

# KNOWLEDGE IN BRIEF

Findings from New Wallace Commissioned Research

## BUILDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF SUMMER LEARNING: NEAR-TERM FINDINGS OF THE NATIONAL SUMMER LEARNING PROJECT

The National Summer Learning Project is a six-year effort seeking to answer an important question: Can two summers of voluntary, district-led summer programs, offering academic instruction and enrichment activities like arts and field trips, help boost low-income students' success in school?

Children from low-income families often do not have the same opportunities to learn and to experience enriching activities during the summer as children from wealthier families and consequently can lose ground academically.

Previous research has shown that some, though not all, summer learning programs can lead to achievement gains. However, we have not known whether urban school districts could develop and implement, at large-scale, voluntary summer learning programs combining academic instruction aligned with the school year curriculum and enrichment activities that expand children's horizons. Nor do we know what impact these programs can have on children's success in school, and how long these effects may last.

The achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers continues to be a stubborn obstacle. The findings from this project could help inform one possible strategy for shrinking the achievement gap: voluntary, district-led summer learning programs.

### STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study, the largest of its kind, is a partnership of The Wallace Foundation, the RAND Corporation, Boston Public Schools, Dallas Independent School District, Duval County (FL) Public Schools, Pittsburgh Public Schools, and the Rochester City School District. It looks

at whether and how large-scale, voluntary summer learning programs led by public school districts, offered for two consecutive summers, five to six weeks each summer, can help improve educational outcomes for children in low-income, urban communities. Specific areas of exploration include:

- Can large urban school districts successfully implement quality summer learning programs?
- Can they successfully attract large numbers of students who could potentially benefit from their programs?
- What impact can these programs have on student outcomes?
- What are the steps, from planning to professional development, needed to implement quality summer programs?

The evaluation, conducted by RAND, focuses on students who were in 3rd grade in spring 2013. More than 5,600 students are part of the study. Students who applied were randomly selected to participate or not participate in the program for two summers (2013 and 2014)—as a result of the funding from Wallace, more students were able to take part in their districts' summer programs than otherwise would have been possible. RAND is gathering a wide range of data from both groups of students through the

## WHY USE A RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL TO EVALUATE THE IMPACT ON STUDENTS?

A randomized controlled trial, or RCT, randomly places eligible children into one of two groups: children who take part in the program and children who do not. It ensures fairness, especially when, as is the case in the participating districts, more students are interested in the program than space allows. Random assignment makes sure that there are no systematic differences between the two groups when the study begins. This means that we can attribute any differences at the end to the program. An RCT is a rigorous method of evaluation, providing the evidence educators, policymakers, and funders need to make decisions about supporting and implementing summer learning programs.

7th grade, including school year grades and attendance, student performance on standardized tests of math and reading, and measures of social-emotional skills.

### NEAR-TERM FINDINGS

The study is determining the effects of two consecutive summers of programming on students' academic out-

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comes. It's also exploring what impact these programs can have on behavior and social-emotional skills. These are big research topics, requiring the collection and analysis of a great deal of data over a substantial period of time, in five diverse cities. Over the coming several years, data collection and analysis will continue—the results will emerge in stages, building to a robust knowledge base about how to design and implement a summer learning program and what kinds of outcomes to expect.

These near-term findings, published in December 2014 in the RAND report *Ready for Fall?: Near-Term Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Students' Learning Opportunities and Outcomes*, are only the first set of findings from the RCT. They tell us the near-term effect of one summer of programming as measured by reading and math tests and social-emotional skill assessments administered in the fall of 2013, shortly after the first summer of programming ended. They provide valuable insights into the impact of summer learning. It's important to keep in mind, however, that these near-term findings do not tell us the impact that one summer's programming has on school-year grades, state tests, and school-year attendance. RAND is still analyzing that data and will share the report in the summer of 2015.

### DISTRICTS CAN DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT LARGE-SCALE PROGRAMS

The project shows that school districts can successfully plan and implement, and attract large numbers of children to, a voluntary summer learning program. There is strong demand among low-income students and their families for free, voluntary programs that combine academics and enrichment.

## HIGHER SCORES ON FALL MATH ASSESSMENTS

In the fall of 2013, children in the study took a math assessment. Children who were selected to take part in the summer learning programs in 2013 scored higher on the math assessment. They entered school in the fall with a meaningful advantage in math, compared to children who applied but were not selected. Indeed, the impact the study had on math skills equals 17-21 percent of the average increase in math performance that students of this age and grade level make in an average year. The impact on math performance was larger than the average impact on test scores among 89 RCT evaluations in elementary education reviewed by Lipsey, *et al.* (2012). The math findings are particularly important because students from low-income households score much lower on 4th-grade math tests than their more affluent counterparts—27 percent score below basic compared to 7 percent of wealthier students.

## NO DIFFERENCE ON ASSESSMENTS OF READING AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS

The assessment of reading comprehension and vocabulary skills conducted in fall 2013 did not detect differences in reading achievement between the two groups of students.

In fall 2013, teachers completed an assessment of each student's social-emotional skills. The assessment did not reveal differences between students who were selected to take part in the summer learning program and those who applied but were not selected to take part.

## PROGRAM FACTORS THAT PROMOTE QUALITY

The near-term findings also reveal a number of factors related to positive outcomes. The RCT did not show that these factors caused these positive outcomes, but the relationship is clear enough to offer guidance to practitioners on program implementation:

- In math:
  - The more days students attended, the greater the advantage they exhibited in math compared to children who had applied but were not selected for the program.
  - More instructional time was associated with better math outcomes.

- In English Language Arts (ELA):
  - There was an association between classroom instructional quality and students' reading assessment scores.
  - Students in ELA sites that were orderly had better reading scores than children who were not selected to take part in the program.
  - Students whose summer reading teacher had just taught 3rd or 4th grade (the grade the children had either just completed or were about to enter) performed better on the reading assessment than other children who took part in the program.

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THESE NEAR-TERM FINDINGS?

We can draw some conclusions from these near-term findings. It's important, however, to recognize that the story will build—and perhaps change—as RAND collects and analyzes data and we share more findings.

We now know that it's feasible for urban districts to mount voluntary summer learning programs, with research-based features, at large scale, and attract large numbers of students.

It's also clear that summer learning programs can have a positive impact on math outcomes, at least in the short-term. Assessments administered in the fall following one session of summer learning programs demonstrated that children who participated had stronger math skills than children who were not selected to take part.

And the initial findings point to a number of factors—including attendance, instructional time, quality of instruction, behavior, and teacher experience—that are related to positive outcomes. School districts offering summer learning programs may want to consider if and how to address these elements of the student experience.

Over the coming months, we will learn the effect of one summer of programming on academic achievement, behavior and social-emotional skills over the course of an entire school year. Subsequently, we will learn the impact of two sessions of summer learning. That story will continue to unfold as additional data is collected and analyzed, and reported over the next few years.

## RELATED KNOWLEDGE

Want to find out more about more about summer learning? The following publications and more can be downloaded free of charge from [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

*[Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success](#)*, RAND Corporation, 2013.

*[NASBE Discussion Guide: Summer Learning: A New Vision for Supporting Students in Summer Programs](#)*, National Association of State Boards of Education, 2011.

*[Summer Snapshot: Exploring the Impact of Higher Achievement's Year-Round Out-of-School-Time Program on Summer Learning](#)*, Public/Private Ventures, The Wallace Foundation, 2011.

*[Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning](#)*, RAND Corporation, 2011.

*[America After 3 PM: Special Report on Summer](#)*, Afterschool Alliance, 2010.

## ABOUT THE WALLACE FOUNDATION

Our mission is to foster improvements in learning and enrichment for disadvantaged children and the vitality of the arts for everyone. We seek to catalyze broad impact by supporting the development, testing and sharing of new solutions and effective practices.

Wallace has five major initiatives under way:

- School leadership. Strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement.
- Afterschool. Making good afterschool programs in cities available to more children.
- Building audiences for the arts. Enhancing the ability of arts organizations to engage new audiences.
- Arts education. Expanding arts learning opportunities for children and teens.
- Summer and expanded learning. Improving access to high-quality summer learning programs, and enriching and expanding the school day.

Find out more at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).