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Research Brief
Summary of new research on topics of interest to New York State educators

Spring 2004

Summer School

Summer school is becoming more and more commonplace in school districts across the nation. Currently, approximately 10 percent of all students in elementary through high school enroll in summer school programs. The demand, moreover, is expected to increase, driven by such factors as the following:

- the national emphasis on higher academic standards and high-stakes testing,
- increased efforts in a number of urban school systems to end social promotion, and,
- continued concerns about the achievement gap and resulting efforts to raise academic performance among children from less-advantaged backgrounds.

Recent research on the "summer slide" has also contributed to the push for summer programs. Studies have shown that, on average, students lose one month of instruction over their summer vacation. This loss, however, is not equal for all learners; children from lower-income families experience a greater achievement decline, particularly in reading, than their more advantaged peers. For these and other struggling students, the summer represents an opportune time to intervene, not only to halt the slide in their learning, but also to provide the extra support they need to meet new learning expectations. At the same time, summer school programs are costly, both administratively and fiscally. Are these programs worth the cost and effort? Two widely-cited studies provide some credible answers: 1) a meta-analysis of summer school research conducted by Harris Cooper and his colleagues; and 2) highlights from the recent study of Chicago's Summer Bridge program—one of the country's largest and most sustained summer programs to end social promotion—conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Meta-Analysis Findings

1. **Summer programs focused on lessening or removing learning deficiencies have a positive impact on the knowledge and skills of participants.**
   - Overall, students completing summer programs can be expected to score about one-fifth of a standard deviation higher than control group students on basic skills outcome measures.
   - If summer school is targeted specifically to disadvantaged students, it can help close the achievement gap.
2. **Students at all grade levels can benefit from summer programs, although the effects are more pronounced for students in early primary grades and high school than students in middle school.**
3. **Summer programs have a larger effect on mathematics achievement than on reading.**
4. **Positive effects of summer school may diminish over time, and some students may need to participate in programs over multiple summers.**

5. **Summer programs produce larger effects when the following elements are in place:**
   - small-group or individual instruction,
   - parent involvement, and
   - careful monitoring of programs and classrooms to ensure instructional quality and fidelity.

6. **Summer programs that require attendance are no less effective—and may be more effective—than voluntary programs.**

Findings from Chicago's Summer Bridge Program

1. **In the short term, the Summer Bridge program was effective in producing test-score gains and offering students a second chance to meet promotional cut-offs.**
   - In all three grade levels studied—3rd, 6th, and 8th—the rate at which the Summer Bridge students increased their test scores was above their school-year rate.

2. **Students from all demographic and achievement groups experienced gains.**
   - 3rd graders at the highest risk of failure gained the most.

3. **Certain factors influenced the magnitude of the gains; gains were larger…**
   - when teachers *knew their students* prior to Summer Bridge and could more readily adapt the curriculum to meet individual needs.
   - in *higher-achieving schools*, where teachers reported paying more attention to individual student need.
   - in classrooms where teachers more often *engaged students in learning*, provided substantive feedback, and worked to address individual learning needs.

4. **The quality of interactions between teachers and students distinguished the most effective Summer Bridge classrooms from average classrooms.**

5. **In the long-term, Summer Bridge did not dramatically alter learning rates, however it appeared to provide the extra boost students needed to keep them from falling further behind.**

In summary, the meta-analysis and Summer Bridge findings hold out promise for summer school programs. Still not all summer programs are alike and not all are equally effective. The best programs incorporate proven research-based strategies and are carefully monitored/evaluated to measure their impact.

The two publications featured in this *Research Brief* are available on the web as follows:
- Meta-analysis summary: **http://www.serve.org/publications/pbss.pdf**
- Summer Bridge: **http://www.consortium-chicago.org/publications/p59.html**

Readers may also be interested in, *Summer Programs: A Look at the Research, Implications for Practice, and Program Sampler,* by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory: http://www.nwrel.org/request/2002sept/