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*“Summer presents a unique and essential opportunity to provide children with fun, engaging learning experiences—something every child deserves.”*

**Ron Fairchild, Executive Director, Center for Summer Learning**

## **Summer: A Season When Learning is Essential**

For some children, summer vacation means camp, family trips, visits to museums, parks and libraries and a variety of enriching activities. But other children find that, when schools close for the summer, healthy meals, medical care and fun and engaging activities are out of reach, as are activities that strengthen academic achievement and provide opportunities to explore new interests.

Researchers are shedding new light on when and where learning takes place and highlighting the connection between summer experiences and success in school and beyond. Studies show that non-academic experiences during the summer can support success during the school year, including higher grades and test scores.<sup>i</sup> The summer months can offer children the chance to expand their horizons, master new skills and build relationships, fostering learning and development. For older youth, these opportunities include participating in service learning projects which give them valuable first-time experience in the labor market as well as connections to employers.

*So many kids can lose so much during the summer, and I wanted them to keep up that momentum of learning on a daily basis.*

**-- Andrea Rohm,  
Parent**

### **Addressing the summer learning gap**

All children experience learning losses if they do not engage in summer learning opportunities. Studies dating back to 1906 find that all children score lower on standardized tests at the end of summer vacation than they do when it begins.<sup>ii,iii</sup>

- Most students lose about two months of grade level equivalency in math skills over the summer months.<sup>iv</sup>
- In addition, low-income students lose more than two months of reading achievement, despite the fact that their middle class peers make slight gains.<sup>v</sup>
- More than half of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade achievement gap between lower and higher income youth can be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities during the elementary school years. As a result, low-income youth are less likely to graduate from high school or enter college.<sup>vi</sup>

The benefits of summer learning programs are well-documented. One analysis of summer program evaluations found that they measurably increased the knowledge and

skills of participants.<sup>vii</sup> The most beneficial programs address the needs of the whole child.<sup>viii</sup> These programs not only boost student achievement, but also improve self-esteem and confidence. Well-designed summer learning programs increase achievement, enhance motivation for and engagement in learning, and develop and nurture new skills and talents. Examples of successful summer programs include summer reading interventions, summer school, summer camp and hybrid youth development-academic enrichment programs.

- Beyond the Bell, a summer learning program in Sioux City, Iowa, uses community partnerships to help children and boost achievement during the summer months. More than 50 businesses and non-profit organizations provide programming for the 700 students who participate each summer. The six-week program is designed to help close the achievement gap by targeting students who are not proficient in reading or math. Students work with certified teachers every morning and spend the afternoon engaged in high quality enrichment activities, recreation and field trips. The program also serves the children healthy snacks and lunches each day.<sup>ix</sup>
- Project Morry<sup>x</sup> is a year-round program in White Plains, New York, that focuses on academic enrichment, recreation and youth development for children from disadvantaged communities in New York City. The linchpin to this notable program is Camp Morry, a tuition-free summer sleep-away camp. Since it began in 1996, all of the Project Morry graduates have completed high school, 80 percent have enrolled in institutions of higher education, and 100 percent of those who enrolled in college remained in college.<sup>xi</sup>
- SuperKids Camp<sup>xii</sup> has served more than 10,000 Baltimore City children since 1997. In addition to sailing in Baltimore's Inner Harbor and visiting museums, elementary students in the six-week program hone their reading skills. Evaluations confirm that more than 80 percent of participants maintain or improve their literacy skills.<sup>xiii</sup>
- Harlem RBI's REAL Kids<sup>xiv</sup> summer program serves nearly 300 children from East Harlem in a seven-week summer program that runs Mondays through Thursdays from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., with field trips each Friday. Using baseball as its organizing principle, the REAL Kids Program provides structured academic, enrichment and sports programming in a youth-centered learning environment. Eighty-two percent of students who completed Harlem RBI's summer program showed no learning loss in reading at the end of the summer, and nearly half made up to six months of reading gains by summer's end.<sup>xv</sup>

*It's 10 times better than school. I didn't used to like to read so much, but now I do.*  
-- **Eli DeJesus, age 8**  
**Participant in Harlem RBI's Real Kids summer program**

### **Keeping kids healthy**

Good nutrition is a key to the healthy growth and development of children. It is a vital component of a child's education because it stimulates learning, improves school attendance and behavior, and contributes to cognitive development.<sup>xvi</sup> Children need access to nutritious meals and snacks all year round, but when schools close for summer, the free and reduced-price school meals available through the National School Lunch

Program that millions of low-income children depend on are no longer available, and many families struggle to fill the gap.

- On an average day during the 2005-2006 school year, 7.7 million low-income children ate a free or reduced-price breakfast at school, and 16.1 million ate free or reduced-price lunch.<sup>xvii</sup>
- In the summer of 2006, an average of 2.85 million children participated in federally funded summer nutrition programs—less than one-fifth of the children served by the free or reduced-price lunch program during the school year.<sup>xviii</sup>

Since 1980 the number of young people who are overweight has more than tripled, with 31 percent of school-age children overweight or obese. Obesity is linked to lower academic achievement, depression and chronic health problems.<sup>xix</sup> Many children are vulnerable to excessive weight gain over the summer, especially minority children and those who already are overweight.<sup>xx</sup> Inactivity and poor quality meals can be the norm for children who do not have access to healthy meals and snacks and summer programs that incorporate physical activity into the program day.

Summer programs enable children to receive the same nutritious meals and snacks during the summer that they receive during the school year. A federal program—the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)—does just that. This program supports meals served at local summer education and enrichment programs, recreation centers, schools, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, parks and churches. In addition to providing nutritious food, these meals draw children into summer programs that promote their health and development, and offer engaging and fun experiences while their parents are working.

- The Travis Air Force Base Youth Center in California serves breakfast, lunch and a snack to 190 children during the summer. The center has a large garden where it grows many of its own fruits and vegetables which are incorporated into the menu whenever possible. Children in the program help in the garden and grow plums, apples, herbs, strawberries, corn, pumpkins, zucchini and more, gaining an appreciation of nature and learning about nutrition and healthy eating.<sup>xxi</sup>

*Our mission is to help children reach their full potential by providing a safe place to learn, grow, and play.*

**-- Brenda Hervey, Director  
Beyond the Bell, Sioux City,  
Iowa**

### **Providing a safe place for children in the summer**

Schools keep children safe during the day. During the summer months, however, many low-income families are without childcare and one in ten children regularly spends time in self-care, either alone or with a sibling younger than 13.<sup>xxii</sup> Further,

the number of hours children spend in self-care increases from 4.8 hours per week during the school year to more than 10 hours per week during the summer.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Although lower income families spend a higher percentage of their income on childcare than more affluent families, many cannot afford the high fees charged by many summer day and overnight camps that provide enrichment in the arts, technology and sports. Consequently, children from low-income families receive lower quality summer childcare and engage in fewer enrichment activities.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Neighborhood characteristics also play a role in limiting opportunities for low-income youth. Children in poor urban areas with high levels of violence are often kept indoors for their safety.<sup>xxv</sup> Housebound children may spend many of their summer hours in front of the television, which can contribute to obesity and learning loss.<sup>xxvi</sup> Summer programs can provide a safe place for children to explore, learn and grow while their parents are at work.

- Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Redhound Enrichment<sup>xxvii</sup> summer program run by Corbin Independent Schools in Corbin, Kentucky go fishing, navigate National Guard obstacle courses, create music videos, learn digital photography and broadcast live from a local radio station. These interactive, real-world projects are fun, but also incorporate learning and academics. Students in grades K-8 are served in the program that operates Mondays through Fridays from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. during the summer months. The program begins the first day school is out for summer, and continues until school starts in the fall.<sup>xxviii</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Children eagerly anticipate summertime—it gives them a break from the school year routine and can be filled with fun and games. Parents want their children to be safe, to learn new skills and explore their interests. Employed parents want all of these things for their kids, along with childcare that will allow them to work free from worries about their children's safety.

Summer programs can meet all of these needs, while also providing academic enrichment that mitigates the summer learning gap, which is felt most acutely by lower income families. Summer programs can round out a child's education and offer experiences that aren't available during the school year. They offer lower income families a way to level the playing field, to give their children enrichment activities and learning opportunities that are otherwise more readily available to affluent families. Summer programs have the potential to help reverse summer learning loss and increase educational equity. They are good for children and families, and help make schools more successful. Investing in summer learning programs pays off in myriad ways.

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- <sup>i</sup> Miller, B.M. (2007). *The learning season: The untapped power of summer to advance student achievement*. Quincy, MA: Nellie Mae Education Foundation.
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- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>vi</sup> Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., Olson, L. (2007). Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. *American Sociological Review*, 72, 167-180.
- <sup>vii</sup> Cooper, H., Valentine, J. C., Charlton, K., & Nelson, A. (2003). The effects of a modified school calendar on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 73, 1-52.
- <sup>viii</sup> Halpern, R. (2005). *Confronting the big lie: The need to reframe expectations of afterschool programs*. New York: Partnership for After School Education.
- <sup>ix</sup> United Way. (2008). School age child care. Retrieved April 21, 2008, from <http://www.siouxlandy.org/ChildCare/SchoolAge/Index.cfm>
- <sup>x</sup> Project Morry received the Excellence in Summer Learning award from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Summer Learning in 2007, recognizing it as one of the nation's best.
- <sup>xi</sup> Center for Summer Learning. (2008, February). *Doesn't every child deserve a memorable summer?* Retrieved April 21, 2008, from <http://www.sumerlearning.org/media/researchandpublications/Memorable.Summer.Fact.Sheet.Final.2.26.08.pdf>
- <sup>xii</sup> SuperKids Camp received the Excellence in Summer Learning award from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Summer Learning in 2007, recognizing it as one of the nation's best.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Harlem RBI's REAL Kids program received the Excellence in Summer Learning award from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Summer Learning in 2006, recognizing them as one of the nation's best. In March of 2007, the REAL Kids Program also received the James Patterson's Pageturner Award.
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- <sup>xvi</sup> Fairchild, R., McLaughlin, B., Costigan, B. (2007, Spring). *How did you spend your summer vacation? What public policies do (and don't do) to support summer learning opportunities for all youth*. New York: The Robert Bowne Foundation.
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- <sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xix</sup> Food Research and Action Center. (2008, January). *Fresh from the farm: Using local foods in the afterschool and summer nutrition programs*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
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- <sup>xxii</sup> Capizzano J., Adelman, S., & Stagner, M. (2002). *What happens when the school year is over? The use and costs of childcare for school-age children during the summer months*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.
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- <sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>xxvii</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> Century Redhound Enrichment received the Excellence in Summer Learning award from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Summer Learning in 2008, recognizing it as one of the nation's best.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Email correspondence with Karen West, Special Projects Curriculum Supervisor, Corbin Independent Schools. March 31, 2008.