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## Summer School that Feels More Like Fun and Less Like Punishment

All it takes is 20 days of class time to combat ‘summer slide.’ New programs make kids want to attend by teaching judo and salsa dancing along with math and science.



Photograph by Roger Cremers/laif/Redux

**L**ast year, 10-year-old Arielle Louis attended an unusual kind of summer school. For five weeks, at no cost, she and other kids from low-income families in Boston took a ferry to an island in the Boston Harbor. Her mornings were spent studying math, reading and writing, but in the afternoons, clad in rubber boots and carrying a bucket, Arielle looked for creatures in the salt marsh, studied how fungi grow and tried to coax snails from their shells. In her downtime, she climbed obstacle courses.

Before that summer at the Thompson Island Outward Bound program, Arielle had been a solid B student in science, but now her mother witnessed a transformation: Arielle was beginning to think of herself as a scientist.

“Every time she would come home, she would tell me how she learned about a different part of the science,” says Mireille Louis, a single mother originally from Haiti, who in past years had struggled to find affordable, educational summer activities for her daughter. “She began making me take her to the library.” There, three days a week, Arielle would pull out books on dolphins, whales and ocean life. “I was on cloud nine,” says her mother. This past year, in sixth grade, Arielle earned an A-plus in science, and this summer she’s scheduled to return to the Thompson Island program for a five-day overnight.

The Thompson island program is part of a larger trend not only in Boston but across the country, to transform the concept of summer school. Over the last 10 years, educators have begun moving away from remedial, mandatory programs that can feel like punishment to struggling students. Instead, they’re trying out voluntary programs replete with activities that, they hope, will make kids want to attend.

The new summer school approach is intended to combat the “summer slide” that, a wealth of research has found, disproportionately affects students from low-income families, who fall behind their wealthier peers when school is out.

*Summertime is yet one more factor in a persistent and sizable achievement gap linked to income (as well as race), which translates to disparities later on in educational attainment and employment.*

“We realized that we can work our hardest all year round, and have the best possible teachers, but if we’re not addressing what’s going on during the summertime it might all be for naught,” says Christine Cray, the director of student services reforms for the Pittsburgh Public Schools, which launched the free Summer Dreamers Academy in 2010.

Rather than targeting just those kids at risk of

failure, schools and communities have begun to offer programs designed for kids considered high-need—whether low-income, low-achieving, or both. And new research suggests that when such programs can get the mix of academics and enticing activities just right—and, crucially, when they can get kids to show up most days—such programs can put a dent in the summertime learning inequities that poor children face.

“We know [low-income children] learn at the same rates as peers from other income levels” during the school year, says Monica Logan, the vice president of program and systems quality at the National Summer Learning Association. “The challenge is, that faucet turns off in the summer.”

After all, middle-income children get all sorts of opportunities for learning over the summer, both at private camps and when their parents take them on trips to museums, libraries and historical sites. But poorer kids may not have the funds for camp, and their parents may not have the time or money for excursions. Research suggests kids from low-income families are increasingly likely to spend their summers watching TV and playing computer games.

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**T**he new summer programs are being tried out in school districts and communities across the country, in places including Dallas, Duval County, Fla., Charleston, S.C, and New York City. These programs are often free or low-cost, and may include meals and transportation, like the programs at 31 sites across Boston that will serve 2,200 students this summer. To keep kids coming, these revamped summer schools mix academics with arts, science and sports, offering such things as salsa dancing, fencing, filmmaking, music classes, Brazilian martial arts, archery and sailing, in settings as diverse as a zoo, an aquarium, public schools, college campuses and nature preserves.

They are funded a number of ways, including through federal and local money, philanthropic organizations, and local community groups. Some programs fund themselves by enrolling a mix of paying and scholarship students. In Boston, where this kind of summer programming started in 2010,

the \$2 million cost is being shared by the Boston Public Schools and a group called Boston After School & Beyond. In many cities, educators say they'd like to scale up.

“People ask us all the time what would it take to serve more students, and we say, ‘More money,’” says Cray, whose Summer Dreamers Academy will serve about 2,000 students this summer. (Program highlights: African drumming and dance, radio broadcasting and judo taught by instructors who were alternates at the Olympics.) The program had to cut back from a peak of 5,000 students after the loss of Obama-era stimulus funds.

In recent years, the Wallace Foundation, a philanthropic organization that supports learning initiatives for disadvantaged children, funded a randomized controlled trial looking at 5,600 students in five cities, including Boston and Pittsburgh, over the course of two summers. Some kids were assigned to attend free five- to six-week summer learning programs with at least three hours of daily academics, and some weren't. The study encountered problems with attendance; summer, after all, is traditionally considered a time for play. The programs are competing with other activities as well as outside circumstances, like kids who have to care for younger siblings over the summer, and families who move away.

But for the 60 percent of children considered high attenders—they came to the program 20 or more days over the summer—the gains were impressive. Controlling for prior achievement and for demographics, the study found that high attenders in 2013 did better on state math tests than “control” students. High attenders in 2014 showed gains over the control group in both math and English language arts, and those gains persisted through the following school year.

The challenge with summer learning programs, then, is not just how to serve as many children as possible with limited funds, but how to ensure that children who enroll actually show up.

*If 20 days is all it takes to make meaningful progress toward closing the achievement gap, then each one of those days has to count.*

“That’s a big challenge, the summer attendance issue,” says Ann Stone, the senior research and evaluation officer at Wallace. “That’s a longer-term goal—to change the attitudes around summer.”

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**T**he new summer school approach is not just about academics, though. According to the Wallace study, there’s some evidence that summer learning programs boost kids’ social-emotional capabilities. At Thompson Island, where Outward Bound activities like belaying up a 62-foot alpine tower are intended to teach skills like leadership and self-reliance, outside evaluators found kids improved in skills like communication, taking initiative and relating to adults. And there may be more subtle gains to be achieved by giving low-income kids more of the experiences that wealthier kids take for granted.

“Closing the experience gap closes the achievement gap,” says Robin Berlinsky, the executive director of a Charleston, S.C. organization called Engaging Creative Minds, which since 2014 has run a Summer Steam Institute that now serves 200 students in two locations. A former elementary school teacher, Berlinsky says she can recall teaching units on erosion to children from different backgrounds, and witnessing how past experiences lead to connections that made learning faster. “Students that had walked in sand, been near water, seen a tidal creek or a lake, those kids were immediately talking and thinking through and problem-solving. And then some kids were just looking at this: Why does the sand run through my fingers? They were having a very basic experience with the material.”

And indeed, for those kids who attend the programming at Thompson Island, many live in a housing facility a mile from the water and yet have never spent time on the water. Arielle Louis had never been on a boat before her first visit. Her mother credits this little island out in the harbor with jumpstarting her daughter’s new passion—Arielle has become fascinated by the science of prosthetics, and was recently accepted into a selective math and science school for next year.

“If this was a private program, there’s no way we would have been able to afford it,” Mireille Louis says. “It was a godsend.”

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