Child TRENDS 5

INFORMATION THAT COUNTS

FIVE WAYS | to Make Summer Learning Programs Successful

Child Trends 5 is a new monthly publication from Child Trends.

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This summer, about 25 percent of children in the U.S. will attend a summer learning program -- less than half of the number who have parents interested in enrolling them. Summer learning programs are non-mandatory programs, typically four-to-eight weeks long, that support accelerated learning. While some programs promote outcomes like career development or physical fitness, they are often meant to mitigate the loss of learning that many students experience during the summer. This "summer slide" is greatest for children from low-income families, and can, over time, lead to wide academic disparities between them and children from higher-income families. Students from low-income families are most likely to attend a summer program, but their unmet demand for summer programs is also highest.

There is much we know (and more we can learn) about designing and executing effective summer learning programs. Based on the best available research, Child Trends offers five ways to make these programs successful:

1 *Invest in educators*

Because staffing constitutes a substantial chunk of program budgets, it can be tempting to skimp on wages or stipends. But programs that hire teachers who have a bachelor's degree and several years of teaching experience are more likely to improve academic outcomes than those that hire college students or do not hire instructors at all. Strategies such as hiring teachers and staff with pre-existing connections to youth, and keeping a low staff-youth ratio, can help teachers identify individual participants' needs and strengths, and address them. An investment in recruiting, hiring and training quality staff, and a sufficient number of them, can be an investment in programmatic results.

2

Connect with others in the field

As the field moves toward extending the school day and school year, tying summer-based education to curricular standards taught during the regular school year takes on greater importance; Youth for Youth, managed by the Department of Education, has resources to help with this. Beyond supporting curriculum alignment, strategic partnerships between school and community organizations can lead to more diversity in funding sources, sharing of facilities and other resources, less duplication of services, access to a larger and more diverse pool of teachers and students for recruitment, and access to data about students' year-round academic needs and improvement.

3

Involve families

Parents play a crucial role in preventing summer learning loss, but they are not often included in summer interventions. Engaging parents in their children's summer programs can help with word-of-mouth recruitment and retention. And, research shows that children with parents who are involved in their academic lives are likely to outperform children without such parental involvement. Staff should communicate regularly with parents about their children's progress, provide opportunities for families to participate in multiple ways, and provide spaces where, and times when, families and staff can connect.

4

Make it fun

Because they have more flexibility in terms of curricula, location, length and structure, summer programs represent a great opportunity to help students learn in a stimulating, active environment, and develop expertise in areas that interest them. Most programs include experiential education -- such as project-based or community service learning, thematic curricula, or adventure education -- which has been shown to engage children and help them improve their grades, understand new material as part of a conceptual framework, and develop leadership skills. To reap the most benefit for each participant, programs should include students of varying academic and behavior profiles in groups, and complement group learning with individual support.

5

Plan, measure, and adjust

Start early. Existing research demonstrates that programs with year-round staff dedicated to planning and recruitment are most successful in setting and reaching programmatic goals. Find out what has been shown to work in other programs, and replicate it. Collect and analyze data, such as the proportion of low-income students who enroll and remain, or students' reading levels between spring and fall of a year with high participation compared to their losses in years with low participation. Engaging in data collection and analysis continuously rather than waiting till the end of a program can help determine what led a program to its final outcomes.

Finally, don't be put off if a program does not have earth-shattering results. Because summer learning loss is cumulative, even a minor reduction each year can lead to major improvement in the end.