

Promoting Accountability and Accessibility in Summer Learning Initiatives

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Abstract

As the standards and expectations for both teachers and students in K-12 public education have risen, the gap that separates class divisions, community locale, and some racial/ethnic disparities has widened. Various policy options offer an alternative traditional K-12 public education in the promise of improving the quality of education for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The quality of these substitutional and supplementary types of education, however, is rarely evaluated with regards to accountability and accessibility. Most substitutional types of education (programs in which student involvement occurs instead of, rather than in addition to, the traditional K-12 classroom) do not offer the same levels of accountability and accessibility as supplemental programs. Summer educational initiatives can have substantial impact in the development of a student's education and can be held to more strident measures of accountability and furthermore can be more accessible in serving more students. Applying these critical qualities as methods of comparison, this paper analyzes the merits and challenges of summer learning programs as an overlooked but valuable policy option that deserves further consideration.

Introduction

As the United States has changed, so too has its education: the mission, objectives, and practices have all evolved dramatically through the influence of globalization and increases in technology. Though many aspects of K-12 public education have undergone significant and frequent transformations, the function remains essentially the same. K-12 schools share a responsibility to educate young scholars, prepare them for the vastly interconnected world of the 21st century, and instill in them civic pride and understanding necessary to improve society. National policies such as "No Child Left Behind" and "Race to the Top" illustrate this through their emphasis on measureable growth and proven approaches to improve public school (U.S. Department of Education, 2003 & U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

As standards and expectations for both teachers and students have risen, the crevice that separates class divisions, community locale, and some racial/ethnic disparities appears to have widened. With less tax money and leverage (both politically and financially), inner city school districts across the nation have suffered in their attempts to prepare their students for academic achievement and lifelong learning. Parents of students who are educated or affluent may have to devote more of their extra income and time to fulfilling practical physiological needs (such as food and shelter) rather than education. The present system of education is in dire need of change to minimize such unjust inequalities.

This policy recommendation aims to examine the role that summer programming plays in mitigating the achievement gap and expanding quality educational opportunities to all students. Summer education is not an innovative approach in itself, but the recent increase in budgetary cuts deeply affecting education, coupled with demands for higher achievement, necessitate such a policy. Given that the disparities between students from lower SES families and those from higher SES families have not waned in spite of attempts within the traditional K-12 system to combat this problem, the need for an alternative seems evident. Guiding this assessment of the summer initiatives is a comparison between substitutional and supplemental approaches, an evaluation of the potential benefits and shortcomings of summer programming in the present, and a recommendation for improving and expanding upon summer educational programming for the future.

Policy Comparison

Considering some of the challenges historically facing public education, the proposition of various alternatives should be unsurprising. Particularly at the state level, where legislatures play a significant role in allocating funds and determining academic standards, less traditional methods provide the opportunity for improvement while still being mindful of cost, accountability, and accessibility. Educational policies at the state level have incentive and ability to minimize achievement gaps within socioeconomic, geographic locale, and racial divisions. States have utilized the implementation of school voucher programs, charter/magnet schools, and summer academic programming, among other innovations, as a way of constricting both the achievement gap and the mounting costs of education.

The disparities between school vouchers and charter or magnet schools and summer programming are evident immediately through their approach. School vouchers and charter or magnet schools provide an alternative opportunity for students, in which their enrollment would exclude them from also attending the traditional K-12 public school. These substitutional programs vary significantly from supplemental options, such as summer initiatives, where students receive extra education in addition to the regular school year. Though their mission of improving education and alleviating the achievement gap are similar, the approach between substitutional education versus supplemental education is notably distinct. Utilizing accountability and accessibility as important measures of the policy effectiveness will illustrate the differences and further underscore the benefits of summer programming.

Accountability can be examined in two dimensions: within the programs themselves and with their relationships to traditional public education. Viewing accountability in this way allows us to see how the programs are held accountable themselves but also considers their impact on the larger system of education.

Likewise, accessibility serves as a critical feature in this assessment, as the underlying objective in improving education is not to enhance the opportunities for a few, but rather maximize the possibilities for many. In the strictest sense, accessibility is important with regards to the geography of education, and its availability to students around the country, regardless of the social, political, and economic climate. More broadly, the potential for every student, in spite of their own individual traits, to participate is imperative.

School vouchers enable qualifying students (usually based on family SES) to attend a private school or public school outside their district for little or no cost. This approach embodies the theory of privatization that students presently in the "failing" public schools can seek alternatives and initiates competition between the schools to cultivate improvement. Most utilize a randomized lottery to select from applicants who met the requirements and completed all the necessary paperwork; those fortunate to be chosen are then able to attend the private or out-of-district public school of their choice, including parochial schools (Farrell & Mathews, 2006; Molnar, 1999; Witte, 1999).

Charter schools and magnet schools are another substitutional policy option that institute the establishment of schools separate from the public school district. Charter schools are publicly funded institutions, but unlike the traditional K-12 schools, they are exempt from some regulations typically placed on public schools. Magnet schools are similar to charter schools but they operate within the school district and focus on particular disciplines (such as mathematics and technology or Spanish immersion) in their pedagogy (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Both types of education provide a more diverse curriculum and shifts emphasis away from standardized testing and more towards student affirmation and flexibility (Allen, 2009; Carter, 2003; Duffet & Farkas, 2008; Jackson, 2011). In both cases, admission is less restrictive than school vouchers but the schools tend to be smaller and generally have waitlists of students

desiring admission.

Neither of these options prove to be truly accountable, nor accessible. Standardized testing is implemented in only some circumstances and those that do utilize it have not been found to be conclusively better. Larger scale studies on substitution schools have yielded mixed results concerning their academic effectiveness (Molnar, 1999; Peterson, Howell, & Greene, 1999). While education is presumably higher quality at private institutions, a recent study conducted in North Carolina found that "the effects of charter school competition on the achievement of students in traditional public schools appear to be negligible" (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006).

The accessibility of these substitutional programs similarly is not substantial. Both school vouchers and charter/magnet schools fail in terms of the geographic locations in which they operate as well as the likelihood of admission. Most of these programs occur only in more urban areas and tend to be relegated to certain regions nationally. The imbalanced ratio of applicants and admissions requires lottery systems and waitlists, which prevent the availability of the program to all. Accessibility is further inhibited by state laws (some restricting or prohibiting charter schools) or strong political actors (unions, for instance) who create barriers against their establishment.

Problems facing these options are evident, but an alternative policy advocating the use of summer to continue education merits consideration. Summer programming exemplifies a supplemental educational policy by providing an additional opportunity to students for academic improvement and has proven to have cumulative effects in minimizing the educational gap that widens during the summer months (Alexander et al., 2007). Occurring in the months between school years, this initiative targets summer learning loss that is attributed to the socioeconomic gap in education (Moninger, 2011). Though this does not provide an alternative during the school year to regular education, it enhances the traditional academic experience by reinforcing concepts learned in the previous year and beginning to build on new ideas that will continue into the next year. Because summer programming is not standardized within states, the flexibility to experiment has enabled some programs to establish themselves as successful precedents.

One of the programs rising in prominence is Summer Advantage USA. The program aims to provide academically-based education and admits students on the basis of need (Drehle, 2010; Tully, 2010). In order to offer the program for free to participants, funding is derived entirely through private donations, including state and private organizations, such as the Indiana Department of Education, Eli Lilly, Wal-Mart, and others (Booher, 2011; Gose, 2010; "Summer Advantage," 2011).

Examining the accountability and accessibility in summer initiatives demonstrates a wider array of possibilities. Because they are not standardized within the states, summer programs vary in terms of the methods of accountability they incorporate to prove their value. Standardized testing is increasingly implemented as a measure of effectiveness and in a meta-analysis, Lauer et al. found that supplemental education (summer and after-school programs alike) helped at-risk students with small but substantial positive results (2006). What differentiates this from the approach used by school voucher or charter/magnet schools is that summer programs focus on retention and bridging the gap. Testing can offer a realistic measure of this but because the programs themselves are not standardized, the risk that the examination results are accurate and unbiased remains. As summer programs serve as a supplementary mode of education, external accountability may be less relevant, but the subjectivity in testing is nonetheless a prevalent concern.

Summer programs are restricted by limited seat availability, as well, and differ with regards to admissions by specific guidelines. Though they can be selective, as a supplemental option, they are not necessarily restricted to the requirements guiding school vouchers and charter schools. More importantly, however, is their accessibility nationwide. Summer programs have more widespread applicability across states, in

rural and urban regions alike, and are limited primarily by funding rather than legislative restrictions.

Policy Recommendation

Using accountability and accessibility as modes of comparison, supplemental education, through summer programming, trumps education that is only a substitution. Compared to alternatives, summer learning represents an addition to the traditional public education system. By providing more instruction during summer months, summer educational programs combat summer learning loss that accounts for up to 2/3 of the achievement gap between SES-stratified students (Alexander et al., 2007; von Drehle, 2010).

An inherent advantage to the summer programs is their flexibility with regards to accessibility to students. Because they offer supplemental instruction, they are not necessarily bound by legal restrictions that influence the existence charter schools or school vouchers. Summer programs can be less restrictive in their application requirements as well (as they are a voluntary supplement), pending the program operating budget and size. They can further incorporate more customization to the particular community they serve and celebrate racial, ethnic, and cultural differences that tend to be ignored by mainstream academics (Hilliard, 1995).

A challenge with summer programs is the overwhelming lack of consistency and structure across the country. The fact that states can mold and construct the programs to tailor to their own needs and fit their own financial support abilities is certainly nice. Within the states, the creation of a uniform summer curriculum could serve as a requirement for programs interested in receiving state funding. Determining base lines for acceptable improvement and corresponding funding would regulate summer programs and ensure that the funding distributions were purposeful and effective. This would provide a level of uniformity (that could potentially lead to securing federal funds, as well) and offer a more consistent approach to standardizing the system to ensure maximum effectiveness and efficiency.

Another issue that should be addressed in creating a more structured guide for summer programs is self-selection. Self-selection occurs as participation is purely voluntary and not mandated and therefore requires levels of interest, participation, and work on behalf of the student and his/her family. Summer programs do minimize the likelihood of self-selection compared to substitutional options, as they can appeal to parents as an alternative to childcare (often a challenge for lower SES families). Nonetheless, ensuring that all qualifying students interested in attending such programs are able to do so remains a challenge.

Summer educational programs serve as an attractive solution, acting not as an all-encompassing "fix," but a critical component to improvement. They can target specific demographic segments perceived to be under-performing in their particular location and funnel money into the most needy areas of public education. Alternately, they could benefit each interested student in the community by providing a way to ensure that students' minds are sharp and they are not only retaining what they have already learned, but are invigorated to begin again in the fall. Unlike traditional K-12 schools, the programs can be run by non-profit organizations or seek state support in creating a complementary, standardized curriculum and receive funding. While further research should be conducted, the accountability and accessibility of summer programming makes it an effective selection for improving student scholarship in K-12 schools without actually taking students out of those schools.

These qualities illustrate the value summer learning-based programs can have in helping improve the overall experience and quality of public K-12 education, but thus far, little research has concentrated on this area. Analyzing the function and immediate and long-term impact, both in magnitude and direction, would demonstrate the overall value of these programs. Additionally, empirical studies devoted to such research could focus on specific facets of the summer programs that are particularly substantive and

potentially recommend incorporating these components into improving the traditional school-year program as well. Given the tremendous importance of education, a full evaluation of supplementary programming and recommendations for improvement would be truly invaluable.

Conclusion

As we continue to strive to improve public K-12 education, our focus should emphasize the accountability and accessibility of various policy options to guarantee high quality programming available to all. Instituting new educational reforms without considering their accountability is not only financially detrimental, but it continues to place the future of the structure of education in peril. Likewise, the limited accessibility of many new reforms (relegated to specific areas to benefit few fortunate students) only reinstitutes the societal division that education itself aims to eliminate.

The benefits of formal summer education and the possibilities of standardizing the experience, merit further consideration. Policy experts at the state level should recognize this potential and utilize summer programming as an alternative in improving K-12 education. Expecting children from wildly divergent backgrounds to achieve uniformly without providing fundamental and equal access to quality education indicates a failure in our understanding of the education system. Given the increasingly globalized environment and mounting demands for greater education, the value of summer education will likely continue to grow and our focus on embracing the potential of these supplemental programs should as well.

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