
Editors' Notes

HOW DID YOU SPEND your summer break when you were a child? Most Americans have an idyllic image of summer as a carefree, happy time when “kids can be kids” and enjoy experiences like taking vacations, relaxing at the pool, and spending time with family. Yet, the reality of what many children encounter during the summer months is anything but idyllic and carefree.

Whereas wealthier children and youth typically access a wide variety of resources that help them grow both academically and developmentally over the summer, poorer children often are unable to benefit from similar types of experiences. When the school doors close, many youth across the country exit into an environment lacking educational opportunities, healthy meals, and adequate supervision from caring adults. From a resources perspective, summer break in the United States has traditionally been a time when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

This volume of *New Directions for Youth Development* focuses critical attention on the resource disparity created by the traditional summer break for U.S. schoolchildren. The chapters that follow bring together scholars and practitioners with unique perspectives on the need for summer learning opportunities for children living in poverty and how best to accomplish that goal. By exploring recent developments in the field of summer learning, hopefully the chapters that follow will help foster dialogue and contribute to enduring solutions to one of the most persistent barriers to educational equity in America.

When read together, these chapters constitute a compelling case for large-scale public investments in high-quality summer learning

opportunities for youth from lower-income households as a strategy for narrowing the achievement gap. The first two chapters of this volume document groundbreaking evidence about the academic and nutritional setbacks that young people face during the summer months. Karl L. Alexander and his colleagues have spent nearly three decades investigating the learning patterns and life trajectories of the same group of young people from Baltimore in their Beginning School Study. One of the most striking findings from their work is that early differences in summer learning opportunities have lasting repercussions throughout a young person's educational development, accounting in part for later educational outcomes such as high school completion and college enrollment. This analysis adds to a well-established research base of at least thirty-nine empirical studies over the past hundred years that confirm a pattern of summer learning loss, particularly for low-income students. Chapter One also provides a research-based rationale for policymakers and providers who place a high priority on preventative summer learning programs at younger grade levels.

In Chapter Two, Douglas B. Downey and Heather R. Boughton expand the evidence of summer loss beyond academic regression in reading or mathematical skills. Their research examines the powerful role that nutritional setbacks over the summer months play in contributing to the epidemic of childhood obesity in America. Although the federally subsidized meal program is available to millions of children from September to June, only one in five students who participate during the school year has access to those meals during the summer. The alarming pattern of changes in body mass index rates over the summer months underscores the need to extend nutrition programs to more young people during the summer months.

The remaining chapters in this volume focus on solutions and strategies for addressing the lack of resources available for youth from lower-income households during the summer months. In Chapter Three, Susanne R. Bell and Natalie Carrillo describe the characteristics of highly effective summer learning programs and provide an overview of some of the most successful model programs from around the country. The authors of Chapters Four,

Five, and Six focus on some of the unique aspects of programs that serve youth in rural areas, employ partnerships to create effective programming, and develop young people's reading abilities. Although there are important differences among the programs, there is also a growing consensus on the core elements of high-quality summer learning programs. The authors define *quality* programming during the summer months and present a clear vision of how to make the promise of an enriching and productive summer break a reality for more young people.

The final two chapters of this issue focus on two of the most salient and timely issues currently facing the field: program evaluation and sustainability. In Chapter Seven, Earl Martin Phalen and Tiffany M. Cooper describe the process Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL) uses to engage in ongoing rigorous evaluation to drive program improvement. Rather than framing the need to measure results and impact as something imposed on programs by external forces (that is, funders and government agencies), the authors show the power of internally motivated evaluations focused on achieving higher levels of program quality and growth.

In the final chapter, M. Jane Sundius offers an insightful perspective from the funding community about the challenge of generating large-scale, sustainable public investment in summer learning programs. Whereas private foundation support continues to be an important source of revenue for many programs, favorable public policies and investments offer the best hope of equitable access to high-quality programs at a large scale in the future. Chapter Eight offers an agenda for decision makers who seek to build coordinated systems and policies that support summer learning opportunities. Despite the unequivocal need for summer programs, particularly for disadvantaged children and youth, surprisingly few policies specifically target summer as a time to advance learning, support healthy physical and emotional development, and provide safe, engaging environments for young people while the school doors are closed. At this point, public policy has yet to be developed and is lagging behind the growing field of summer programming.

This journal was designed to both highlight and stimulate growth in the field of summer learning. As editors of this volume, our intention is to attract attention to summer as a critical window of time for young people's academic, social, emotional, and physical development. We also seek to strengthen the position of the summer learning field within the broader context of out-of-school-time programming. We encourage you to think critically about how your work intersects with the needs of young people over the summer months and how together we can achieve the goal of a more sustainable and equitable expansion of summer learning opportunities for all young people.

Ron Fairchild
Gil G. Noam
Editors

RON FAIRCHILD is the executive director of the Center for Summer Learning at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education. The center works to create high-quality summer learning opportunities for all young people.

GIL G. NOAM is a clinical and developmental psychologist on the faculty of Harvard University and the founder and director of the Program in Education, Afterschool and Resiliency at Harvard Medical School and McLean Hospital.