

The Case Against Summer Vacation

It's an outdated legacy of the farm economy. Adults still romanticize it. But those months out of school do the most damage to the kids who can least afford it

BY DAVID VON DREHLE

RECENTLY I REREAD *THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER* after many years, and I was stunned to discover that Tom's summer vacation doesn't begin until the end of Chapter 21. Memory plays tricks. Tom's glorious idyll of mud, mild rebellion, chaste romance and rampant imagination—electrified by a dash of danger and a blaze of heroism—had been filed in my mind under the heading of complete summer freedom. Even the most vivid scenes of Tom in school had been washed out by the brilliance of Tom barefoot and unbound. In reality, though, our hero spent much of his summer vacation pathetically bedridden with the measles.

I mention this because my muddled recollection is a small version of a broad misunderstanding, a skewed view of childhood and summertime. We associate the school year with oppression and the summer months with liberty—and nothing is more American than liberty. Summer is red, white and blue. It's flags and fireworks, hot dogs and mustard, cold watermelon and sweet corn. School is regimen; summer is creativity. School is work; summer is play. But when American students are competing with children around the world, who are in many cases spending four weeks longer in school each year, larking through summer is a luxury we can't afford. What's more, for many children—especially children of low-income families—summer is a season of boredom, inactivity and isolation. Kids can't go exploring if their neighbor-

hoods aren't safe. It's hard to play without toys or playgrounds or open spaces. And Tom Sawyer wasn't expected to care for his siblings while Aunt Polly worked for minimum wage.

Dull summers take a steep toll, as researchers have been documenting for more than a century. Deprived of healthy stimulation, millions of low-income kids lose a significant amount of what they learn during the school year. Call it "summer learning loss," as the academics do, or "the summer slide," but by any name summer vacation is among the most pernicious—if least acknowledged—causes of achievement gaps in America's schools. Children with access to high-quality experiences keep exercising their minds and bodies at sleepaway camp, on family vacations, in museums and libraries and enrichment classes. Meanwhile, children without resources languish on street corners or in front of glowing screens. By the time the bell rings on a new school year, the poorer kids have fallen

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weeks, if not months, behind. And even well-off American students may be falling behind their peers around the world.

The problem of summer vacation, first documented in 1906, compounds year after year. What starts as a hiccup in a 6-year-old's education can be a crisis by the time that child reaches high school. After collecting a century's worth of academic studies, summer-learning expert Harris Cooper, now at Duke University, concluded that, on average, all students lose about a month of progress in math skills each summer, while low-income students slip as many as three months in reading comprehension, compared with middle-income students. Another major study, by a team at Johns Hopkins University, examined more than 20 years of data meticulously tracking the progress of students from kindergarten through high school. The conclusion: while students made similar progress during the school year, regardless of economic status, the better-off kids held steady or continued to make progress during the summer—but disadvantaged students fell back. By the end of grammar school, low-income students had fallen nearly three grade levels behind, and summer was the biggest culprit. By ninth grade, summer learning loss could be blamed for roughly two-thirds of the achievement gap separating income groups.

During a June visit to the Argentine neighborhood of Kansas City, Kans., I

Idyllic view Summer outings like this one in Frenchtown, N.J., punctuate a season of boredom

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Photographs by Cass Bird for TIME

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Too much downtime Lack of stimulation causes something called summer learning loss. Jalil Stephens, 13, unwinds after day camp in Indianapolis

received a quick tutorial on the realities of summer. I met a group of teenagers who were being paid through a private foundation to study writing and music and history for about 10 hours per week, and I asked them what they would be doing if the program weren't available. They told me about the swimming pool—one public pool for all of Wyandotte County (pop. 155,000). They noted that their working-class neighborhood had a basketball hoop. And a soda machine. And that's about it.

"There is an idyllic view of summer, but we've known for decades that the reality is very different for a lot of underprivileged kids," says Ron Fairchild, CEO of a nonprofit organization in Baltimore called the National Summer Learning Association. "We expect that athletes and musicians would see their performance suffer without practice. Well, the same is true of students."

Fairchild and his organization are part of a growing movement to stop the summer slide by coordinating, expanding and improving summer enrichment programs—especially for low-income children. Supporters range across the po-

litical spectrum from Republican Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana to Democrats in the Department of Education under President Obama, who has created a National Summer Learning Day to call attention to the issue. Some of the nation's largest private donors—including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Wallace Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Atlantic Philanthropies—are putting their muscle into the cause.

The romance of summer is so ingrained that this flock of reformers might remind some readers of another character from Tom Sawyer's world, the wealthy Widow Douglas, who "introduced [Huckleberry Finn] into society—no, dragged him into it, hurled him into it—and his sufferings were almost more than he could bear. The widow's servants kept him clean and neat, combed and brushed... The bars and shackles of civilization shut him in and bound him hand and foot." As our modern-day reformers strive to civilize summer as an educational resource, the trick is to seize the opportunity without destroying what's best about the season: the possibility of fun and freedom and play.

Barriers of Cost and Culture

EXPERTS BELIEVE THAT A MAJORITY OF THE 30 million American kids poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches do not attend any kind of summer enrichment program. The obvious way to reach that large a group is through the public schools. And indeed, education reformers have been talking about lengthening the school year—to make America's students more competitive—for at least a generation, going back to the publication in 1983 of the blockbuster report on our troubled schools *A Nation at Risk*. Long summer holidays are the legacy of our vanished agrarian past, when kids were needed in the fields during the growing season. Leaders in a number of states have tried to add days or even weeks to the academic calendar, but they quickly run into barriers of cost and culture. In this bad economy, state and local governments are cutting, not growing, their school budgets. And entire industries depend on the rhythms of summer—think travel, camping, sports and theme parks. They use their influence to keep summers as long as possible. In fact, the statute that

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prevents Virginia schools from reconvening early in August is known as the King's Dominion Law, in honor of an amusement park north of Richmond.

For these reasons, many summer-learning initiatives fall to an informal alliance of education entrepreneurs. In the bare basement of an old church on the Near Eastside of Indianapolis, a group of kids whose world is normally measured in city blocks were experiencing Italy one late-June morning. Some of the children were quietly writing newspaper articles about Italian life. Others were attempting the Italian tradition of family conversation at the dinner table. Still others were making cannoli, stuffing pastry tubes with a creamy, sweet cheese mixture. There's a summer discovery for you: Who ever heard of sweet cheese?

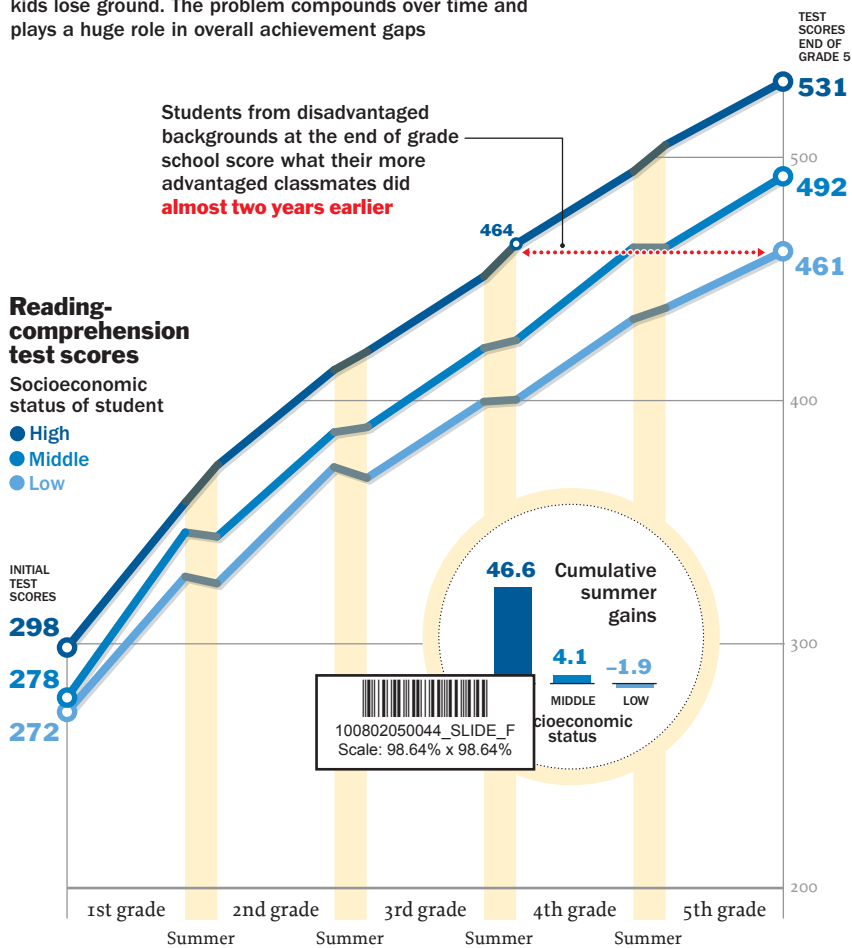
For some 80 elementary-school children in this low-income neighborhood, the summer of 2010 is as close to world travel as they've ever been. The all-day program at the East 10th United Methodist Church is built this year around a World Cup theme. Each week the focus turns to another country, and while the kids are exploring foods and landmarks and cultural traditions, they are, unwittingly, doing math as they measure ingredients and learning science as they raise vegetable gardens with plants native to each land. Fridays are for field trips; to study Australia's Great Barrier Reef, the kids rode buses to the aquarium in Chicago.

Mike Bachman is the executive director, a young man with clear eyes and obvious enthusiasm. "Everything that happens is enrichment. It all has an educational purpose, but we don't want the kids to think that they're in school," he explains. "We infuse the education into everything we do." That can mean sneaking leadership lessons into afternoon soccer games, teaching principles of fitness during outings to the local swimming pool or wrapping planning skills into preparations for a picnic at a state park. "It was the first time some of them had ever seen charcoal," Bachman says.

Indianapolis is ahead of most cities in making better use of summer, according to Fairchild of the National Summer Learning Association. And that's mainly because a group of local philanthropies, led by the Lilly Endowment, decided in the 1990s to coordinate their efforts to provide safe places for children to go when they were out of school. In recent years, says Lilly's Willis Bright, the focus

Charting the Summer Slide

Test scores show that all students' learning skills improve at similar rates during the school year, but higher-income kids keep up the pace during the summer while lower-income kids lose ground. The problem compounds over time and plays a huge role in overall achievement gaps



Are more school days the answer?

Although U.S. students have longer summer breaks, they spend more total hours in the classroom. Yet U.S. test scores still fall below those in many other industrialized countries

COUNTRY	DAYS IN SCHOOL YEAR (MEDIAN)	TOTAL INSTRUCTIONAL HOURS	MATH SCORES: 15-YEAR-OLDS
South Korea	204 days	545	547
Denmark	200	648	513
Japan	200	600	523
Mexico	200	1,047	406
Brazil	200	800	370
Australia	197	815	520
New Zealand	194	968	522
Germany	193	758	504
Norway	190	654	490
U.S.	180	1,080	474
Luxembourg	176	642	490
Spain	176	713	480
Russia	169	845	476
Italy	167	601	462

Sources: American Sociological Review; Karl L. Alexander, Johns Hopkins University; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; National Center for Educational Statistics. Reported by Ruchika Tulshyan



A New Kind of Summer School. Finding fun ways to infuse learning

Baltimore *The Parks & People Foundation's six-week SuperKids camp boosts reading skills during sailboat rides and trips to the Maryland Zoo*

Indianapolis *The eight-week leadership camp at St. Florian Center includes daily calisthenics—and a lesson from firefighters on how to rappel from a building*

has increasingly been on “the learning element”—a critical need, given that the Indianapolis public schools graduate fewer than half of their students. “But that doesn’t mean you make it just another classroom,” Bright adds. “You can teach physics with a basketball.”

Together, 11 charitable organizations—ranging from United Way to small family foundations—pool about \$3 million per year to support nearly 200 summer programs around Indianapolis. Not all of the programs are educational, but that’s where the emphasis lies. Grants support everything from those buses to the Chicago aquarium to salaries of certified teachers to day-camp visits by professional artists and musicians to an urban garden created by retired biochemist Aster Bekele, where city kids explore plant science alongside Bekele’s former colleagues from the Eli Lilly pharmaceutical labs.

Rather than engineer a vast new initiative, the strategy is to build on the city’s existing patchwork of day camps, community centers, sports camps and summer-jobs programs. The activists hope to improve quality while keeping costs low, coordinate training for staff members and encourage a philosophy of educational enrichment. Over the years, Bright has seen a volunteer tutoring effort by 100 Black Men of Indianapolis grow into an all-day summer academy for some 200 students from kindergarten to eighth grade. Supported by the pool of grant money, academy students receive innovative math



training through Project SEED, study music through the Young Audiences’ Summer Arts for Youth and practice reading through an interactive software program called Ticket to Read. But it’s not all desk work. The students know it’s summer when they burst outside for tennis lessons and when they study the stars to understand how slaves navigated the Underground Railroad. Total tuition: \$125 for seven weeks.

Meanwhile, a group of Indianapolis firefighters have gone from volunteering on ball fields to enrolling more than 100 students in an eight-week summer leadership camp named for St. Florian, the patron saint of firefighters. Each morning, the camp “cadets” study math, science, creative writing and public speaking. Afternoons are reserved for sports and field trips. Senior cadets—high schoolers—focus on learning the skills they need for a job hunt: writing résumés, impressing an interviewer, dressing for success. “We keep up our learning so we don’t fall behind,” says Isaiaah Quarles, a buoyant 12-year-old with a cascade of dreadlocks. As Quarles escorted me through the camp, whip smart and charming, I could picture him persuading his friends to paint Aunt Polly’s fence. I asked him how he would

spend his summer if St. Florian’s didn’t exist. Dismayed, he answered, “I would just be sitting at home.”

Stealth Learning

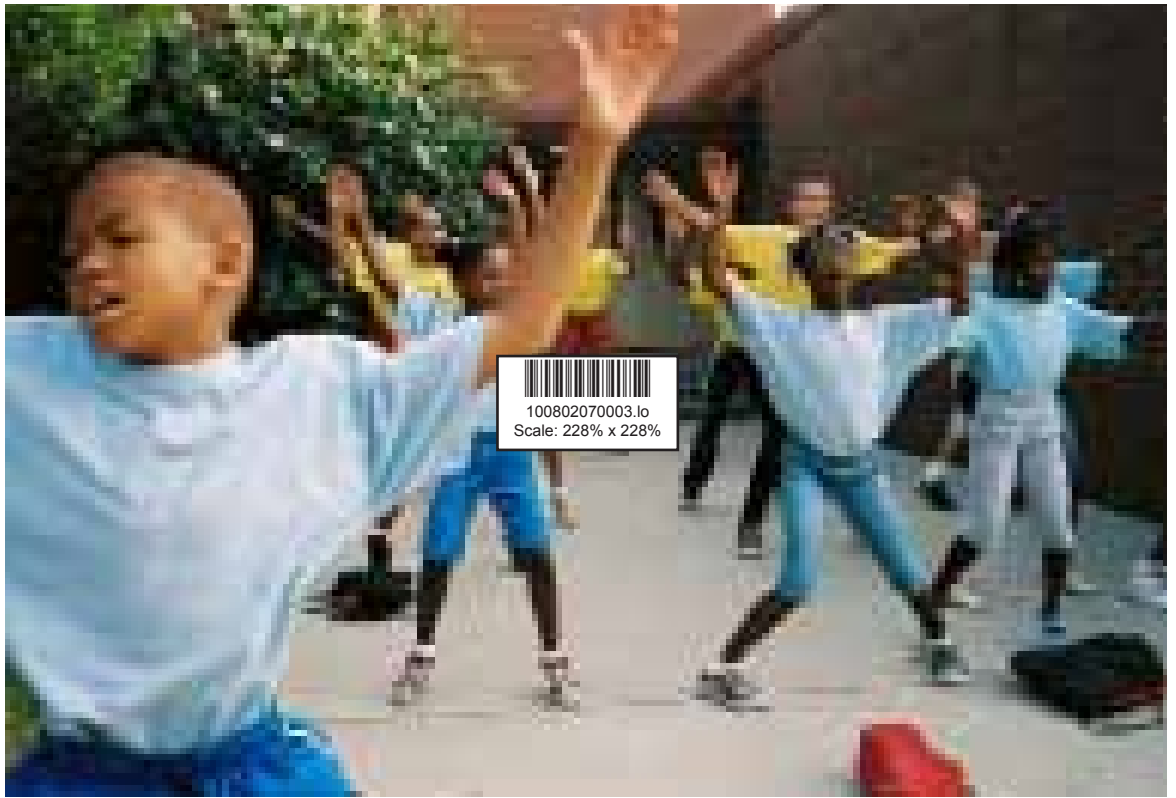
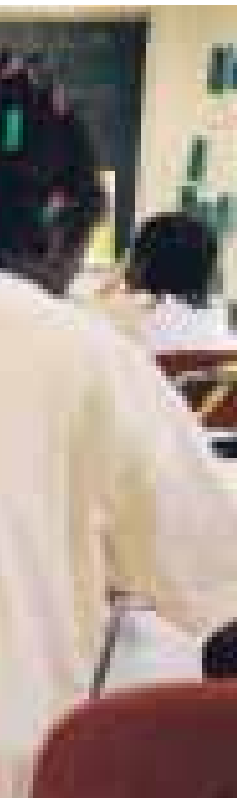
I SAW A LOT OF EAGER, ENGAGED KIDS in Indianapolis and met a number of vibrant teachers and volunteers. But every camp and academy I visited had dozens of children stranded on a waiting list. And for each of those students, there were no doubt hundreds of kids whose parents had not even bothered to find a summer program and fill out an application.

A recent study sponsored by the Wallace Foundation estimated that only 25% of students currently participate in organized summer learning programs, although a majority of parents said they would enroll their children if more programs were available. Fortunately, some public schools have begun to tackle the problem of summer learning loss. In Cincinnati, Ohio, a program called Fifth Quarter offers an additional month of classes, specially tailored for summer, at 16 schools serving low-income students. Houston schools offer four weeks of math and science education for at-risk students and report that participants average a boost of more than 10% in their test scores.

‘We’re not the Grinch That Stole Summer Vacation.’

—RON FAIRCHILD, CEO, NATIONAL SUMMER LEARNING ASSOCIATION

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In the Appalachian town of Corbin, Ky.—home of Harland Sanders and his famous fried chicken—there was no one but the school district to fend off summer slide. Karen West, director of Corbin’s Redhound Enrichment program, says, “Eighty-eight percent of our children live in latchkey families, and we have no YMCA, no Boys & Girls Clubs. Really, there was almost nothing for them to do.” Hired in 2006 by the Corbin independent school district, West began building what is now a 10-week operation, running 10 hours per day, from the day after school lets out until the day before classes resume. Lessons in reading, math, science and social studies fill much of the day, but nothing about Redhound Enrichment feels like dreaded summer school.

Each summer, West builds on a theme. This year it’s “Lights, camera, action!” Every week revolves around a subtheme, and for the week when *Toy Story 3* was to open, West picked “To infinity—and beyond!” On Monday, students took a field trip to watch the movie. Throughout the week, teachers integrated space exploration into the rooms. On Friday, the kids put on a fair, and a mobile planetarium paid

The entire community of Corbin pitches in. Restaurants host meals at which stu-

dents can practice etiquette. The swimming pool invites the kids each Wednesday. Baptist Regional Medical Center organizes the Longest Day of Play to promote health and fitness. The department of fish and wildlife leads a session on conservation—then takes all the students fishing. As the kids weigh and measure their catch, they think they’re just trying to win first prize, but West notes that they are also doing a day’s worth of math. Summer educators like to call this sort of thing “stealth learning.”

“We have over 30 partners,” West says, and their in-kind contributions nearly match her annual budget of \$60,000. “When everyone gives a little, we can do miracles.” The proof: students in the Corbin program not only don’t fall behind through the summer; they move ahead. More than half of the participants improve by a full letter grade or more in both reading and math.

For Fairchild, successes like the ones in Cincinnati, Houston and Corbin show the possibilities in a new approach to

summer school. “That phrase has such a bad ring to it,” he notes. “We need to push school districts to frame summer school as a good thing, something extra—not a punishment. There is a cultural barrier that we have to overcome. We’re not the Grinch That Stole Summer Vacation.” With billions of dollars for improved education bulging from last year’s economic-stimulus package, Fairchild hopes to persuade school districts across the country to steer some of the money into the neglected months of June, July and August.

But a report by Education Sector, a non-partisan research group in Washington, highlights a problem with relying on public schools for summer enrichment. “In the best schools, there would be an ample increase in academic learning time,” author Elena Silva wrote. “But in poorly managed schools, with inexperienced teachers and a host of other challenges,” a longer school year just means more lost days. If school districts fail during the traditional year, what are the chances that competence and creativity will suddenly blossom when the weather turns hot? In the best summer-only programs, bureaucracy is lean and change is easy. There’s an informality to the summer culture—maybe it’s those

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Summer Doldrums

See how different programs keep kids’ minds sharp at time.com/summer

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bare feet and damp swimsuits and homemade lanyards—that fosters easy innovation and rapid improvement. As Terry Ogle, a former middle-school principal who runs the Indianapolis Algebra Project, told me, things happen more quickly outside school systems: “A few years ago, we were teaching kids at two summer sites. Now we’re in 29.”

It was during a summer vacation from Harvard Law School that Earl Phalen had his first teaching experience, as a volunteer at an impoverished school in Jamaica. He says he knew immediately that “this was what I wanted to do with my life.” But like many other big thinkers drawn to education in recent years, Phalen saw the existing public schools as a roadblock, not a career path.

So Phalen has become one of the country’s leading education reformers by seizing opportunities to reach kids outside the traditional school day. One of his nonprofit ventures, Reach Out and Read, engages pediatricians to evangelize for literacy. His latest project, sponsored by an innovative Indiana undertaking called the Mind Trust, uses summer to make an end run around the ingrained habits and intractable bureaucracies of inadequate schools.

Called Summer Advantage, the program offers five weeks of intensive, all-day education to children from kindergarten to eighth grade. Phalen hires only certified teachers and chooses them on the basis of talent, not seniority. The curriculum ranges from math, reading and writing to cooking, dance and music—but the consistent element is strong teachers working in small groups with excited students. I visited a Summer Advantage school in Indianapolis, and perhaps the best way to describe it is to say, first, that all the students are in economic and academic need and, second, that I wasn’t there five minutes before a boy looked me in the eye and announced, “I’m going to be an aeronautical engineer.”

Summer Advantage is operating at a dozen sites across Indiana this year, serving some 3,100 “scholars,” as Phalen insists his students be called. His goal is to enroll 100,000 scholars five years from now and to be “part of the cadre that changes the way



this country does education.” He has support from Washington, where a friend from Harvard Law now sits in the Oval Office. The U.S. Department of Education has put money into Summer Advantage, Phalen says, “because we’re part of their agenda to prove that hiring teachers based on quality instead of seniority will produce good results.” So far, the data look promising. Summer Advantage launched last year, and its scholars improved their performance on state math and reading tests by an average of 14 percentage points, Phalen says. On the basis of that, he projects that scholars who spend three seasons with Summer Advantage will raise their scores from an average baseline in the low 30th percentiles into the 70th percentiles in math and reading.

“If you want to drive the dropout rate even higher, just extend the school year by another 30 days,” says Phalen. Instead, he argues, we should embrace the fact that summer is the opposite of school to make it the season of true educational reform. But here’s the hard part: if summer enrichment is the innovative,

cost-effective answer to one of the nation’s thorniest problems—the failure to educate many of our neediest kids—how do we address so large a problem without creating another stultifying version of the failed status quo? How do we increase participation and raise standards without crushing creativity and imposing bureaucracy? Can we really entrust something so important to a haphazard network of camp counselors, volunteers and entrepreneurs?

Well, maybe. In places all over the country—from inner cities to Appalachia, inside rec centers and church basements, on bumpy ball fields and pocked playgrounds—kids are learning this summer, and they’re having a blast. While it’s true that NASA runs one of the largest summer enrichment programs in the country, this isn’t rocket science. If ever there was a movement suited to local experiments, informal innovations and seat-of-the-pants efforts, surely it’s the campaign to squeeze more from summer. Because revolutions come from the grass roots, and everyone knows when grass is thickest.

In summer. ■

Primary Sources

*For a jaw-dropping video showing how much of the achievement gap can be attributed to lack of stimulation during the summer, watch summerlearning’s **Two Steps Forward** on YouTube.*

*Or dive deep into the data in **Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap**, a 2007 study led by Johns Hopkins sociology professor Karl Alexander.*

Parents and caregivers can take simple steps to help prevent summer learning loss:

*The **American Library Association** posts excellent reading lists, including one for reluctant readers, at ala.org.*

*The nonprofit **Reading Is Fundamental** delivers free books to low-income families and has games and activities to motivate young readers at rif.org/kids.*

*And to keep math skills from getting rusty over the summer, check out the aptly named **coolmath-games.com**.*

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