

This Is Your Brain on Summer

By Jeff Smink

BALTIMORE
 THE American ideal of lazy summers filled with fun has an unintended consequence: If students are not engaged in learning over the summer, they lose skills in math and reading. Summers off are one of the most important, yet least acknowledged, causes of underachievement in our schools.

Decades of research confirm that summer learning loss is real. According to a report released last month by the RAND Corporation, the average summer learning loss in math and reading for American students amounts to one month per

180-day school calendar creates an incredibly inefficient system of learning. We cannot afford to spend nearly 10 months of every year devoting enormous amounts of intellect, energy and money to promoting student learning and achievement, and then walk away from that investment every summer.

This waste is preventable. According to the RAND report, good summer programs with individualized instruction, parental involvement and small classes

can keep children from falling behind and reduce the achievement gap.

Yet many districts, including New York City, have not fully embraced the summer's potential. In New York, around 34,000 third through eighth graders are required to take summer school classes this year in order to be promoted to the next grade. The classes typically last only half the day, leaving many on their own for the afternoon. And since such classes are primarily remedial, they

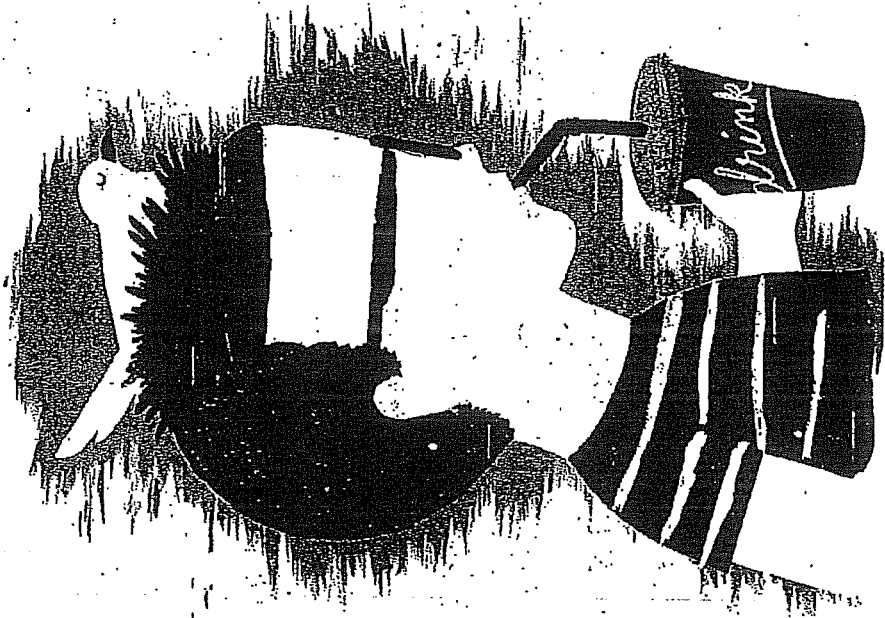
often carry a stigma that can affect struggling students and their parents. Fortunately, this remedial and often punitive model, which accounts for summer school's bad reputation, is beginning to change. Dennis M. Walcott, New York's schools chancellor, has expressed interest in more innovative summer school programming in collaboration with community partners.

Districts in Pittsburgh, Chicago, Providence and Baltimore have begun to move away from the remedial model and embrace a new vision of summer school that is both fun and an essential component of their education reform agendas. Pittsburgh is offering full-day summer programs framed as "camp" for all their elementary and middle school students that incorporate academics along with enrichment activities like judo and rowing.

Such programs are in high demand. A 2010 report by the Afterschool Alliance found that, while only 25 percent of students participated in summer learning programs, 83 percent of parents supported spending public funds on such programs and 67 percent of low-income parents said their children would enroll in a summer program if they could.

All students in high-need schools should have at least six weeks of full-day summer school that is comprehensive and engaging. Of course, summer school costs money, and money is tight. But there are many existing financing streams that can be tapped for summer schools, like the federal Title I program and school improvement grants. Schools could also do a better job of partnering with complementary summer programs run by libraries, parks and youth employment agencies.

Americans cherish the notion of summer as a time of relaxation and fun, but it comes at a heavy cost to poor students and the schools that serve them. This fall, despite any progress made during the school year, millions of students in urban communities will come back to school further behind than they were last spring. Until our nation addresses summer learning loss, efforts to close the achievement gap will continue to fall short. □



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Time out of class sets students back.

year. More troubling is that it disproportionately affects low-income students; they lose two months of reading skills, while their higher-income peers — whose parents can send them to enriching camps, take them on educational vacations and surround them with books during the summer — make slight gains. A study from Johns Hopkins University of students in Baltimore found that about two-thirds of the achievement gap between lower- and higher-income ninth graders could be explained by summer learning loss during the elementary school years.

This learning loss is cumulative, summer after summer. It has a tremendous impact on students' success, including high school completion, post-secondary education and work force preparedness.

As a result, no matter how effective other school reforms are, our traditional

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