

# ALL CHILDREN DESERVE UNINTERRUPTED LEARNING!

by Fred Brown

**W**hen I was growing up, I couldn't wait for summer vacation! My family seemed to always have the perfect road trip planned, and often the destinations were many states away from my native Ohio. Before I entered middle school, I had visited over 25 states, walked the perimeter of the Grand Canyon, marveled at the splendor of Niagara Falls, and crossed the borders into both Canada and Mexico. The destinations were only part of the fun. There were also the games we played along the way: 20 Questions, I Spy, a modified version of Wheel of Fortune that my dad made, and more. There were tons of books and travel documents for me to read since I was often asked to help the family make choices about stops along the way.

Even though I usually mourned the end of summer, I was often excited for that first day of school. I couldn't wait to share with my classmates during the annual "what did you do this past summer?" discussion. Not only would I have great stories to tell, there would always be some cool artifact to share. My learning truly didn't stop simply because the school year ended.

Only later did it dawn on me that not everyone continued to experience learning during the summers. As an elementary teacher in Elyria, Ohio, a small urban district about 30 miles west of Cleveland, I looked forward to asking my students the question all my teachers had asked me that first day of school: "What did you do this summer?" However, I quickly realized that many of the students in my school didn't have families who could provide road trips, summer camps, or others types of learning experiences. Their stories were mainly about roaming the neighborhood, hanging out at the mall, and watching television. It didn't take me long to recognize these were often the same students who had the greatest challenges remembering what they had learned the previous school year. As a result, we spent most of the first few months of school "reviewing" the previous year's material. I was experiencing summer learning loss firsthand; I just didn't know what it was. Like many other teachers, I was caught up in a pattern that is playing out in many schools and districts:

## 1

Teachers work very hard all year to make sure their students know the content.

## 2

Summer happens.

## 3

Teachers start a new school year working extremely hard to reteach last year's content, particularly for their lower income students (sometimes blaming the teacher in the previous grade for not doing a good enough job).

## 4

Teachers feel pressured because of all the new content they are required to help students learn and get frustrated that some of their children are so far behind.

## 5

Despite this, teachers continue to do their best to make sure students learn the new content.

## 6

Summer happens, the achievement gap widens.

## 7

Repeat.

When it comes to summer learning loss, the phrase "If I knew then what I know now" rings especially true for me. If I had known that many youth lose two months in math skills over the summer but that low-income youth also lose more than two months in reading achievement. If I had known the effects of the "summer slide" are cumulative and significantly contribute to the achievement gap between lower and higher income children. If I had known that summer learning loss accounts for about two-thirds of the ninth grade achievement gap in reading! If I had known that four out of five of low-income students were

falling being in reading by the end of third grade, and that they were four times more likely to drop out of high school than their peers who were reading proficiently.

The reality is that teachers, schools, and districts know these things and have the opportunity to respond. According to *Making Summer Count*, a report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and written by researchers at Rand, rigorous studies of voluntary summer programs, mandatory summer programs, and programs that encourage students to read at home in the summer have all found positive effects on student achievement. The combined evidence from these studies suggests that all these types of summer learning programs can mitigate learning losses and even lead to achievement gains. The follow-up report from Rand, *Getting to Work on Summer Learning*, offers some specific guidance to school district leaders interested in launching or improving summer learning programs:

- commit to having a summer program by January;
- include both district and site-level staff in planning;
- deliver planning templates to site leaders;
- anchor the program in a commercially available and evidence-based curriculum;
- standardize the curriculum across district sites;
- include strategies for differentiation in curriculum materials to accommodate at least two ability levels;

- instruct students in small classes or groups; and
- provide support for students with special needs.

Many municipalities have recognized the benefits of effective summer learning programs and followed many of these recommendations. One of the cities prioritizing summer learning is Dallas, Texas, Learning Forward's hometown. Dallas is also home to Big Thought, an organization working with Dallas public schools and committed to mitigating the effects of summer learning loss. Big Thought's approach is to combine innovative learning experiences with community resources to help develop the capacities of the city's youth.

As Learning Forward's deputy executive director, I visited several Big Thought locations last summer. First, let me describe what I didn't see. I didn't see classrooms full of students who were in danger of being retained if they didn't pass their summer school courses. I also didn't see teachers reteaching from the same textbooks students had used during the previous school year. What I did see, however, were highly motivated children engaged in inquiry-based learning activities that challenged their thinking and held their interest. I saw lessons that combined mathematics and literacy skills, encouraged collaboration, and pushed teachers to create learning environments that

pushed their thinking just as much as they pushed their students'.

Programs like Big Thought are in cities all over the country. As seen in many of the other articles in this journal, the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) is one of the organizations working to help increase the number of providers offering high-quality summer learning programs to youth in high-needs districts. The NSLA website offers guidance and examples of programs that are in place all across the country. For school and district leaders looking to follow the advice in the Rand report, there's absolutely no need to reinvent the wheel.

For those who know Learning Forward, you may be asking why we would be interested in summer learning. Learning Forward, after all, is an organization that is focused solely on professional learning for educators as a vehicle for increasing educator effectiveness and student learning. The reality is that many of the innovative teaching strategies used by teachers during the summer are excellent models for the regular academic year. Summer provides teachers an opportunity to test and refine those techniques that pique children's interest and motivate them to learn.

Often, professional learning to prepare for summer learning is focused on program components and schedules. As districts help prepare

teachers for their summer learning experience, it is essential that their professional learning goes well beyond mere logistics. Rand's *Getting to Work on Summer Learning* emphasized that teachers need opportunities to deeply engage with the summer curriculum. Those districts experiencing the most success, according to the report's authors, begin giving teachers opportunities to practice the summer curriculum in the spring and also provide coaching support.

Principals and other building leaders who are inspired by the effective teaching they observe during the summer can strengthen their schools' professional learning systems by ensuring those techniques become the norm during the school year. Additionally, schools can create seamless links between the traditional academic year and the summer learning experience. The goal should be that students enjoy a connected learning experience that spans the entire year!

In a few months, thousands of children will be sitting in SUVs or airplanes in great anticipation of their upcoming summer vacations. Others will be deeply engaged in summer learning experiences sponsored by their school districts and local organizations. Wherever they are, I hope their learning is continuing—our collective success depends on it!

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