

# Schools aim to stem 'summer slide'

**Research finds kids forget quite a bit during 3-month break**

By Stevenson Swanson | Tribune national correspondent  
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NEW YORK - The lazy days of summer make for hazy days in the classroom when a new school year begins.

With summer vacations over or winding down, education experts say teachers will spend the first four to six weeks of the new school year simply rehashing material that their young charges learned in the previous school year but forgot over the summer.

It's a phenomenon so well-recognized that it even has a name: the summer slide.

"Research confirms what most people accept as common sense, which is that if you don't practice something, you suffer a loss," said Ron Fairchild, executive director of the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University.

Studies have found that students in all income groups fall an average of 2.6 months behind in math skills, possibly because few students are likely to practice much outside the classroom.

But when it comes to the summer slide in reading, household income is an important factor. Children in low-income households lose an average of two months in reading ability, while their middle- and upper-income counterparts tend to make slight gains in reading levels over the summer months.

Researchers attribute that difference in part to greater opportunities for children in more affluent households to participate in costly summer programs such as specialized camps, or to go with parents on educational vacations that keep their minds stimulated.

And new research is showing that the summer slide is more than just a temporary nuisance. In a study released earlier this year, sociologists at Johns Hopkins concluded that the summer learning gap between well-off and poor students that starts in elementary school has a powerful influence on reading scores through high school and beyond.

Using data from a study that tracked the progress of 790 Baltimore students from 1st grade to age 22, the researchers found that differences in summer learning accounted for 65 percent of the gap in reading scores between upper-income students who went to four-year colleges and low-

income high-school dropouts.

"What this research shows is that summers play a huge role in the achievement gap," said Fairchild, whose center tracks reading programs for low-income kids. "If there isn't any intervention during the summer targeted at low-income kids, there's this cumulative gap."

### **A new kind of summer school**

But summer learning programs aimed at such children are springing up in many parts of the country, including New York, Chicago, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and statewide efforts in West Virginia and New Mexico.

In contrast to traditional summer school, which is usually designed as a remedial program for underachieving students, these classes typically combine education and recreation. They also provide a safe place for children whose parents work during the day and can't afford child care.

"If their parents are working, if there's no one home to take care of them, there's often a lack of guidance where they can be doing something constructive and safe," said Mande Polonsky, who runs the 2-year-old Keep Kids Learning Initiative for the Chicago Public Schools, a six-week program that provided 3,200 students this summer with morning classes in reading, math and science, followed by afternoon sports, culture and arts and crafts.

**REAL Kids**, a 9-year-old program in New York's East Harlem neighborhood, uses baseball as its organizing principle.

The 300 black and Hispanic children who took part this summer were divided into 18 teams. They wore their team uniforms all day, from breakfast and morning reading classes to afternoon baseball and softball games.

Many of the books or reading materials in the program deal with baseball, and the program includes sessions aimed at fostering the children's social development, focusing on such things as solving conflicts peacefully and practicing good manners. Those lessons are then put to the test on the baseball diamond.

"Baseball provides a lot of opportunities to unpack a lot of life lessons," said Megan Demarkis, who runs the program for **Harlem RBI**, a non-profit youth development group. "What does it mean to lose gracefully? How do you handle mistakes? It really gives them something to chew on."

### **'10 times better than school'**

A group of 8- to-11-year-old children who took part in this summer's program clearly enjoyed the baseball side of **REAL Kids**, but they also talked enthusiastically about the books they had read, from "Baseball Brain Teasers" to fantasy and animal stories.

"It's not all about baseball," said Eli DeJesus, 8, who called **REAL Kids** "10 times better than school." "I didn't used to like to read so much, but now I do."

His brother Vincent, 10, said that if he hadn't been enrolled in the program, he probably would have been playing video games.

Their mother, Yolanda Valdes, noted that in their East Harlem neighborhood, many kids are "just running loose" in the summer.

"I've never seen my kids so motivated," said Valdes, a single mother. "They were up before me every day. And when they came home, they'd tell me about the books they'd read, their baseball games, their losses, their wins. They were never disappointed."

**Harlem RBI** executive director Rich Berlin said that more than 80 percent of the children who complete REAL Kids have either improved or maintained their reading skills by the end of the six-week program.

"The focus on literacy puts them in a place where they're prepared to succeed in school and socially," he said.

The summer slide might seem to provide ammunition to advocates who want to switch from the traditional nine-month school year to a year-round schedule.

But a study released this month found that students at such schools do not learn more than students in nine-month schools.

Ohio State University sociologist Paul von Hippel said the main reason was because the year-round school calendar has the same number of school days -- about 180 -- as the nine-month system. Instead of bunching up vacation days in the summer, the year-round schools generally take about a one-week break every month.

"If you want to address the summer slide by manipulating the calendar, you need to have more school days," von Hippel said. "Just redistributing the same number of school days is not going to increase the amount that children learn."

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