

What Will Summer Look Like?

Summer Learning Loss and COVID-19 Learning Gaps

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Summer 2021 will likely look much different than previous summers due to the impact of the now more than one-year-long pandemic.

Here we share research about summer learning loss and overlap that with emerging studies illustrating how COVID-19 closures and remote learning have compounded learning loss, all of which disproportionately impacts Black children, indigenous children, children of color, and all children who live in poverty.

Summer's Impact on Academic Learning

Prior to COVID, much research had been compiled about both the deleterious effects of summer learning loss and the proven benefits of high-quality summer experiences. According to a 2020 study appearing in the *American Educational Research Journal*, more than half of US students between grades one

and six experienced summer learning loss five years in a row. The study reviewed 200 million student test scores and found that the average student loses between 17 and 28 percent of school-year gains in English language arts during the following summer, depending on grade. In math, the average student loses between 25 and 34 percent of each school-year gain during the following summer.¹

The most pronounced summer learning loss occurs among students in K-3 grades. Their skills are new and developing, and the time away from regular practice during schooling means they are more likely to forget. These summer setbacks are particularly worrisome because the early grades are the foundation for the achievement, work habits, and perceptions about self-confidence and schooling that impact performance for years to come.

Research also shows that summer learning loss varies by subject area. For instance, nearly all students slide backwards



Dr. Matthew Boulay is the founder of the National Summer Learning Association, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Baltimore. A former elementary school teacher in New York City, Boulay earned a PhD in Sociology and Education from Columbia University's Teachers College and was recently named one of the 25 most influential people in out-of-school time learning. A former Marine and veteran of the war in Iraq, Boulay lives in Oregon with his wife and two children. Boulay recently published *How To Keep Your Kids Learning When Schools Are Closed*, an e-book that aims to provide practical advice to parents who are asking urgent questions about how best to support, nurture, and educate their children during periods of social distancing and quarantine.

Elizabeth McChesney serves in several roles including Senior Advisor in Educational Equity Initiatives at the Urban Libraries Council. In 2015, she won the LJ Movers and Shakers Award for transforming summer reading to summer learning, starting a national movement in libraries. She went on to earn NSLA's First Founder's Award for Excellence in Summer Learning and the John Cotton Dana Award. She is the 2021 recipient of the ALSC Distinguished Service Award. Liz chairs the ALSC Task Force on Summer Learning and Out of School Time Learning and has co-authored *Summer Matters: Making All Learning Count* (ALA Editions, 2017); *Pairing STEAM with Stories* (ALA Editions, 2020), and *Keke's Super-Strong Double Hugs* (Archway, 2020).

in math performance—on average, students lose about two months of math skills every summer.² Again, the loss is most severe for younger children, but older elementary/middle school students can also experience summer learning loss in math, most likely because math is deemed a subject for learning and practicing only in school. While reading is practiced outside of school, it's much less common to encourage math practice in the home.

When it comes to summer learning loss in reading, the research suggests that children in more affluent families do not experience much decline and some even make small gains during the summer. However, students from low-income families tend to experience significant summer loss in reading skills and reading comprehension. In fact, this class-based gap is a persistent finding in the research on summer learning loss: in all grades and all subjects, lower income kids fall farther and farther behind their wealthier peers every summer.³

Economic status is linked to opportunity—affluent children are more likely to attend summer camps and programs or have private lessons or access to a tutor and other adults who can support their learning. Children in poverty were keeping up during the school year, then falling behind in the summer, says Karl Alexander, professor emeritus, Johns Hopkins University, the original researcher of summer learning loss. By the beginning of middle school, the typical child from a low-income family was reading one or two grades behind grade level. At that point everything becomes challenging, which poses a serious problem in terms of their academic success and later life prospects.⁴

It's important to take a broad view of summer learning that incorporates a whole child approach, encompassing an understanding of children's physical, social, and emotional well-being. Today we understand that the body and mind are linked, and that daily exercise, good nutrition, and adequate sleep impact children's sense of optimism and self-confidence, their ability to persevere, and their learning.

The 2020 Absence of Schooling

The pandemic upended the conventional school calendar. When schools suddenly closed in March 2020, we became acutely aware of the absence of schooling and learned overnight that schools do so much more than simply teach academic skills and content.

Social and Emotional Development

Schooling provides an important connection for caregivers and children alike. During the school year, children and caregivers are connected to friends, neighbors, teachers, and other caring adults as well as referrals and resources that help families. In the absence of schooling, these connections often disappear, which can lead to a sense of isolation.

For example, the summer months can be a time when kids watch more television, spend less time in conversation, and are more socially isolated. Researchers have consistently found that watching excess television can be associated with increased boredom, higher levels of alienation, and lower levels of challenge, positive affect, and the ability to concentrate.⁵

Physical Health, Exercise, and Good Nutrition

While all of us would like to believe that summers are a time in which warmer weather and longer days allow children to increase their physical activity, the reality is that for many children, summers are time without daily exercise. In fact, researchers have discovered that summer can be a particularly unhealthy time of year for many children.

Poor nutrition and inactivity can lead to weight gain that puts children and youth at risk for health, social, and psychological problems including stigmatization, bullying, and poor self-esteem. All this can have major implications for learning.⁶

Couple this with the fact that many children experience hunger. Six out of seven children who qualify for federally funded meals at school don't have access to meals during the summer.⁷ That means only one in seven of the low-income children who rely on school lunch during the school year participated in the summer meals program.

Emerging Data on COVID-19 Learning Loss

There has been widespread consensus that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to far-reaching learning loss, compounded by structural inequities that have kept children of color and those in poverty further behind than their peers from white and affluent families. Research by McKinsey & Company leveraged summer learning loss research and analyzed it to assess the potential impact of the absence of schooling and remote learning caused by COVID-19. McKinsey reported that the shift to remote learning set white students back by one to three months while children of color lost three to five months.⁸

While there has been significant improvement since spring 2020, children of color continue to be more likely to remain remote and less likely to have access to learning tools including devices and connectivity.⁹ Likely, this gap will increase as this school year ends. McKinsey's analysis projected that a seven-month learning loss would occur by January 2021. This number rises to nine months for Latinx students and ten months for Black students.¹⁰ John B. King, former education secretary and president of the Education Trust said, "I think we should be very concerned about the risk of a lost generation of students."¹¹

Research from the Brookings Institute shows that when comparing students' median percentile rank between fall 2019 and 2020, there is some good news. Children in grades three to eight performed similarly in reading between the years. This may be attributable to the autonomy of older children in reading. However, the news about math learning is grim, with children in 2020 scoring 5 to 10 percentile points lower than same-grade children in 2019.¹²

This summer and next are going to be unlike any other. As an extension of their core commitment to equity, public libraries can play an important role in helping children with learning loss, hunger, and beginning to build resiliency from trauma. Now is the time to assess your library's summer program to ensure it is targeted to help kids in need.

Aaron Dworkin, CEO of the National Summer Learning Association says, "Public libraries are uniquely positioned to help all kids rise and to close these gaps. It's going to take the enormous energy and heart of us all, working together, to make a meaningful difference."¹³

The National Summer Learning Association's Annual Conference, Summer Changes Everything, is scheduled for November 10–13. For more information, visit www.summer-learning.org. &

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