



Center for American Progress



Promoting Educational Achievement & Opportunity Through Summer Scholarships

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) marked an important expansion of the federal role in promoting educational opportunity, but it does not address the needs of children in the summer. Strong evidence shows that learning slows or stops in the summer months, while gaps in student performance grow. Evaluations of summer programs also show that such programs have consistent positive effects on knowledge, skills, and test scores.

We propose a program of Summer Scholarships for children to use toward traditional summer school or summer enrichment programs in the years prior to third grade, when NCLB testing begins. Below are the key features of our proposal:

- *Promoting parental choice.* Summer Scholarships would allow families to select the program that best fits their child's needs, thereby boosting educational outcomes and helping schools meet NCLB goals.
- *Promoting innovation.* Public and private organizations would be eligible to administer summer programs, fostering competition that will promote quality, innovation and accountability.
- *Engendering broad support.* All children who start school academically behind would qualify for Scholarships, and partial or full Scholarships would be available to most families on an income-based sliding scale.
- *Focusing on cost-effectiveness and affordability.* Based on two possible program configurations, the costs of such a proposal would be between \$4.9 and \$8.1 billion annually, and would serve 4.5 to 6 million children.

Our proposal complements No Child Left Behind by giving children a “summer boost” in the years before third grade, when children first take the tests mandated by NCLB. It stands to reinvigorate faith in public education by addressing early scholastic inequality for which schools are not responsible. At the same time, it is designed to engender broad popular support, as it will benefit students with school readiness problems at all income levels. By increasing the affordability of childcare and promoting the market for quality summer programs, our proposal should simultaneously ease the burdens on working parents while providing more and better-suited options for their children's summer activities.

Timely, popular, affordable, innovative, and effective, our Summer Scholarship proposal is the next logical step in federal education reform.



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Widespread concern about the quality of children’s education led to the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which dramatically expands the federal role in elementary and secondary schooling and attempts to hold schools accountable for student outcomes. But education policies that focus on the traditional school neglect the possibility that student outcomes differ mainly for reasons outside the control of schools. Child learning environments, for instance, vary markedly during the summer, when school is generally not in session. This policy brief argues that greater federal attention toward improving the summer learning opportunities of young children would boost scholastic outcomes and facilitate attainment of NCLB’s goals.

Summer learning opportunities have received little attention in federal education policy compared with preschool and after-school programs, which is surprising for three reasons. First, there is substantial evidence that student learning slows in the summer and that gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children widen. Second, it appears that summer school and summer enrichment programs can effectively boost achievement and produce other positive child outcomes. Finally, American students already endure longer school days than children in other industrialized nations, but the length of the school year is comparatively short in the United States.

We propose a system of progressively valued scholarships that children could use to enroll in traditional summer school or specialized public or private enrichment programs. Students who are academically or economically disadvantaged would receive the most generous scholarships, but the vast majority of middle-class children would be eligible for at least partial subsidy. A stronger federal role in the area of summer learning opportunities makes sense in the era of No Child Left Behind and may in fact be schools’ best opportunity to meet the requirements of the law.

“Summer Slide”: Summer and Academic Performance

Studies have consistently implicated diminished summer learning rates in patterns of scholastic inequality. Though it faces methodological challenges, this research shows unambiguously that rates of learning in a variety of subjects decline in the summer relative to the school year.¹ Regardless of region, economic resources, or racial and ethnic background, the development of academic skills and knowledge occurs much more slowly in the summer. Even more worrisome than the slowed pace of learning is the possibility that children actually *lose* knowledge or skills during the summer. Whether summer learning loss occurs appears to depend on the subject being tested and the characteristics of the child.²

In addition, achievement gaps between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students grow during the summer.³ The evidence as to whether achievement gaps grow more during the summer than during the school year is inconsistent. Despite a much-cited conclusion that half to two-thirds of annual achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children could be traced to summer, subsequent evidence was more ambiguous than is often acknowledged.⁴ Nevertheless, the latest study examining this question is perhaps the best, and it concludes that economic gaps in reading and math *do* increase more in the summer after kindergarten than they do during kindergarten or first grade.⁵

Effects of Summer School and Summer Enrichment Programs

Research suggests that both academic- and enrichment-focused summer programming provide a range of benefits to participating youth. Hundreds of studies have been completed over the past thirty to forty years measuring the impacts of summer programs on participating children. These studies vary quite a bit in terms of the types of programs under examination and the populations they serve; the evaluation designs used to establish effects also differ. Thus, it is difficult to conclude anything concrete by simply looking at any one program or initiative's results. Recent research has confronted this challenge by systematically synthesizing the literature on summer programs through a statistical process called meta-analysis.⁶

Educational psychologist Harris Cooper and his colleagues conducted a meta-analysis of summer programs that included 125 independent effect estimates.⁷ They concluded that both remedial summer programs and summer programs focused on the acceleration of learning led to moderate positive effects on children's knowledge and skills. Furthermore, summer programs had similarly beneficial effects on non-academic outcomes such as self-esteem, attendance, and leadership. A larger meta-analysis by James S. Kim found effects on students' achievement test scores that were comparable to those found by Cooper et al. Moreover, Kim found that those studies employing the most rigorous (random assignment) evaluation designs showed even larger effects.⁸ Kim found that multi-year programs and those that included an enrichment component were more effective than other programs. These meta-analyses imply that summer academic programs typically increase students' test scores by one-fifth of a standard deviation, which is equivalent to moving a student from the 50th percentile of the distribution to the 58th percentile. This effect size amounts to one-fourth of the reading or math gap between entering kindergartners whose mothers have a high-school education and those whose mothers are college graduates, or one-third of the black-white gap in math or reading.⁹

The Proposal: Summer Scholarships

To promote educational opportunity, we propose a system of federally funded Summer Scholarships for young children. Summer Scholarships could be applied toward traditional summer school programs or enrichment programs. By concentrating on the summer learning environments of young children, our policy will help schools to ensure that by third grade students are ready for testing under No Child Left Behind. Just as importantly, a scholarship-based policy provides several advantages not fully realized in more traditional models:

- Parents will have more choice, allowing them to find the best program for their needs and those of their children.
- It will promote opportunity and integration.
- Competition between programs will promote quality and accountability.
- It will spawn greater experimentation with different approaches.

Child Eligibility

Our proposal focuses on the youngest students, with the aim of averting the development of achievement gaps before they grow insurmountable and before students face testing under the No Child Left Behind Act. Beginning in kindergarten and continuing through second grade, children would qualify for Scholarships for subsequent summers on the basis of either of two criteria:

- *School Readiness:* Children whose performance on a nationally standardized readiness assessment as a kindergartner places them below the 25th percentile would automatically qualify for Scholarships for the three subsequent summers.¹⁰
- *Family Income:* Children whose family income places them below the federal poverty line would be eligible for a Scholarship for the subsequent summer. In addition, children with higher family incomes would qualify for partial Scholarships on a sliding scale, with the amount declining as income increases. Children in families whose incomes are as much as four times the federal poverty line – or as high as \$77,000 for a married couple with two children – would be eligible for at least some Scholarship money under the more comprehensive of our two policy configurations.

Child eligibility would also be contingent on adequate child school attendance during the school year in order to promote responsibility on the part of parents, protect educational service providers from unfair financial risk, and ensure that program dollars are spent efficiently.

Provider Eligibility

Our program would deem a wide range of educational service providers eligible for reimbursement via Summer Scholarships. As with the Head Start and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, both public schools and private entities would be eligible to participate. Qualifying entities will feature group-based programs – our proposal is not intended to fund individual tutoring. Participating programs would be required to operate full-time for at least eight weeks of the summer and to devote at least half of each day to instruction in math and reading. They could enroll children not receiving scholarships, subject to the restrictions described below. Programs would have to re-apply for eligibility every year in order to guard against fraud and ensure high quality.

Program Administration

The Summer Scholarship program would be administered by state education agencies (SEAs) with federal oversight by the Department of Education. The Department of Education would establish national guidelines, certify state operation plans, and distribute funds to SEAs for payment to service providers. In particular, the Department would be responsible for approving the readiness tests used by states to establish readiness-based eligibility. SEAs would determine child eligibility and qualify service providers. They would also disseminate information to parents about eligibility and available providers, process applications from parents, coordinate the assignment of children to programs, and evaluate providers' performance. Finally, SEAs would be responsible for auditing of providers and oversight.

Child eligibility would be determined from school reports of child readiness levels and from applications that assess family resources and composition. The application for the National School Lunch Program might easily be modified to include additional information to determine income eligibility for Summer Scholarships. SEAs would notify parents of the Scholarship amount for which their children qualify. They would also provide them with information on participating programs for the upcoming summer, including any tuition or fees, program characteristics, and measures of parent and child satisfaction in various domains.

SEAs would obtain from participating programs the maximum enrollment they are prepared to handle during the upcoming summer. Our proposal would also require participating programs to state their total fees (if any) for the eight-week period, with per pupil administrative costs for the period added so that parents can determine whether they would incur out-of-pocket expenses over and above the Scholarship amount. The cost to parents would equal a program's per pupil cost plus its fees, minus the child's Scholarship. Parents would thus have financial incentives to enroll their children in programs with lower per pupil costs and fees. Programs could use alternative fee schedules for non-Scholarship children, but the sum of per pupil costs and fees charged to Scholarship children must not exceed the fee charged to non-Scholarship children.

Parents would submit a ranked list of their preferred programs, and SEAs would allocate children to programs, relying on randomization when demand for a program exceeds supply. No actual cash or cash equivalents would be received by families; the flow of funds would be from the Department of Education to the SEA to the provider chosen by a family.

To promote accountability, parental choice, and diversity, and to mitigate the possibility of "cherry picking", any participating program would be required to accept any Scholarship student assigned to it (subject to parents' ability to afford any remaining balance once the Scholarship funds have been applied). Once slots are allocated to Scholarship holders, programs could accept other children, but enrollment could not exceed 120% of that indicated earlier to the SEA. Programs would, of course, retain the right to discipline, suspend, or expel children with just cause, and children might face disqualification from future Summer Scholarships if payment of fees or child absenteeism becomes a problem.

SEAs would establish a process for measuring provider quality and parental satisfaction and would disseminate report cards to parents to facilitate informed decision-making and quality control. Participating providers would be required to furnish such information to SEAs. Child outcomes should be reported separately for readiness-based Scholarship students, income-based Scholarship

students, and other students so that programs with high concentrations of disadvantaged children are not unduly penalized. SEAs would also conduct their own evaluation of providers on an annual basis, whether or not the results are shared with parents. When combined with the provider application procedure, an essentially blind admissions process, and a requirement to accept all children assigned to one's program, these reporting requirements should adequately address incentives to cherry-pick the most promising students.

Reimbursement to educational service providers would be based on the total amount of scholarship funds awarded to children who the program serves, with an adjustment for average daily attendance. Providers would specify in their applications to SEAs how they would track attendance, but reported attendance levels should in all cases be tied to periods of the day devoted to instruction in math or reading. This requirement would give providers incentives to encourage regular attendance while at the same time giving families flexibility in terms of daily child arrival to or departure from the program. Reporting and reimbursement would occur at regular intervals over the course of the summer.

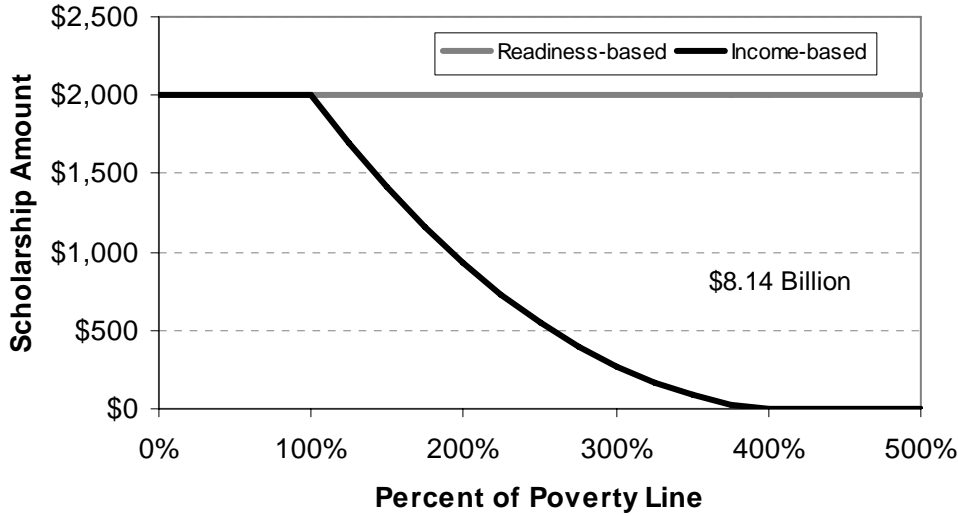
Cost Estimates

Any number of parameters in our Summer Scholarship proposal might be altered to produce different cost estimates. We highlight here two configurations that would assist a substantial number of families while remaining politically viable.

- *Proposal One:* The first configuration would set a scholarship level of \$2,000 for poor children and those with lagging school readiness. The income phase-out is depicted in Figure 2. Children whose family income is twice the poverty line would be eligible for a scholarship worth \$930. Those with incomes three times the poverty line would receive \$270, and the scholarship would be unavailable to children with incomes greater than four times the poverty line. We assume a participation rate of 65% among eligible children, and we assume that 85% of schools will administer school readiness tests once the policy is in place. Under these assumptions, the summer scholarship program would require \$8.1 billion in funding annually and would serve 5.8 million children. Twenty-nine percent of these children would fall in the bottom quartile of school readiness, 28% would be poor, and 46% of scholarship recipients would fall under at least one of these two designations.¹¹
- *Proposal Two:* A second version of the proposal would provide all children who have school readiness problems with a \$500 scholarship that would supplement any amount for which they already qualified on the basis of their family income (with a maximum scholarship of \$1,500). Thus, poor children would receive a scholarship worth \$1,500, as would somewhat wealthier children whose school readiness lags behind at the start of school. Nonpoor children at any given income level would receive a bigger scholarship if they started school academically behind. The phase-out of the scholarship as income increases is shown in Figure 3, which also shows the equivalent scholarship schedule for children with low school readiness scores. In this configuration, children with family income more than three times the poverty line receive no scholarship. The annual cost of this program is estimated at \$4.9 billion. This configuration would serve 4.6 million children, 30% of whom would lag in school readiness, 35% of whom would be poor, and 51% of whom would be poor or behind in readiness.

Figure 1: Scholarship Amount by Family Poverty Level

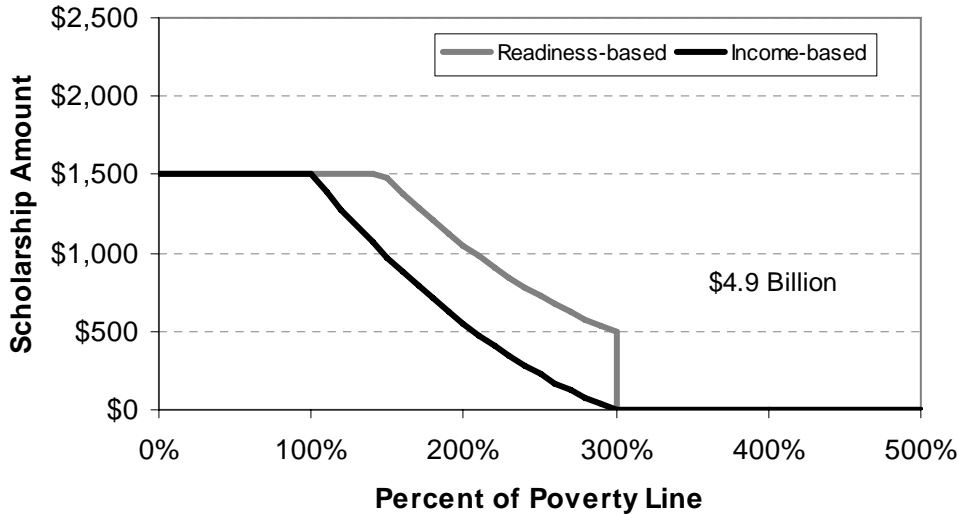
Option 1: \$2000 scholarships for both low-income and low-readiness children



| | | | | | |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Income for 4-person family with 2 children: | \$19,157 | \$38,314 | \$57,471 | \$76,628 | \$95,785 |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|

Figure 2: Scholarship Amount by Family Poverty Level

Option 2: \$1500 income-based scholarships with \$500 additional for low-readiness children



| | | | | | |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Income for 4-person family with 2 children: | \$19,157 | \$38,314 | \$57,471 | \$76,628 | \$95,785 |
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These cost estimates are overestimated in that they do not account for savings realized in other federal programs that currently fund summer school and summer enrichment programs. Over 40%

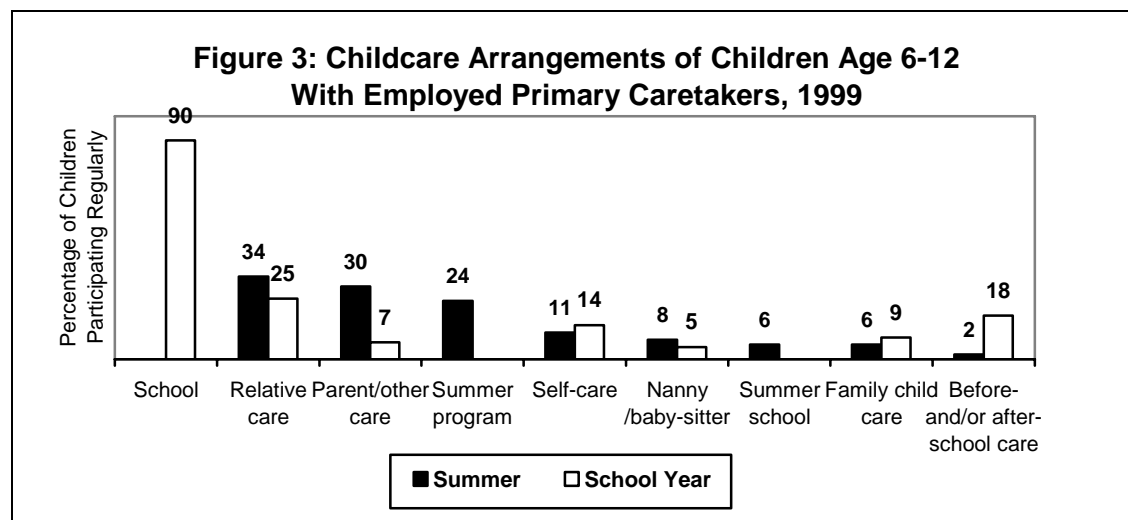
of Title I schools, for example, use funds from that program to pay for summer school, and perhaps another 25% have summer programs that are effectively subsidized by the program.¹² The Migrant Education Program, 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, and Summer Nutrition Programs also fund summer school. In addition, the Treasury would realize reduced expenditures on federal childcare tax credits and programs.

The nature of our proposal requires a strong administrative capability to ensure that programs meet the requirements for eligibility and that no illegal cherry-picking occurs. Anticipating this requirement, our proposal earmarks five percent of program funding toward administration – two-thirds more than that earmarked by Head Start for administration.

A Side Benefit: Provision of Summer Childcare

Another attractive feature of our proposal is that it would alleviate the childcare needs of parents during the summer. In fully 71% of two-parent families with school-age children, both parents work at least part-time for at least part of the year. Four out of five single mothers with school-age children work, and 60% of these women worked full-time year-round.¹³ Thus it is no surprise that parents rely on others to help care for their children. These outside caregivers include relatives, home-based childcare providers, and, of course, the public education system. The last of these, however, essentially shuts down over the summer. In the absence of publicly provided childcare on the scale of the public school system, many parents scramble to make safe, reliable, and educational arrangements for their children when the school year ends.

The significance of this disruption is clearly seen in a recent study of Minnesota parents that found that while the amount of time *preschoolers* spend in the care of relatives, friends, and neighbors does not increase much once summer begins, it doubles for children between the ages of six and fourteen.¹⁴ As shown in Figure 3 below, the childcare settings of children nationwide shift notably in the summer.



Note: Estimates show the percentage of children using arrangements or self-care regularly, at least once a week in the past month, while the primary caretaker was working. Children may participate in more than one program. (Data from the 1999 National Survey of America’s Families; chart adapted from Capizzano, Adelman, and Stagner 2002: 6)

In addition, the amount of *time* that children spend in different arrangements changes during the summer. For example, while the percentage of children in self-care actually decreases slightly in the summer, the average amount of time in self-care increases from 4.8 to 10.3 hours per week.¹⁵

There are also indications of disparities among certain categories of parents and their children with respect to summer activities. Children in higher-income families are more likely than other children to participate in organized activities during the summer, for example, and those families who pay for summer childcare pay far more, on average, than is paid by lower-income families.¹⁶ While we have little direct information on disparities in the quality of summer activities, these differences are likely to indicate a situation in which some families disadvantaged by income or geography are unable to find affordable summer care that will help children to reach their potential. That the cost of childcare for those who pay declines in the summer for low-income parents but increases for upper-income parents, when combined with the fact that both groups are equally likely to pay for care, also hints that economically disadvantaged children receive inferior summer childcare.¹⁷

To address parents' childcare needs, participating programs would be required to increase their hours of operation beyond those offered by traditional summer school. While roughly two-thirds of Title I schools offer summer school programs, for instance, they typically add just 70 to 100 hours of instruction to the school year.¹⁸ Our proposal would require programs to operate for nine hours per day, five days per week.

Conclusion

The No Child Left Behind Act has forced failing schools to be held accountable, yet it has not addressed the fact that children are in school for only three quarters of the year. Though we agree that schools should be held accountable, they cannot be blamed for diminished rates of learning and widening disparities that occur during the summer. Our proposal complements No Child Left Behind by giving children a "summer boost" in the years before third grade, when children first take the tests mandated by NCLB. It stands to reinvigorate faith in public education by addressing early scholastic inequality for which schools are not responsible.

Summer Scholarships have great potential for broad public support. Voters consistently rank education as a top policy priority, and a majority of voters express support for a larger federal role in public education.¹⁹ Furthermore, our program is designed to benefit a large number of middle-class students and students with school readiness problems at all income levels. Evidence suggests that perhaps half the inequality in math and reading achievement and 35 to 40 percent of inequality in vocabulary achievement at the start of school occurs *within* families, so the goal of reducing such disparities need not pit families, schools, and states against one another.²⁰

NCLB's requirement that schools boost the achievement levels of their disadvantaged students or be deemed failing will also give broad incentives to provide richer learning opportunities to those who enter school already behind. And by increasing the affordability of childcare and promoting the market for quality summer programs, our proposal should simultaneously ease the burdens on working parents while providing more and better-suited options for their children's summer activities.

Timely, popular, affordable, innovative, and effective, our Summer Scholarship proposal is not only a practical means for helping parents juggle the demands of work and family. It is also the next logical step in federal education reform.

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Notes

¹ See for instance Heyns 1978, 1987; Cooper et al. 1996; Alexander et al. 2001; Reardon 2003; Downey et al. 2004. For details on general methodological difficulties in measuring scholastic achievement, see the methodological appendix at http://newvisioninstitute.org/New_Vision-CAP_Summer_Scholarship_Brief_Appendix. A number of these difficulties bias research results against finding summer learning loss.

² Heyns found that raw scores declined on average between fifth and sixth grade on tests of arithmetic computation, science, and “social studies study skills” but not on seven other tests. Alexander, Entwisle, and colleagues reported that reading and math scale scores declined among the most disadvantaged students during the summers between first and third grade. There were few declines, however, among relatively advantaged students or in summers between third and fifth grade. Reardon found no evidence of absolute declines between kindergarten and first grade in math or reading. Finally, in a review of the literature on summer learning loss that includes numerous earlier and unpublished studies, Harris Cooper and his colleagues (1996) reported fairly strong evidence of absolute declines in learning for math computation and spelling, but otherwise few consistent findings. Drawing strong conclusions from the review is not possible, however, as the authors do not correctly distinguish between studies using metrics that do or do not allow one to consider absolute changes.

³ In a large study of Atlanta public school children from the mid-1970’s, Barbara Heyns (1978) reported that on eight of nine tests, parental income had a bigger effect on summer learning rates than on learning rates during the school year. Doris Entwisle, Karl Alexander, and their colleagues surveyed Baltimore public school students in the mid-1980’s (see Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2001 for a summary). They found that math and reading score gaps between the most disadvantaged students and the most advantaged students grew during the summers between first and third grade. Gaps between the most disadvantaged students and even moderately disadvantaged students grew between third and fifth grade. The large, nationally representative Sustaining Effects Study (from the mid-1970’s) found that socioeconomic gaps in reading grew during the summers between first and fifth grade, but math gaps may have declined somewhat (see Heyns 1987). Using a nationally representative sample from the late 1990’s, Sean Reardon (2003) found that math and reading scores diverged according to socioeconomic status during the summer between kindergarten and first grade. Downey and his colleagues (2004) – in what is probably the most sophisticated study to date – used the same data and came to the same conclusion. The evidence on whether summers exacerbate the racial achievement gap is ambiguous and inconsistent. Our reading of the evidence on black-white seasonal gaps is that more work on nationally representative samples is required before confident conclusions may be drawn.

⁴ Heyns (1978) is perhaps the most oft-cited study. Entwisle and Alexander found that the gap between the most and least advantaged students in Baltimore grew more during the summer than during the school year. This was true for math but not for reading when they compared the most disadvantaged children to moderately disadvantaged peers. Reading gaps between children of different socioeconomic backgrounds grew more during the summer in only three of five student cohorts in the Sustaining Effects Study, and the differences between the summer and school-year patterns were very small. Unlike the Atlanta and Baltimore surveys, the Sustaining Effects Study was nationally representative. So, too, was Reardon’s study, which found no evidence that summer gaps in reading and math widened more than they did during the school year. On the other hand, the Downey et al. study found that socioeconomic gaps increased faster between kindergarten and first grade than they did during the school year. Insufficiently nuanced interpretations of this literature are offered by Borman 2000; Bracey 2002; Cooper 2003; Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson 1997; and Fairchild and Boulay 2002.

⁵ Downey et al. 2004

⁶ Meta-evaluation works by treating each individual study as a unit of observation. The researcher looks at each individual study and records or distills that study’s “effect size.” In addition, the researcher codes the study according to a series of pre-determined criteria, such as type of research design (e.g. random assignment), characteristics of the population served by the program (e.g. low-income, rural, etc.), or

characteristics of the program itself (e.g. academic only, includes enrichment, etc.). This allows the researcher to then examine how the effect sizes of programs vary by these criteria. They might determine, for example, that summer programs seem to work substantially better for urban children rather than rural children.

⁷ Cooper et al. 2000

⁸ Kim 2002. Some earlier research found that compensatory summer school programs are ineffective (see Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson 1997; Heyns 1987), but as these researchers sometimes note, many of the programs studied were of low intensity, were half-day programs, and lasted just six weeks. Attendance is also a problem in many current summer school programs – rates of attendance may be as low as 40 to 60 percent in some cities (Harrington-Lueker 2000). Finally, there are remarkably few studies that rely on random assignment. We believe that the comprehensiveness of the meta-analyses provides the strongest evidence on the matter, but it is worth noting that the programs our policy would encourage would be of longer duration than the typical compensatory program studied in the earlier research. We also discount the importance of findings that relatively advantaged children tend to benefit more from summer academic programs than disadvantaged children do. We do so because participation in summer programs other than compulsory summer school is currently much more common among economically advantaged children (Capizzano, Adelman, and Stagner 2002), so the net effect of increasing affordability will likely be greater participation among the poor and a reduction in scholastic inequality. Furthermore, our program is more generous to academically and economically disadvantaged students and designed to reduce disparities in the quality of summer programs by promoting parental choice.

⁹ West et al. 2000

¹⁰ This would apply to children whose schools assess the readiness of incoming students prior to or early in the kindergarten year. The proposal would not require schools to conduct such testing, but we anticipate that the opportunity to provide children with scholarship funds, as well as demand from parents, would provide clear incentives to adopt readiness assessments. Schools could use any assessment from a registry of approved tests that have been nationally normed.

¹¹ We assume federal administrative costs equal to five percent of non-administrative expenses. For details on our cost figures, please see the appendix at [http://newvisioninstitute.org/NewVision-CAP Summer Scholarship Brief Appendix](http://newvisioninstitute.org/NewVision-CAP_Summer_Scholarship_Brief_Appendix).

¹² U.S. Department of Education 1999; 2002

¹³ Authors' calculations from March 2004 Current Population Survey.

¹⁴ Wilder Research Center 2002

¹⁵ Capizzano, Adelman, and Stagner 2002

¹⁶ Le Menestrel 2002; Capizzano, Adelman and Stagner 2002

¹⁷ Capizzano, Adelman, and Stagner 2002

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Education 2002

¹⁹ Center on Policy Attitudes 2000

²⁰ Authors' calculations from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

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