We spoke with Cooper, now a professor at Duke University, about his findings and how policymakers, program providers, and others should respond.

Tell us about what prompted your research originally.
While I was serving as a school board member, there was a threatened federal reduction in summer school support. I didn’t think that seemed like a good way to save money, so after the meeting, I talked to some graduate students and said, “Let’s look at what happens over the summer.” So we collected study results, conducting what is called a meta-analysis, and came up with some definite findings.

And what did you discover?
We found that kids do forget over the summer. Across the board, all kids lose some math skills. In reading, the middle class holds its own, but the poor lose reading and spelling skills, and that pattern emerged as a possible explanation for the academic achievement gap between those who have financial resources and those who don’t. We also found that summer learning programs have a significant positive effect, and those positive effects are greater for middle-class kids than for poor kids.

How do you explain the income-related results—that summer programs seemed to be more effective for middle or higher income kids?
We speculated that middle-class summer school programs may have better funding and resources. And it also may be simply that the problems of poor kids are much more entrenched and difficult to address, more remedial in nature.

Some have proposed the “faucet theory,” which suggests that when summer comes around, academic resources for the poor are turned off. Middle-class and better-off parents, however, have the resources on their own to compensate to some degree and provide whatever their children might need—remediation, enrichment, or acceleration-type activities when school is not in session.

You also found that there was a larger overall negative effect on math skills than reading skills. How do you explain that? Reading practice is more naturally embedded in a child’s environment, and parents know how to pay attention to keeping kids reading over the summer. They’re less likely to pay attention to math.

Isn’t it really just common sense that if you don’t practice a skill, you lose it, and that would apply to academic skills as well? It seems like common sense except for the fact that so many people question the value of it and look at summer learning as something optional or disposable.
Based upon what your research has shown, what are your personal ideas on what constitutes a high-quality summer program? Small, individualized programs with parental involvement were all associated with greater effectiveness. Summer affords more freedom to digress from a prescribed curriculum, so you can study at a more leisurely, individualized pace, especially when dealing with younger children. Also, small programs may be more nimble, making them more efficient at planning, decision-making, and using available resources.

One of your findings was that closely monitored programs produced larger effects. What does this mean, particularly for someone running or working in a program? That’s an odd finding that suggests it’s really a proxy for something else, probably the degree of conscientiousness associated with program implementation. It would involve ensuring that summer instructors have experience, training, and resources available in a timely fashion, as well as clear expectations.

What kinds of local, state, and national policies should be implemented to address summer learning loss? Harking back to my school board member experience, I would say that parents who are happy or enthusiastic about innovation are the best salespeople to other parents, so get them involved and reach out to policymakers. I would also promote rigorous evaluations, local control, and incentive funds for pilot programs.

What do you see as the biggest roadblock to making progress in the area of summer learning? People have a vision of what summer vacation ought to be that may not coincide with the reality for most kids. The other influence could be that there are some economic interests involved in keeping the summer the way it is. Amusement parks and summer camps, for example, would need to adjust if school-based policies changed.

What do you see as the best way to address roadblocks? Funds should be set aside to foster participation in summer programs, especially among disadvantaged youth, and we need to start funding pilot projects and put some possible solutions to the test.

WHAT HAPPENS TO STUDENTS OVER THE SUMMER:

- At best, students showed little or no academic growth over summer. At worst, students lost one to three months of learning.
- Summer loss was somewhat greater in math than reading.
- Summer loss was greatest in math computation and spelling.
- For disadvantaged students, reading scores were disproportionately affected and the achievement gap between rich and poor widened.

REFERENCES


Duke University Professor Harris Cooper