Stemming Summer Learning Loss

Many New England children lack the resources to access camp, travel and other activities, resulting in "summer learning loss" that can have lifelong implications.

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One long-held assumption about New England is that the level of intellectual capital in the region will help ensure future prosperity and security. Many assume that by utilizing traditional methods in traditional locations, we will prepare the current generation to become tomorrow's post-secondary learners, workers and parents — the conventional wisdom being that if we invest wisely in current education structures, the next generation will pay society back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship. Never completely accurate, this assumption is actually less true today than ever.

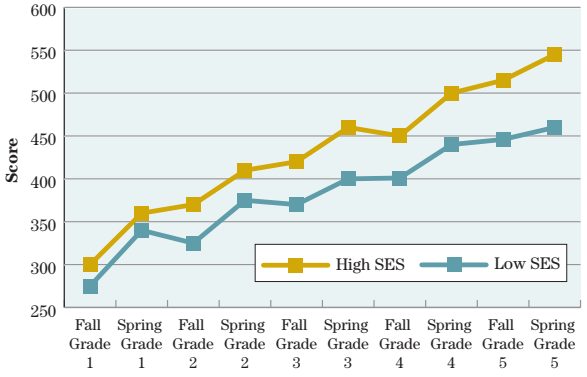
With today's global economy and constantly evolving technology, we need to change how we prepare learners for success. Part of this process is to expand our notion of when and where learning happens. With their esteemed role in the region, our higher education institutions can and must play an integral part in this expansion.

What does it really take to shape a generation of well-rounded young people who will support their families, strengthen their communities, and uphold the values of a civil society? New insights about when and where learning takes place reveal the connection between a child's summer experiences and his or her success in school and beyond. In so doing, the research underscores the tremendous untapped potential of the summer months to improve academic achievement and to level the playing field for all of our children.

Some of the differences in student academic achievement — often referred to as the achievement gap — can be linked directly to what is actually an opportunity gap in summer enrichment opportunities. Children from families with financial resources receive the additional learning provided by camp, travel, lessons, and other activities during the summer months. Far too many New England children lack the resources to access these opportunities, however, and as a result suffer from what we refer to as "summer learning loss."

What's also striking is the particular conclusion that a number of researchers have arrived at: that children in all socioeconomic groups are learning at nearly the same rate during the school year, and that differences in achievement between poor and middle class children are rooted in the inequities that young people experience outside the schoolhouse door. In Figure 1, data from the Baltimore Beginning School Study led by Johns Hopkins researchers reveals that the gap in achievement grows not during the school year but rather over the summer. It's a profound finding that can have lifelong implications for learners.

Figure 1: Verbal Scores, California Achievement Tests, by Socio-Economic Status (SES) and Season



Adapted from Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson, 2001

Although much of the research on this subject focuses on children in elementary and middle school, the Beginning School Study followed its original sample group of Baltimore public school students to age 22. The study found that as much as two-thirds of the differences among students in rates of participation in academic tracks in high school, dropping out of school, and completion of four years of college could be traced back to summer learning loss that occurred during elementary school.

While findings in these studies should not distract us from certain other inequities — access to quality early education is one example — it should cause us to broaden our thinking to consider placing stronger emphasis on learning that takes place outside traditional classrooms.

The evidence is growing and the conclusions are the same — the summer months can no longer be ignored. We cannot shut off the faucet of learning for two months or more and expect to have enough learners achieving at levels necessary for future postsecondary success. The point is amplified when you consider that, in the

global economy, we need to maximize the number of learners achieving at the highest levels.

The question those of us in New England must now ask is as clear as the need is urgent: How can the region's higher education community expand its role in addressing summer learning loss?

Many New England colleges and universities currently reach out to communities of underserved learners and those efforts are important and should, of course, continue. These institutions are also uniquely positioned to provide the resources and gravitas that could expand knowledge around the importance of summer learning. Despite years of research on summer learning loss, most educators know very little about the critical impact of summer experiences on school performance. To start, summer learning loss could be widely included in the curricula as we educate the next wave of teachers and school administrators. Information about summer and the opportunity gap, as well as promising solutions to stem learning loss, should be integrated into courses designed to prepare teachers and administrators at all levels.

If we know that summer learning increases a young person's chances at postsecondary success, then our postsecondary institutions are a natural fit to become more involved. If college-ready students are the goal, involvement in summer learning is a must.

Higher education institutions might also encourage and aid in the placement of college work-study students in summer programs to provide mentoring, tutoring and enrichment activities to those in elementary school. Not only would programs benefit, but work-study students — including education students — would also gain experience working with diverse populations, exactly the kind of experience that is often lacking in today's young teachers.

The most important service colleges and universities could provide might be to increase and expand research around issues surrounding summer learning. Efforts to better understand parental work schedules, the resources of community service organizations and the effect of those resources on outcomes and any opportunity gap would be real a contribution to the field. So too would be a better-developed picture of how to replicate the rich learning environments experienced by many middle class children with the intentional academic support needed by some children. We must quicken the pace at which we explore and uncover issues around program content, staffing, and financing. The opportunities are boundless, and the economic and civic needs are deserving of the urgent attention of the brightest minds in our higher education community.

The community's involvement in — and support of — summer programs would be mutually beneficial. Colleges and universities often find themselves using far too many of their resources on remediation. These institutions may ultimately be better served by supporting summer learning and thus helping students arrive on campus with the skills and knowledge necessary for success. By some estimates, two out of every three teenagers who are old enough are unprepared for life after high school. If we know that summer learning increases a young person's chances at postsecondary success, then our postsecondary institutions are a natural fit to become more involved. If college-ready students are the goal, involvement in summer learning is a must.

Truly capitalizing on the higher education community's increased focus on summer learning might also result in a less direct, but profoundly important, long-term benefit. Through these types of integral roles, New England's colleges and universities would help validate the importance of summer learning, and in the process, help to expand the conversation about where, when, and how learning happens. Normalizing the idea of summer learning could ultimately lead to innovation regarding school design and the definition of "school time." If that happens, we will be that much closer to a watershed moment: the necessary, profound re-evaluation of our K-12-to-postsecondary continuum.

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If we wish future generations to be economically and civically engaged, we need to take different approaches to how we educate, and we need to do so now. Establishing a more flexible idea of learning that includes a focus on summer is logical and crucial. With the strength of New England's higher education community behind the plan, summers of educational enrichment are entirely possible.

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