

The Washington Post

Stemming the Summer Slide

Area Schools Find That a July Start Gives Poorer Kids an Edge

By Daniel de Vise
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Summer can be the enemy of the schoolteacher: Students forget their math. They stop reading. And in the case of those with limited English skills, they lose their newly acquired words.



Several thousand students participate in Montgomery County's four-week program, including the soon-to-be fifth graders in volunteer assistant teacher Jeff Oosterhout's class.

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So at 22 elementary schools in the poorest enclaves of Montgomery County, summer ended early.

One recent morning, Jennifer Barrett, a kindergarten teacher at Sargent Shriver Elementary School in Silver Spring, handed out sandwich bags containing random numbers of classroom knickknacks: four glue sticks, five pencil sharpeners, six dominoes.

"All right, we are going to be doing some counting. Are you ready?" she asked the students. "Now remember, put them in a line so you're ready to count them."

A boy counted his glue sticks -- "I've got one, two, three, four!" -- and smiled.

Classes don't officially start until Aug. 27, but in each of the past six years, elementary schools serving Montgomery's high-poverty neighborhoods have opened in July to give students an early start: free breakfast and lunch and three hours of academics every weekday for four weeks, supplemented by afternoon arts, physical education and all the activities other children are getting at summer camps and on family vacations.

"We re-create the school system for four weeks," said Chrisandra Richardson, director of academic support initiatives for Montgomery schools.

The effort, which research shows has helped improve test scores, reflects changing attitudes about the role of summer school. Most of the nation's schools still operate, researchers say, under a tradition-bound view of summer as catch-up time for students at risk of repeating a grade. But a growing number of school systems are embracing a new approach to summer study -- as an opportunity to close the achievement gap before it opens.

A recent study by Johns Hopkins University adds to mounting evidence of the "summer slide": Poor students start out behind their more affluent peers and fall further behind each year -- and most of the loss occurs when school is out. By the end of elementary school, Hopkins researchers found, poor children trail middle-income classmates by three grade levels.

The Montgomery program, called Extended Learning Opportunities -- Summer Adventures in Learning, is considered a national model for stemming the summer brain drain. Students who faithfully attended the first summer session in 2002 tested better in reading and math after summer school than before, according to research.

Among 12 schools that participated in the program continuously from 2002 to 2005, second-grade reading scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills rose an average of 12 points, from the 44th to the 56th percentile. The school system as a whole showed a nine-point gain, from the 64th to the 73rd percentile.

Other Washington area school systems have launched similar programs.

In Charles County, more than 2,100 students just finished four-week voluntary summer academies, programs offered across the grades and centered on reading and math. Launched in 1998, the academies offer a camp-like setting in elementary grades, with an emphasis on technology in middle school and on the High School Assessment exit exams in the upper grades.

Three schools with high poverty levels in St. Mary's County offer a four-week Eleven Month School Program, now in its fourth year. The program offers full-day instruction to 360 students in reading, math and enrichment activities.

Enrollment in the Montgomery summer session is 4,666, or a little more than half of the 9,109 students attending the eligible schools. The \$2.5 million program is offered at all schools covered by the Title I federal poverty program, which offers extra money to Montgomery elementary schools where at least 56 percent of students qualify for meal subsidies. Classes started July 9 and end Friday.

The summer program has become so routine that some parents have come to consider it the official start of the school year, an impression school officials do not discourage. Kindergartners and their parents don their finest clothes for the start of classes.

"We had criers the first few days," said Richardson, who administers the program.

Teachers who go back far enough to remember the years before the summer program say the youngest students, in particular, are now much better prepared for the start of regular classes.

Before the advent of summer study, "they didn't know things like where the bathroom was, how to line up for the cafeteria, sitting in a circle," said Diane Mohr, a former kindergarten teacher who works with Richardson. "You'd lose a good two to three weeks of instruction."

Years of research by Hopkins professors suggests that poor children fall more than two years behind their middle-class peers in verbal ability and 1 1/2 years behind in math between kindergarten and fifth grade; the math loss is smaller, they say, mostly because affluent parents aren't particularly adept at teaching their children math during the summer.

Researchers followed Baltimore students from first grade to adulthood, tracking their progress on tests taken at the start and end of each academic year.

"Children whose parents are college-educated, they continue to build their reading skills during the summer months," said Karl Alexander, a Hopkins sociology professor involved in the research. "You go to a museum or you go to a library or you go to the science center, and through osmosis you make some headway there."

Low-income children actually keep pace with more affluent students during the academic year but slip behind during the summer, for lack of books to read, museums to visit and generally "unequal summer learning opportunities," said Brenda McLaughlin, director for research and policy at the Center for Summer Learning at Hopkins, which is devoted to erasing the achievement gap.

At Sargent Shriver Elementary, the reading and math losses are compounded by language losses. More than half of the students are learning English as a second language. Those pupils spend much of the summer in neighborhoods where only Spanish is spoken, and they forget some of the English they've learned in school.

But progress was evident after just eight days in Barrett's summer classroom. From the start of classes, she had asked her students daily to write their names on large sheets of paper, and she posted each one on the wall. The sheet from the first day was an illegible tangle of letters. By day eight, the names were written in a straight line and, for the most part, correctly spelled.

"Let's help Richard count how many letters in Jonathan's name," Barrett told the class. The students counted aloud, reached eight and kept right on going. At 10, the teacher politely stopped them.

WashingtonPost. Slide Show (including the picture above):

Giving a New Meaning to Summer School

While summer school has traditionally been considered a way for struggling students to catch up, a growing number of school systems are looking at summer programs as a way to close the achievement gap before it opens.



In each of the past six years, classes began in July at 22 schools in the poorest enclaves in Montgomery County. Teacher Holly VanPuymbroeck works with Steven Hernandez, who will be a first grader in the fall, at Sargent Shriver Elementary School.

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Jennifer Barrett's kindergarten class gets a head start on the school year. While summer school has traditionally been considered a way for struggling students to catch up, a growing number of school systems are looking at summer programs as a way to close the achievement gap before it opens.

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Heran Kebede, who will be a fifth grader in the fall, participates in the Montgomery County program, which is considered a national model in the fight to stem the typical summer brain drain.

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Sargent Shriver Elementary School incoming fifth graders Luis Garcia and Rianne Velasco read a play. Johns Hopkins Research suggests children in low-income families keep pace with their more affluent peers during the school year in terms of math and verbal ability, but fall behind during the summer.

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At Sargent Shriver, more than half of students are learning English as a second language and many live in areas where they only hear Spanish spoken. The summer program helps to keep their English skills afloat until the new school year begins.

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Closing learning gaps Struggling students give up break to get a head start on school year

By Ruma Kumar
Sun reporter
August 2, 2007

This summer, 16-year-old Taurean Johnson has been learning to like school, trust the teachers he once "sassed" and think about college instead of trucking school.

School won't start until Aug. 27, but he and 80 other rising freshmen at Annapolis High School have sacrificed sleeping late in favor of three weeks of Internet research, poetry writing and lessons in fractions and probabilities. The students were also linked with school teachers and staff members who will serve as mentors - there to help with everything from finding lockers to grappling with peer pressure.

The program at Annapolis High, which ends today, is among dozens like it in school systems around the region to stem an educational phenomenon dubbed "summer slide."

Research shows that children, particularly those from low-income families, slip in reading and math over the summer if they don't receive appropriate enrichment to reinforce school lessons. The findings have grabbed attention in Washington, where Maryland Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski and Democratic presidential candidate and Illinois Sen. Barack Obama are co-sponsoring a bill that would, among other things, grant \$100 million to five states selected by the U.S. secretary of education to fund summer programs for children from disadvantaged families.

"Everyone would expect an athlete or a musician's performance to suffer if they didn't practice. The research suggests the same is true for students and their academic work," said Ron Fairchild, executive director for the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University. "We know, through research, that students who don't practice lose ground every summer. Those losses are cumulative and grow the achievement gap that schools are working so hard to erase."

The latest study from Johns Hopkins, which tracked 325 Baltimore students from first grade to age 22, found that by the end of the ninth grade, students from disadvantaged homes performed more than three grade levels below their peers in higher socio-economic families on reading comprehension tests. Two-thirds of that gap, Hopkins sociologist Karl L. Alexander found, was attributable to the lack of adequate summer enrichment in the early years. By the time the same students graduated, the disadvantaged students were performing six grade levels below their peers.

"That time out of school really is a liability for low-income or disadvantaged students," said Alexander, lead researcher on the study that was published in the April issue of the *American Sociological Review*. "Every way we've looked at it, we see very consequential long-term effects of these summer experiences."

Emboldened by such research, a growing number of school systems invite certain students - those struggling to pass state math and reading tests or with poor attendance and behavior - to get a several-weeks head start on the school year in hopes they will need less review and remedial work.

In Howard County this summer, 2,100 kindergartners through eighth graders spent 19 days last month getting 160 minutes of daily intense reading and math instruction. In Baltimore, 2,000 students at 12 schools participated in an intensive six-week program to boost reading, writing and math skills using creative methods, including chess. In Baltimore County, 13 elementary and two middle schools invited 1,500 students to improve literacy and math in a six-week program designed to slow the summer backslide.

Though most programs are geared to the younger children in elementary school, there is a new crop of initiatives such as the one at Annapolis High designed for older students. Gradually, educators are recognizing the programs can ease the academic slump that sometimes comes with the move between elementary to middle school, or the shift from middle to high school.

That's the case in Anne Arundel schools, where 216 students spent three weeks in six middle and four high schools. The programs helped reinforce key reading and math concepts and gave students time to set goals for their new schools, meet teachers and develop study skills that could help them survive the next grade.

At Annapolis High - where another year of low marks on the state tests might lead to a state takeover - staff members have worked through the summer on a strategy to sharply raise test scores and boost attendance and graduation rates, especially among black male students, half of whom do not graduate in four years. The school has done this without nearly half of its longest-serving employees, who resigned rather than reapply for their jobs after Superintendent Kevin M. Maxwell required an overhaul in January.

The school's salvation rests on its success with students such as Johnson.

Johnson is two years behind, largely because he failed sixth grade. His attendance in middle school was spotty, and so was his behavior. And he is not alone. Whether it is behavior or academics, 200 students - nearly half of the incoming freshman class - are at risk of failing or dropping out, said Eugene Whiting, assistant principal at Annapolis.

Of the 200 students invited to the program, 107 accepted. Since the program started in mid-July, 80 students have come to class regularly.

Whiting said the school had to "fight a culture" to get the students to come to school during the summer.

"Parents told us, 'No, he needs to rest, or she needs time off school,'" Whiting said. "It was hard getting them to realize summer can be used for learning, too. It's a critical time for us to help these students."

Johnson was one of the students ready to come to school. He started turning his life around in eighth grade, serving on the student government and getting extra help in class. He said he watched his temper and mouth around teachers and looked for new friends.

"I used to cut up and sass back, you know. Tell teachers, 'You don't know what you're talking about,'" Johnson said. "I know that won't get me anywhere. I want to hang around good people, not the ones who cut up and act like they don't have no home training."

On a recent goals-setting exercise at the summer program, Johnson scribbled his hope: "Stay out of trouble."

Then, under a category about what to change, he wrote: "Ego/attitude, impression that people have of me."

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www.baltimoresun.com/news/local/annearundel/balmd.ar.summer02aug02,0,2195177.story



Summer of learning

Enrichment program gives low-performing schools and their children a boost, with fun

Jean Marbella

July 24, 2007

Harry who?

SPOILER ALERT!!! This column has nothing about He Who Must Be Hyped. No tally of how many millions of copies of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows have sold in the time it took to read this sentence. And nothing about unbearably cute children who haven't slept since Friday, when they got in line at the Barnes and Borders a Million to get their copy and have been reading nonstop ever since -- pausing only to e-whine about the newspaper meanies who spoiled EVERYTHING by printing early reviews of the book.

If you're still with me, you'll be glad to know that some kids instead have been consumed by the tale of 10-year-old Kenny and his family, the Weird Watsons, who set off from their Michigan home on a hilarious road trip that turns deadly serious when they reach their destination -- it's Birmingham, Ala., and it's 1963. Then there's Peppe, an Italian boy in New York's Little Italy, who is ashamed of his job lighting street lamps until one night when he illuminates the whereabouts of his lost sister.

The Watsons Go to Birmingham -- 1963 and Peppe the Lamplighter might not be getting the breathless attention of Harry's final adventures, but as part of the reading list of a unique summer learning program, they may be casting the same magic on children: the love of reading.

"I just want to be smarter and smarter," says La'Monta Harris, 10, a student at William Paca Elementary School in East Baltimore. "I think I read Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets. I go to the library, and I like to read about science. And I've read about sports and adventurers and heroes, like firefighters and stuff."

Paca is one of 12 low-performing schools in the city that are host to an intensive six-week program designed to boost reading, writing and math skills over the summer, a time when kids in disadvantaged neighborhoods tend to lose ground, setting them up to lag farther and farther behind more affluent students as time goes on.

This summer, the Baltimore public schools contracted with a well-regarded nonprofit called BELL, Building Educated Leaders for Life, to offer a full-day, five-days-a-week program to prevent the summer backslide. As part of the program, kids are encouraged to read -- especially BELL's recommended books, which feature diverse characters and authors -- for a half-hour or full hour every evening.

The first thing you notice in the BELL classrooms at Paca is that this is no ordinary summer school, the kind attended by sullen students under threat of not advancing to the next grade with the rest of their class in the fall.

All the BELL kids -- about 2,000 at the 12 schools -- are there voluntarily. They take reading, writing and math classes in the morning, then participate in "enrichment activities" in the afternoon, which seem like a lot of fun but are also reinforcing what they learned in the morning.

"It breaks the misconception that school has to be boring," said Sharayna A. Christmas, manager of the BELL program at Paca.

In Adelia Carter's room -- and in the hallway as well -- first- and second-graders were learning about physics. Yes, first- and second-graders, not high school students. Actually, they think they're building roller coasters and racing toy cars around a circuitous track, but if they were to read the board, they would realize they're engaged in "the study of force, motion, matter and energy." In other words, physics.

"Miss Carter! Miss Carter! Look!" Jasmine Gamble shrieked, pulling her teacher into the hallway. There, the 7-year-old and a classmate had finally gotten a marble to loop-the-loop a makeshift "roller coaster." (The trick: a bigger push at the start, and a smaller loop.) They still hadn't gotten the marble to roll through the rest of the course, but there's still almost two weeks left to the program. (Hint: Don't use such tall chairs for the final hump.)

"It's a real hands-on approach," said Carter, who, like some of the other instructors at the program, teaches in the district during the academic year.

The students are called "scholars" in the BELL parlance. "We want them to know we believe in them," said Carole Y. Prest, BELL's executive director for the Mid-Atlantic region.

And they're expected to live up to the title -- there's no dumbing down here, even among the youngest kids who will enter kindergarten this fall. Forget "A" is for apple and "C" is for cat; in the BELL classroom, the kids were learning that "D" is for dentist and "P" is for pediatrician.

For Emma Snyder, a former teacher now working on a graduate degree in creative writing, the summer program was a way of getting back to the classroom, which she had missed, but one that offered more flexibility and improvisation.

She teaches the "Kids' Economics" enrichment class, where rising fourth-grade students are starting a classroom bank. The project stemmed from a previous exercise in which they went shopping in a classroom store and discovered that they were more likely to buy something on impulse if they carried money in their pocket than if they had to make a separate trip to get the cash first.

"Suddenly, it was like, 'Hmmm ... maybe I don't need a Jolly Rancher candy,'" Snyder said. "They became really interested in banking and how the bank gives interest and how it makes loans."

After econ, the students went to Mike Muempfer's class for chess, where they've been working toward a tournament.

Davonte Pollard, 9, studied his opponent's move, one eyebrow rising slowly as he figured out the strategy being waged against him. "You're trying to take my bishop," he said, blocking the move.

"It's a lot about thinking," he says, tapping a piece against his head. "It's a quiet game."

BELL -- yet another of those education initiatives started by idealistic Ivy Leaguers (Yale and Harvard Law, in the case of BELL co-founder Earl Martin Phalen) -- found significant gains in its students' reading and math skills at its summer program at Dickey Hill Elementary/Middle School last year. This year, the program was expanded to 12 other schools at a costs of about \$2 million, Prest said, with \$1.5 million coming from the school district's budget and the rest from charitable donations.

While this year's BELL scholars are being tested before and after the program, they're also learning another lesson: that much of life is just showing up. Those with good attendance will get to go, with their parents, to an Orioles game next weekend.

EDUCATION WEEK

Much of Learning Gap Blamed on Summer

Published in Print: July 18, 2007

Rich-poor reading divide in Baltimore linked to what happens over break.

By Scott J. Cech

It's been a truism for decades that students' learning slips during the summer, and that low-income children fall farther behind than their classmates, but no one had connected the longitudinal data dots to show just what the cumulative consequences of the summer slide might be. Until now.

A recent study by sociology professor Karl L. Alexander and colleagues at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore concludes that two-thirds of the reading achievement gap between 9th graders of low and high socioeconomic standing in Baltimore public schools can be traced to what they learned—or failed to learn—over their childhood summers.

The study, which tracked data from about 325 Baltimore students from 1st grade to age 22, points out that various characteristics that depend heavily on reading ability—such as students' curriculum track in high school, their risk of dropping out, and their probability of pursuing higher education and landing higher-paying jobs—all diverge widely according to socioeconomic levels.

“I call this the Harry Potter divide,” said Alan B. Krueger, a professor of economics and public policy at Princeton University, referring to a 2000 poll by the Princeton, N.J.-based Gallup Organization that asked adults if any of their children were reading the wildly popular series of eponymous books. The poll results showed a wide gap in the responses, based on income.

“Children from low [socioeconomic-status] backgrounds don't get that reading enrichment,” said Mr. Krueger, who was chief economist of the U.S. Department of Labor in the Clinton administration.

Pace Parallel During Year

The study, which appeared in the April issue of the *American Sociological Review*, makes use of data from reading tests that were administered to the same students twice yearly, enabling researchers to isolate reading comprehension gains made during the school year with those made—or lost—during the summer.

Although the limited national data available on the subject had suggested that the gap between rich and poor would be wide, Mr. Alexander said the numbers on summer from his Baltimore study took him aback.

“What surprised me was the size of the summer learning difference,” he said.

By the end of 5th grade, the differential in cumulative scores reflecting what students of high and low socioeconomic classes learned outside of school in the summer was stark.

The summer learning among students in relatively well-educated, economically secure homes had effectively added a total of about 47 points to their test scores by that point in their school careers. Students in relatively low-income, poorly educated families had been reduced by about 2 points over that period.

By contrast, in data covering five winters, when test scores reflect mostly classroom learning, the socioeconomically disadvantaged students kept pace with their more-advantaged classmates.

“Schools are in fact compensating for a shortfall of quality learning experiences outside of school,” Mr. Alexander said. “I don’t fault parents—parents by and large are the best advocates for their children—but the reality is that many parents lack the effective tools for helping.”

Daria L. Hall, the assistant director for K-12 policy development for the Washington-based Education Trust, a nonprofit group that promotes high academic standards for disadvantaged children, worries that the findings will take policymakers’ focus off the need to close a different kind of gap.

“We can’t allow the problems of the out-of school inequities to overshadow the problems of the in-school inequities,” she said. “However way you look at it, low-income kids and kids of color get less than their fair share of quality teaching, curriculum, and resources.”

Mr. Alexander's research has also attracted interest outside of academia. Democratic presidential candidate and U.S. Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois is co-sponsoring the Summer Term Education Programs for Upward Performance Act of 2007, a bill that cites Mr. Alexander's research.

The legislation would authorize \$100 million to be divided among five states selected by the U.S. secretary of education for summer programs that combine fun and academics for children who are eligible for the federal free-lunch program. States would have to match the federal contribution of \$1,600 per child per summer.

"That would be wonderful if the states would actually sponsor high-quality programs," said Meredith Phillips, a professor of public policy and sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

About the study itself, Ms. Phillips said the methodology is sound and the data depth is enviable, even if the sample size is small and all drawn from one place. "This is the only data set available to study this question—we can't do any better than this," she said. "The one limitation is that we don't know how generalizable the results are from kids in Baltimore to kids nationally."

Mr. Alexander acknowledged such limitations but said he was sure "that you'd see much the same results in high-poverty school systems across the country."

Asked what would ameliorate the problem his study highlights, Mr. Alexander suggested two words: more school.

"Most advanced industrial countries have more schooling than we do—230 to 240 days a year, some of them," he noted. "The key, though, is that whatever we do, it needs to be done well."

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http://wcbstv.com/parenttoparent/local_story_190175844.html

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Family First: Prevent Brain Drain This Summer

(CBS) *NEW YORK* If you're worried your kids are going through brain drain this summer there's plenty you can do to get them back on track. Richard Berlin is Executive Director of "Harlem RBI" which is a year-round program that keeps hundreds of kids in East Harlem on top of their game academically through a mix of sports and classroom instruction.

CBS 2's Cindy Hsu sat down for a Q&A with Berlin.

How much can kids lose academically over the summer?

On average, children from low-income families lose nearly three months of grade-level equivalency, compared to one month lost by middle-income children when reading and math performance are combined. East Harlem youth, in particular, face a myriad of challenges related to growing up poor, including experiencing high rates of "summer learning loss" due to a lack of enriching activities during the summer months, attendance at failing schools during the school year and inadequate opportunities during after-school hours.

What can parents do to prevent brain drain?

In order to prevent summer learning loss, it is vital that youth keep reading and learning throughout the summer in a fun environment:

§ Parents can send their children to a summer learning camp such as Harlem RBI's REAL Kids Program.

§ Read to/with your kids every day – even reading the newspaper together can be meaningful

§ Take educational trips, such as low cost visits to parks, museums, zoos and nature centers. Consider a vacation with an educational theme.

§ Visit your local Public Library with your child; help them choose high interest books that they will enjoy.

§ Practice math every day. Even a visit to the grocery store can be an opportunity to practice math.

§ Get outside and play. Intense physical activity has positive effects on academic achievement.

§ Do good deeds – community service is a great way for children to stay engaged.

§ Limit TV and Video game time. Just because it is summer does not mean that your child should “check out.”

Tell me about Harlem RBI's Real Kids summer program?

In 2007, the REAL Kids Summer Program will serve 270 boys and girls (a 12.5% increase from 2006) ages 9-12, in a seven-week summer program that runs Monday through Thursday from 8:30am-5:00pm with field trips each Friday from 10:00am-3:00pm. The REAL Kids Program provides structured academic, enrichment and sports programming in a youth-centered learning environment. REAL Kids is a model summer learning program for youth. In March of 2006, Harlem RBI's REAL Kids Program was named the winner of the Johns Hopkins University's "Center for Summer Learning Excellence Award" in a competition that is national in scope. Also, in March of 2007, the REAL Kids Program was awarded with James Patterson's Pageturner Award.

REAL Kids addresses the following gaps that typically hinder elementary school-age children's ability to succeed academically, socially, emotionally and physically:

** REAL Kids combats "summer learning loss" prevalent among youth in low-income communities. On average, children from low-income families lose nearly three months of grade-level equivalency during the summer months each year, compared to an average of one month lost by middle-income children.*

** REAL Kids addresses the lack of structured programs during the summer months for low-income youth. 64% of low-income parents report their children do not have quality program options in the summer*

** REAL Kids supports youth literacy among a population that is likely to fall behind academically at an early age, as statistics show that only 36% of elementary school students in East Harlem meet the State and City Reading Standards.*

The specific objectives for youth of the REAL Kids Program are to:

- Bridge the “summer learning gap” common among low-income youth;*
- Improve and increase literacy skills and youth's interests in reading;*
- Develop positive social and emotional skills such as teamwork; and*
- Improve physical fitness through baseball/softball participation.*

REAL Kids' goals and objectives are achieved through several comprehensive strategies. The program design creates a micro-environment that meets youth's broad developmental needs while supporting and encouraging their efforts to find enjoyment and success in educational, enrichment and athletic settings. One of the biggest accomplishments of REAL Kids is the seamless interweaving of these vital developmental areas. In the classroom, on the ballfield, on field trips, or at a sleep-away camp, youth come to value and enjoy reading and learning, cultivate their physical capacities, build relationships with peers and adults, and explore the Harlem RBI Values of Respect, Effort and Teamwork.

What success have you seen?

The ultimate goal of Harlem RBI is to ensure that participants who enter the program as vulnerable children graduate as resilient young adults.

Harlem RBI's long-term goals for youth are achieved through participation in the program over time. Each program component has specific age-appropriate goals that support these organizational goals and the REAL Kids Program is where youth start to learn how to achieve these goals. Data from the most recent program years suggests the organization is off to a strong start. Over the last three years, 93% of graduating participants have matriculated to college compared to only 13% in the surrounding neighborhood. Harlem RBI continues to engage youth over many years, not on a seasonal or ad-hoc basis. This consistency builds strong support networks that ensure participant achievement of program goals. The 2007 graduating senior class average duration in the program reached 5.9 years this year.

Harlem RBI evaluates each program by participants' progress and achievement of program goals. Evaluation results for summer 2006 affirm that the REAL Kids program is an effective and valuable program for youth.

The REAL Kids Program improves literacy skills and attitudes towards reading.
-86% of youth improved or maintained their reading scores, showing no summer learning loss
-95% of youth self-reported that REAL Kids helped them to like reading more
-85% of youth greatly improved their basic reading comprehension skills with 96% improving in their ability to make predictions and 90% improving their ability to ask themselves questions about what they read

The REAL Kids Program improves social and emotional skills such as conflict resolution, self-confidence, and teamwork.
-96% of youth improved their ability to avoid fights
-Over 75% of youth improved their ability to praise, motivate and support their peers
-Nearly 100% of youth reported that the REAL Kids program helped them to challenge themselves to do better

The REAL Kids Program has an impact in school and at home.

-96% of parents reported that as a result of REAL Kids, their children try harder in school

-97% of parents reported that their children were more excited and better prepared to start school in September after a summer in the REAL Kids program

-Over 93% of parents reported that their children are more motivated to write, like reading more and choose to read at home as a result of the REAL Kids program

-98% of parents reported that as a result of REAL Kids, their children got along better with peers

Who is eligible and how do you get involved?

Currently, Harlem RBI programs serve over 650 East Harlem boys and girls between the ages of 7 and 18. Activities are age and gender-appropriate and intensify over time as participants grow, from season to season and year to year. Harlem RBI programs are free of charge and all participants are accepted regardless of athletic or academic ability. Once youth enter Harlem RBI, they are expected to commit to Harlem RBI until they graduate from high school and matriculate to college. Participants spend between 6-16 hours per week during the school year and as many as 35 hours per week during the summer in Harlem RBI's academic, enrichment and sports programs.

Final thoughts?

All learning – and particularly summer learning – should be Fun. Keep children active and engaged and they will both enjoy themselves and grow in the process.

[E-Mail Comments to Cindy Hsu](#)

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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette®

Summerbridge: Where kids love to learn

Friday, August 03, 2007

By Gretchen McKay, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Last summer, Katlyn Stark did what a lot of kids do on their summer vacations, which is to say she didn't do too much: She slept in, watched TV and generally forgot about her classes at Aliquippa Middle School.

It was fun, of course, but to be honest, the 12-year-old admits with a grin, it was also kind of boring. And it made going back to class in the fall that much harder.

So when the 'tween heard about a two-year summer learning program being offered to disadvantaged seventh- and eighth-graders just across the river at Sewickley Academy, she told her parents she just had to go.

"I want to get taught," explained Katlyn, who dreams of someday becoming a pediatrician. "And somebody told me it would help me with college."

By "it," the seventh-grader was referring to Summerbridge Pittsburgh, a nonprofit summer enrichment program that aims to help at-risk middle schoolers achieve success in the classroom by changing their attitudes about learning.

Now in its 13th year at the academy, Summerbridge combines high-energy fun and games with serious academic classes such as math, writing, public speaking and wellness taught by high school and college-aged students. This year, the program -- which is underwritten in large part by Sewickley Academy with financial help from a variety of foundations, corporations and individual sponsors -- won national recognition.

It is one of three 2007 Excellence in Summer Learning Awards from the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University's School of Education.

"It's unbelievable," said Kevin Brezler, the program's 30-year-old executive director. "Before, we used to refer to Summerbridge as Pittsburgh's best-kept secret. So in a sense



Pam Panchak, Post-Gazette

Artasia Scott, 12, of Elmore (foreground), and Kira Fields, 12, of Wilkinsburg, perform a dance routine at the Summerbridge talent show held at Sewickley Academy Middle School last Friday.

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

now, we finally have the eyes and ears of the public school district and the city and can share what we've learned."

An above-average student at Aliquippa, Katlyn was accepted into the six-week program, which began June 25 and finishes up today. And the way she sees it, the program more than lived up to its reputation.

She had particular praise for the staff, an energetic bunch who are mostly in their late teens and early 20s and prefer hands-on activities to worksheets and lectures.

"They can get closer to you and know how you feel," Katlyn said, adding, "When you're an adult, you forget some things."

The numbers speak to its success: Ninety-two percent of its alumni graduate from high school, compared with just 59 percent of students with similar backgrounds nationally, while 80 percent continue on to college.

On the flip side, 72 percent of Summerbridge teachers, many of whom were Summerbridge students, go on to pursue careers in education.

To be accepted into the six-week summer session, students -- who are recruited from more than 30 public middle schools in Allegheny and Beaver counties -- must be performing at or above grade level on standardized tests and come from low-income or single-parent homes, or ones with significant stresses. In addition, they must agree to attend both summers before entering seventh and eighth grades and caregivers must also sign a family commitment form.

Getting that initial buy-in from parents is sometimes a challenge, said Kevin Brezler, the program's 30-year-old executive director. Yet once classes start, most quickly come to see the value of the program. How else to explain its 95 percent retention rate?

Even parents who don't come physically to the program, either as a volunteer or as a guest at one of its special events, like last Friday's talent show, can't help but notice the attitudinal shifts in their children.

"They see how their kids don't mind homework, or are reading for fun," said Mr. Brezler, "and they realize how important it is."

That change isn't lost on educators, either, especially since many of the kids come from schools where most are performing below proficiency levels.. Every spring during the recruiting process, Mr. Brezler noted, teachers marvel over the difference it's made in so-and-so's life.

As Katlyn can attest, the program isn't easy. Not just because it starts promptly at 8 a.m. All students have five academic classes per day. They also must commit to one hour of homework a night (weekend assignments are optional) and finish three novels. Eighth-

graders, for instance, are reading Walter Dean Myer's "Monster," a book that is used in some ninth- and 10th-grade classes elsewhere.

Because Summerbridge holds students -- and teachers -- to such high standards, it can be a little intimidating at first. "It's the idea that it's the 100 percent we're looking for, not just being good enough to pass or get the B," said Mr. Brezler.

What makes it fun, said Mr. Brezler, is that everything is taught in a creative, hands-on fashion that puts the lesson in context.

"So much of public education right now is built around about testing, and testing is abstract," he said. "Here, we show them that math relates directly to balancing your checkbook and figuring out your interest rate on credit cards."

Classes also are broken up with various events and activities, including a mid-morning "all school meeting" in the poster-filled lobby in which the kids do chants called "energizers," the teachers (and Mr. Brezler) perform skits, and everyone releases pent-up energy with a lot of hooting and hollering.

To help them on that long climb through high school, Summerbridge also each year offers its 500 students who have gone on to high school an arts-based school-year program with weekend workshops aimed at building intellectual curiosity. (Last year, three weeks of Italian lessons ended in a trip to the opera.)

Summerbridge also organizes tutoring sessions, college application and financial aid workshops, SAT prep courses and college tours.

This fall, it also will extend a helping hand to parents. For example, staff are working with the Parental Stress Center to provide courses in financial literacy, stress management and conflict resolution.

"We've definitely grown," said Mr. Brezler, noting how the original class back in 1994 had fewer than 60 students.

He said its original mission -- to change students' attitudes toward learning -- has stayed very much the same. If kids get excited about reading and doing homework, their grades are bound to improve.

"We energize them about learning. And then they go forward."

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