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The Case for Extended School Time in Arkansas

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THE CASE FOR EXTENDED SCHOOL TIME IN ARKANSAS

SUMMARY POINTS

- The “summer learning loss” phenomenon appears to disproportionately affect low-income students.
- Low-income students in Baltimore actually experienced greater achievement gains during the school year than their peers from higher income families.
- Evidence of the impact of summer learning indicates that extended school years and school days for students in economically disadvantaged schools may be beneficial.

There is growing discussion over the topic of extended learning opportunities throughout the state. For example, this past fall at the OEP conference in November, Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators Director Richard Abernathy stated that additional instructional time may be needed in order to fulfill all the curricular requirements for schools. Citing the need for additional enrichment opportunities, a bill is making its way through the Arkansas Legislature to provide funding for after school and summer school programs. Additionally, and potentially of more consequence, is a bill sponsored by Senator David Johnson (D) of Little Rock to expand learning time for Arkansas public school students by allowing school districts to operate a two-hundred day school year (SB 267). Although the OEP does not advocate on behalf of any bill or issue before the state legislature, we do feel strongly about closing the achievement gap, and our advocacy of making data-driven policy decisions warrants comment on this issue.

THE BILL

SB 267 does not make extended school years mandatory, but does allow additional funding for schools meeting certain criteria to operate on a two-hundred day school year. In order to receive this funding a school must be both:

- 80% Free-and Reduced Lunch eligible.
- In the first year of school improvement or later.

THE CASE FOR THE BILL

The evidence for the case of extended learning opportunities can be discussed from two angles. **First**, many schools, or networks of schools that have track records of successfully serving disadvantaged students, such as KIPP, YES Prep, and Harlem Village Academies, include extended learning opportunities as one component in their school model. As a result, we see that students in these schools seem to experience less “summer learning loss.” Though this is not conclusive evidence that extended learning opportunities are *the* answer for combatting “summer learning loss”, the evidence from these school models does suggest that extended learning opportunities can be *one* component of their overall success.

Second, a related strand of research focuses specifically on “summer learning loss”, which is a particular problem for low-income students. That is, students from more affluent backgrounds are more likely than their low-income peers to engage in structured educational or extracurricular activities during the summer months. Indeed, the presence of “summer learning loss” has been clearly documented in the research literature. One particular study by Alexander, Entwisle, &



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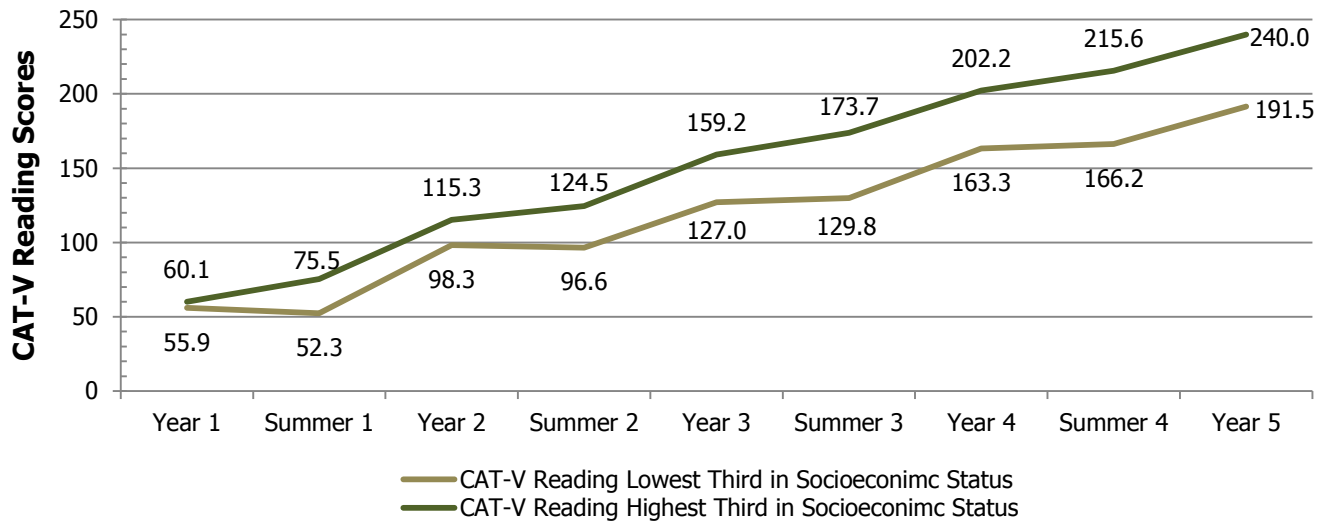
Jeffery R. Dean

Olson (2001), showed that information retention is greatly impacted by the summer break.

The researchers analyzed reading achievement data for 665 students using data from the Baltimore-based Beginning School Sample (BSS) – a representative random sample of 790 Baltimore school children whose educational progress had been monitored from grade 1 through age 22. Data were collected at two points each year: once during

the fall and once during the spring. This allowed the researchers to measure two types of growth – the growth that occurred during the school year and the growth that occurred during the summer. Figure 1 below illustrates how “summer learning loss” can adversely affect the accumulated learning of low-income students in relation to their more affluent peers.

Figure 1. Reading Scores in School Years and Summers for Elementary Students



Note that the learning trajectory for the the high income students increased at a relatively consistent pace over the school year and summer. On the other hand, the graph makes clear that the reading score gains for the poorer students leveled off or even dropped during the summer months.

Over the 5-year data collection period, the students from higher income families gained a total of 240 points on the CAT-V Reading Assessment; 53 points of which were measured during the summer time periods. For low-income students, despite having cumulative point gains on the CAT-V Reading Assessment of 192 points over the entire data collection period, they gained less than a single point during all of the the summer months combined. The total difference in point gains between these two groups (48 points) can be attributed entirely to summer learning gains among these students from higher income families. In fact, the low-income cohort actually experienced greater achievement gains (191 points) during the school years than their peers from higher income families (188 points).

As researcher Karl Alexander of Johns Hopkins states, “Since it is low [socioeconomic status] youth specifically whose out-of-school learning lags behind, this summer shortfall relative to better-off children contributes to the perpetuation of family advantage and disadvantage across generations.”

In sum, there have been few, if any, studies specifically assessing whether a longer school year would improve public education. However, based on this Baltimore study and several others that highlight the impact of “summer learning loss” on poor students, there is a strong case to be made for a shorter summer break (and thus a longer school year). Moreover, some of the school models (e.g. KIPP) across the country that have traditionally succeeded in educating low-income students rely heavily on extended school years and longer school days. Taken together, these two lines of research suggest that Arkansas lawmakers are pursuing good policy when they are seeking ways to increase the number of instructional hours each year for our state’s most disadvantaged students.

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