. A report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation,

Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters, identifies four recommendations to address contributing factors and improve grade-level reading across the nation:

1. Develop a coherent system of early care and education that aligns, integrates, and coordinates what happens from birth through third grade and beyond.
2. Encourage and enable parents, families, and caregivers to play their indispensable roles as co-producers of good outcomes for their children.

3. Prioritize, support, and invest in results-driven initiatives to transform low-performing schools into high-quality teaching and learning environments for all children.

4. Find, develop, and deploy practical scalable solutions to two of the most significant contributors to the underachievement of children from low-income families—chronic absence from school and summer learning loss.¹

Causes and Contributing Factors to Summer Learning Loss

Some researchers have described summer learning loss by proposing the faucet theory, which suggests that resources for all children are turned on during the school year, but turned off during the summer months.² Turning off learning opportunities in the summer creates a drought of available resources and learning opportunities every year, causing our most vulnerable children to fall further and further behind.

Other contributing factors—the lack of available and affordable summer learning programs and family and parental enrichment opportunities—intensify the lack of school-provided resources during the summer months. Most summer programs are simply unaffordable for low-income families. Middle-class and more affluent children are more likely to engage in summer learning opportunities and move ahead of their low-income peers.

Responsibility for providing summer enrichment opportunities does not rest solely with schools. Parents must assume their role as the first teachers of their children. The parents’ role as teacher does not end when their children enter school. Parents and families must continue to actively supplement and reinforce what their children are learning in the classroom. Without academic reinforcement at home, children are more likely to succumb to summer learning loss. Moreover, many communities do not provide summer learning opportunities outside of summer school for students who do not pass. This leaves various population segments with no avenues to strengthen their skills for the next year.

2011 National NAEP Scores

	Proficiency Levels				
	Average Score	Below Basic	At or Above Basic	At or Above Proficient	Advanced
National	220	34	36	32	7
Black	205	51	49	16	2
Hispanic	205	50	50	18	2
White	230	23	77	42	10
Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch (Low-Income)	207	48	52	18	2

All proficiency numbers are in percentages.

2011 Georgia NAEP Scores

	Proficiency Levels				
	Average Score	Below Basic	At or Above Basic	At or Above Proficient	Advanced
State Average	221	34	66	32	7
Black	208	49	51	19	3
Hispanic	214	40	60	25	4
White	231	22	78	43	11
Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch (Low-Income)	209	47	53	20	3

All proficiency numbers are in percentages.

Results of Summer Learning Loss

Studies have shown that children are learning at the same rate during the school year.³ However, there is a disparity between low-income and more affluent families in their ability to afford quality summer programs and to even have access to programs where they live.

The Beginning School Study (BSS) in Baltimore examined how much of the achievement gap is rooted in summer learning loss. The BSS followed the scores of 800 children taking the California Achievement Test (CAT) in the fall and spring from 1982-1987 from grades one through five. The study concluded that:

- Children from a lower socio-economic background start out behind their middle-

class peers, with about a six-month gap in grade equivalency;

- this gap increases to 2.5 years by the time these children leave fifth grade; and
- the increased gap between first and fifth grade was all attributable to changes in learning that occurred over the summer.⁴

One review of 39 summer learning loss studies and meta-analysis of the 13 most recent and highest quality of those studies concluded that in math all children lose an average of 2.6 months of learning. In reading, however, middle-class children gain knowledge and skills while low-income children lose them. The combined reading and math summer loss average is about three months.⁵

The cumulative impact of summer learning loss over the course of the first five years of school is almost three years.

It is critical that changes occur at the local level and in state legislation to better address the crisis of summer learning loss and its impact on our most vulnerable students.

Startling disparities among racial and socio-economic populations are evident in the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores in Reading. Of all fourth graders who took the NAEP in reading, 34 percent scored below basic. Sadly, among the nation's—and Georgia's—minority populations, the percentage of children scoring below basic almost doubled. At the national level 51 percent of black children and 50 percent of Hispanic children scored below basic. In Georgia 49 percent of black children and 40 percent of Hispanic children scored below basic. Only 23 percent of white fourth graders at the national level, and 22 percent in Georgia, scored below basic in reading on the NAEP.

Socio-economic status has a negative impact in determining the amount of quality educational experiences and resources available to students. Summer learning loss exacerbates the socio-economic achievement gap since children from lower socio-economic backgrounds typically start school lagging behind their peers.⁶

Implementing targeted efforts to address the racial and socio-economic disparities in the achievement gap is essential, or this continued under-achievement will create a class of youth and adults unprepared to be productive citizens. The ability to read proficiently by the end of third grade is a strong predictor of whether a child will



drop out of school, end up in the criminal justice system, or become productive in the workforce. An ever-growing group of students who do not read proficiently creates a series of problems that place an economic burden on society, including costs of remediation and lost wages.

The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that if

1,200,000

high-school dropouts from the class of 2011 had earned their degrees, the U.S. economy would have benefitted from an additional

\$154,000,000,000

in wages over these students' lifetimes.

At this rate

12,000,000

high-school dropouts over the next decade would cost our nation more than

\$1,500,000,000,000.⁷

In Georgia, the

60,600

students who did not graduate in 2011 lost lifetime earnings of

\$7,800,000,000.

If all high-school students graduated college-ready, Georgia could have saved

\$121,000,000

in community college remediation and lost earnings.⁸

A Comprehensive Approach

The far-reaching consequences of summer learning loss call for change on every level in how students are educated and the educational opportunities available to them. Here are some evidenced-based recommendations to close up the achievement gap:

For Legislators and Public-Private Funders

Support and fully fund education policies that promote innovative research and proven practices.

- **Expand and invest in quality early childhood education, including universal Pre-K.** Taking a proactive approach will ensure that early-education level interventions are in place before a gap can even open.
- **Increase funding for summer programs.** Additional funding will allow community-based organizations to convene local partners to close gaps and fulfill unmet needs.
- **Increase funding for research opportunities that generate practical solutions to combat summer learning loss.** More solutions and proven strategies will keep every child on track to read at or above grade level by the end of third grade.
- **Require school systems to allocate and report on funding used to support summer learning programs.** Accountability and transparency will enable school districts to adequately serve all children. Ample funding is critical since low-performing districts typically have high-poverty areas.

• Create programs and policies that promote family self-sufficiency.

With these in place, poverty will no longer be a factor in determining whether or not families can afford summer learning and enrichment opportunities for their children.

For School Officials

All stakeholders in a school district must collaborate on how to offer affordable, quality summer learning programs for all children.

- **Extend the school day or year.** Teachers will have more time to remediate students who fall behind during summer break, and provide enrichment for their advanced peers. An extended day would ultimately allow teachers to spend fewer days on remediation tasks.
- **Modify the school calendar.** Shorter, frequent breaks year-round can help decrease the depth of knowledge and skills children lose over time.
- **Change the criteria for summer-school attendance requirements.** Extending summer learning opportunities to students at risk—but not yet lagging behind—prevents the achievement gap from opening.

• Explore competitive federal-level grant programs to fund initiatives to combat summer learning loss.

Competitive grant programs, like Race to the Top, encourage innovative ideas to increase and expand year-long learning opportunities for all students.

For Parents and Community Members

You are your children's first teacher. Get involved in their education and reinforce at home what they learn in school.

- **Talk to your children.** Tell them stories about yourself and get them to share stories with you.
- **Select an affordable summer program.** Schools, colleges, and recreation centers offer educational enrichment programs.
- **Visit your local public library.** They are free and often provide programs that keep children engaged throughout the summer.
- **Explore local attractions.** Museums, parks, and zoos serve as engaging summer learning opportunities.
- **Prepare for the upcoming school year.** Ask your child's teacher for a list of books and activities for the summer.

Conclusion

While a focus on summer learning is a step in the right direction, participation in summer learning programs alone cannot completely close the achievement gap. It will take a systematic approach—sustained over time—connecting families, school districts, communities, and legislators in addressing the academic, socio-emotional, and economic needs of children and families to plug up the gap that has plagued our state and nation for so long.

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2. Beth Miller. 2007. *The Untapped Power of Summer to Advance Student Achievement: The Learning Season*. Massachusetts: The Nellie Mac Foundation. www.nmefdn.org
3. Miller, 3.
4. Miller, 3-4.
5. Miller, 3.

6. Miller, 4.
7. Alliance for Excellence in Education. 2011. *The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools*. www.all4ed.org. Washington, D.C.
8. Alliance for Excellence in Education. 2012. *Georgia High Schools*. www.all4ed.org. Washington, D.C.
9. National Association of Summer Learning. 2010. *Summer Learning Spells Success: What parents can do to keep kids sharp over the summer*. www.summerlearning.org

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13. Brenda McLaughlin and Jeffery Smink. 2009. *Summer Learning: Moving from the Periphery to the Core: The Progress of Education Reform*, 10(3):6.
14. Ibid, 6.