

SCHOOL'S OUT: A LOOK AT SUMMER LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

Issue 7 • July 2004

IN THIS COMMENTARY

- 2** How do Children and Youth Spend Their Summers?
- 3** What does the Programmatic Landscape Look Like in the Summer?
- 3** Can Summer Learning Opportunities Make a Difference?
- 6** Beyond the "Dog Days" of Summer: Policy Opportunities and Challenges

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The Out-of-School-Time Policy Commentary series is written and published by **The Forum for Youth Investment** with support from the **Charles Stewart Mott Foundation**

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SUGGESTED CITATION:

The Forum for Youth Investment. (2004). *Out-of-School-Time Policy Commentary #7: School's Out: A Look at Summer Learning and Engagement*. Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies, Inc. Available online at www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/comment/ostpc7.pdf

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- Out-of-School-Time Policy Commentary #4: After-School for All? Exploring Access and Equity in After-School Programs
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- Out-of-School-Time Policy Commentary #6: Participation During Out-of-School Time: Taking a Closer Look

The word *summer* brings to mind images of a relaxed, unstructured season – a time markedly different from other seasons of the year. In the United States we have a particularly entrenched notion that summer is different – a notion reflected in popular assumptions about summer as a “break” and reinforced by carefree depictions of summer that abound in popular culture. As Ron Fairchild, executive director of the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University, put it, “There are significant cultural expectations that kids should be ‘off’ over the summer.”*

Surveys conducted in 2002 and 2003 by the Academy for Educational Development (AED) found that more than half of parents (55 percent) want their school-age kids to have fun and relax during the summer.^{1,2,3} Learning new things and being better prepared for school were reported as summer priorities by less than 15 percent of parents. Almost no parents advocated summer structures resembling children’s school-year schedules.

While relaxed summers may be the cultural norm, several factors suggest a need to question the thinking and expectations of policymakers and the public and to acknowledge the unique opportunity presented by summertime. Beyond the perennial supervision challenge that so many working parents face, summer learning loss or the impact of summer idleness on student achievement, pressure related to academic standards, increased awareness of the achievement gap and efforts to eliminate social promotion now constitute a powerful new set of realities that is beginning to challenge age-old perceptions of summer.

If we imagine a continuum of summer possibilities with total idleness on one end and formal learning opportunities on the other, the AED survey suggests that most parents’ desires probably fall roughly in the middle – they want a loose structure that ensures their children are safe and not too bored, but they don’t necessarily see summer as a time for formal learning, especially not if formal learning essentially means more school. Until recently, most policymakers also fell roughly in the middle, offering minimal public supports to keep kids off the streets in the summer. But unprecedented levels of pressure on the education system to improve student achievement may mean that a new policy window has opened for thinking through what learning could and should look like during the summer.

A serious rethinking of the school calendar, still based on an agrarian model designed to ensure additional summer help on the farm, seems logical and would allow for a broad and rich conceptualization of year-round learning. But that major a policy shift will not happen overnight. In the meantime there is real momentum for increasing attention to the summer as a unique opportunity to engage children and youth in positive, enriching learning experiences.

The policy landscape related to summer learning is not tension-free, however. Not surprisingly, many of the school-year tensions that exist between commu-

nity-based organizations and schools related to questions of content and approach for after-school programs continue into the summer. Will the press for learning during the summer result in remediation only or a commitment to helping all children and youth develop skills? Will it focus narrowly on academics or will it reflect a broader commitment to learning and enrichment?

In 2002, the Washington Post raised these tensions by accusing city leadership of choosing “fun” over “learning” by funding community-based programming as opposed to traditional summer school. The press portrayed what was in fact a collaborative effort across city agencies, nonprofits and schools as an either/or situation, pitting school-based academic support against community-based enrichment. In reality, while facing a significant budget deficit, key city stakeholders worked together with schools and nonprofits to develop an intentional summer strategy. While more school is a logical knee-jerk response to summer learning loss and low student performance, it is not entirely clear that traditional summer school represents the best or the only answer. Many cities are taking an “all hands on deck” approach, activating the full range of formal and informal cultural and educational resources on behalf of children and youth during the summer.

The goal of this commentary is to inform and broaden the policy conversation about summer learning and engagement by exploring the questions, How do children and youth actually spend their summers? What does the programmatic landscape look like in the summer? Can summer learning opportunities make a difference? We close by discussing several specific policy challenges and opportunities related to summer learning.

HOW DO CHILDREN AND YOUTH SPEND THEIR SUMMERS?

“Middle and upper class kids have access to a lot of enrichment opportunities. They read, they are exposed to new things, they go on trips, participate in science camps, computer camps. There are even opportunities to send your child to colleges to learn foreign languages. It’s great, but most poor kids simply don’t have those opportunities.”

- JANE QUINN*

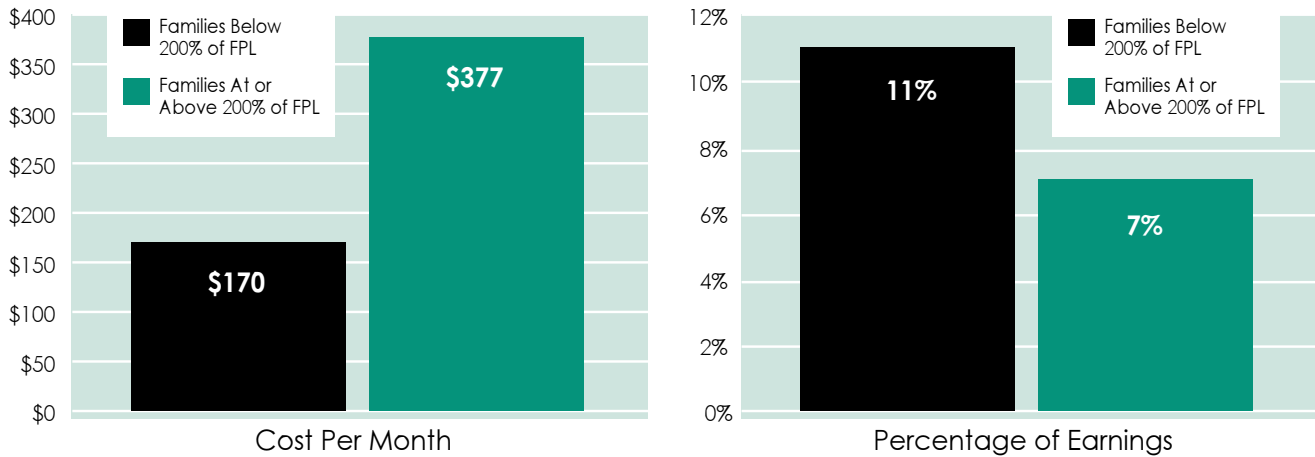
For the majority of young people, the summer months stand out as markedly different than the rest of the year. School is out for the overwhelming majority of students, which means time in various activities shifts substantially. But with relatively weak public support for children and

youth during the summer, most families are left to create and pay for their own mix of summer activities. With roughly ten hours a day to fill rather than a few hours after school, resources play a huge role in determining who gets what. While studies are not as robust as they could be, much of what we know about the distribution of opportunities in the general out-of-school time space carries over to the summer and, at times, is exacerbated.

Family income matters. The costs of summer are borne largely by families. Among working families with school-age children, 41 percent pay for child care during the summer. While the percentage of families paying for child care during the summer is roughly the same (44 percent of low income and 40 percent of higher income families), the average expenditures across income levels are significantly different – \$170 per month for low-income families vs. \$377 per month for higher income families. More importantly, those expenditures reflect significantly different percentages of family income. Families making 200 percent or less of the federal poverty line spend an average of 11 percent of their earnings on summer care, while higher-income families spend only seven percent.⁶ Low-income families spend more of what they earn and get what are likely to be lower quality opportunities. See Figure 1 for a comparison of summer childcare expenses by income group.

Age also matters. Patterns vary substantially depending on age, with fewer 10- to 12-year-olds spending time in relative or non-relative care than six to nine year-olds, and a higher percentage spending time in self-care (28 percent vs. one percent). Ten to 12 year-olds are also more likely to attend summer school (11 percent).⁷ See Figure 2 for a breakdown of summer care arrangements by age group.

Because much of the research about summer comes from a supervision and child care perspective, there is little data to draw on to paint an accurate picture of how older youth spend their summers. The good news is that among school-year after-school programs geared toward teens, 70 percent provide programming during the summer.⁸ The bad news is that summer jobs, which represent some of the most developmentally appropriate activities for teens, are increasingly difficult to come by. The employment rate among teens has dropped dramatically since 2000. This summer, only 42 to 43 out of every 100 teens looking for work can expect to find a job compared to 52 out of every 100 in 2000. Both race/ethnicity and income are associated with teen summer employment rates, with poor black youth least likely to find jobs.⁹

FIGURE 1: CHILD CARE SPENDING PATTERNS OF LOW & HIGHER INCOME FAMILIES (1999)

Approximately one-third of children and youth under 13 participate in at least one formal summer program; three-quarters are in a form of supervised care during the summer, and four percent attend schools with year-round or modified calendars.^{10,11} These percentages are not mutually exclusive; the same individual may participate in program-based, family-based and self care during the summer months, and the proportion of time spent in one, some, or all of the possible arrangements and settings varies. The typical child's summer probably consists of a mix of formal and informal activities, with a combination of supervision arrangements.

Roughly ten percent of children and youth participate in summer school. The percentages are higher in large urban areas, where about one in five students attended summer school in 2000. In 1998, 27 percent of all school districts in the United States, and 52 percent of districts with large numbers of poor and/or minority students offered summer school. In many states and localities, participation is mandatory for specific groups of students – those performing under a certain level or at risk of not advancing to the next grade. Most districts point to remediation and increasing achievement scores as the key purpose of summer school, with just 16 percent of districts surveyed noting enrichment as an aim.¹²

Up to two-thirds of children and youth may not be participating in any summer program. Time spent in productive, high-yield activities has numerous benefits for children and youth,¹³ and summer presents an ideal opportunity to use large blocks of time to support a range of developmental needs. But up to two-thirds of children may not be participating in any structured summer program. For a significant subset of these children, summer's long hours mean large blocks of idle time. The probability

for losses during this time – academic, social and otherwise – is significant.

WHAT DOES THE PROGRAMMATIC LANDSCAPE LOOK LIKE IN THE SUMMER?

“Summer is an opportunity for all kinds of creative programming that can't happen during a few hours after school, things like field trips and outdoor education. It is also an opportunity for ground-breaking partnerships between youth agencies and both formal and informal educators.”

– RON FAIRCHILD*

A range of opportunities does exist for children and youth in the summer – summer camps, community-based programs, parks and recreation activities, libraries, summer employment opportunities and school-based programs, to name some of the familiar types. In addition to programs offered in the summer only, many programs that operate during the school year continue and expand their operations into the summer months. More than 65 percent of 21st Century Community Learning Center programs operate in the summer months, for example.¹⁴

Highlighted on page 4 are a handful of approaches to summer learning and engagement. Within each type, we identify specific examples of promising programs that reach a broad range of children and youth and target those most in need.

CAN SUMMER LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

“We know that all young people experience significant learning losses when they're not engaged in constructive learning activities. The research goes back to 1906, so this is one of those areas in youth policy

CAMPS

More than 12,000 day and resident camps exist in the United States. Each year, more than ten million children and adults attend camp.¹⁵

What they offer: Camps were first designed in the 1800s to offer youth a yearly recreational escape from the difficulties of life. Much of the original intent holds true today, but camps have become as diverse as the populations they serve. Ranging from traditional to specialty camps, summer camps offer young people a diverse set of community experiences, providing opportunities to connect with peers, engage in numerous enrichment activities, and spend time away from home in a positive environment. In recent years, camps serving young people with special needs (e.g., Burn victims, HIV positive, cancer patients, etc.) have offered these youth a unique opportunity to explore, learn and have fun.

One Approach: The Oceanography Camp for Girls, located in St. Petersburg, Florida offers a hands-on, multidisciplinary and practical experience that encourages young girls to pursue careers and opportunities in the sciences. Participants engage in field activities designed to highlight the interdisciplinary nature of the marine sciences – physics, geology, biology, and chemistry – and gain some valuable hands-on experience both in the field and in the labs, working alongside graduate students who staff the program.¹⁶

LIBRARIES

More than one third of libraries evaluated in a recent survey reported participation of more than 200 children in their summer learning programs, annually.¹⁷

What they offer: Libraries can serve as ideal settings for young people by providing basic structure and consistency, as well as encouraging autonomy and self-directed learning. Libraries offer rich environments in which young people have access to a range of activity options, supportive adults, resources, and information. Summer library initiatives offer young people opportunities to engage in reading programs and contests, special events, job opportunities and skill-building activities.¹⁸

One Approach: The Youth Internship Program of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland serves young people from low-income communities. Participating teens are involved in a range of experiences, including working with the summer reading program, developing library public service announcements, providing homework assistance and assisting others with library use. Youth participants gain skills in technology, leadership, customer service and mentoring and receive community service credits recognized by the school system.

SUMMER ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS

School-age children (age 6-12) spend an average of 23 hours per week in summer programming.¹⁹

What they offer: Summer enrichment programs – whether offered by schools, faith-based, community, youth-serving or civic organizations – are essentially the summer equivalent of after-school programs. They offer young people a range of traditional opportunities from academic support to enrichment, as well as more innovative options to develop skills through internships, fellowships, community service and civic engagement. Promising summer programming models capitalize on the opportunities that extended hours offer. They often target underserved youth populations, develop creative community-based partnerships, and present creative opportunities for young people to work, learn and take action with and for their communities.

One Approach: The CAS/Ailey Camp, sponsored by the Children's Aid Society and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, is a program designed for youth ages 10 to 14. Each summer, approximately 80 young people spend eight weeks training with professional dancers, learning the basic techniques of ballet, modern dance, jazz and tap. At the end of each week, participants celebrate their accomplishments with various cultural and recreational field trips. At the close of the summer program, students present what they've learned in a high-energy performance to family and friends, including the dance theater's artistic director and world-renowned artist Judith Jamison.

FAITH-BASED PROGRAMS

Nearly 40 percent of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 have attended a summer camp run by a religious organization at least once.²⁰

What they offer: Faith communities — churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other places of worship — can play a key role in nurturing the healthy development of children and youth by offering a range of opportunities for involvement in youth groups, community service opportunities, after-school and summer programming, and more.

One Approach: The Boston-area Youth Organizing Project (BYOP), a youth-led organization working through schools and congregations to create positive social change, began eight years ago as the Roxbury Church Collaborative and is affiliated with the church-based Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO). BYOP's Summer Training Institute offers leadership development and opportunities for participants to identify key issues of concern and take action. When funding cuts threatened nearly 3,000 summer jobs in 2003, BYOP youth addressed this issue directly and organized a successful Save Summer Jobs Campaign which resulted in the restoration of \$1 million from the proposed cuts, \$750,000 in new funding from Boston Connects, an increase in the number of small business employment positions available to young people, and several job opportunities with GBIO.

SPORTS PROGRAMS

More than 38 million American youth participated in organized sports programs in the year 2000.²¹

What they offer: In addition to the physical benefits of regular activity, research cites certain physiological and social benefits to youth participation in sport-related activities.²² Sports programs not only serve as an alternative to risky behaviors, they also offer youth opportunities for companionship, support and social interaction. Highly-skilled youth avoid off-season "skill loss" through such programs, and all youth can greatly benefit from an environment that promotes safe and healthy peer and adult interactions, clear expectations and opportunities to belong.

One Approach: Team-Up for Youth in the San Francisco Bay Area is a neighborhood-based initiative that has partnered with agencies in ten low-income neighborhoods to increase the quality and capacity of out-of-school sports programs. Goals of the Community Sports Organizing Project include increasing the number of available programs, addressing low participation rates among specific youth populations (i.e., girls) and engaging parents and members of the community in supporting high-quality programming.²³

PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

21st Century Community Learning Centers, often collaborations between schools and community organizations, provide enrichment programming for children, youth and families in more than 1,400 communities. More than 65 percent of programs operate during the summer.²⁴

What they offer: Through collaborations between public schools and nonprofit organizations that operate summer programs, young people benefit from comprehensive educational programs that combine an academic focus with enrichment activities. Young people who participate in enriching programs show significant progress academically.²⁵

One Approach: The Summer Model Partnership, in Baltimore, Maryland, was piloted in 2003 by several community allies, including the Baltimore City Public School System and the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University. By connecting seven public schools (serving young people in grades K-12) with seven enrichment programs, this initiative explored strategies for improving the quality and quantity of local summer programs by identifying a need for coordinated citywide efforts that bridged achievement gaps for low income students. One key component of the project was hiring college students who served as program interns and worked with student participants throughout the day in both the school and program setting helping to carry over the academic concepts that young people were learning into their enrichment activities.

and education where we have a strong research base to support kids being involved in these kinds of opportunities over the summer.”

- RON FAIRCHILD*

Academically-oriented programs can stem summer learning loss. Research dating back a century suggests that all youth experience losses if they are not engaged in learning. The patterns are predictable – lower-income youth experience bigger losses, and, as youth get older, the gaps between high and low achievers become greater.²⁶ Generally, low-income youth experience a three-month loss in reading performance over the summer, and all youth experience roughly two months’ worth of losses in math computation.^{27,28} While low-, middle-, and high-income youth made similar school-year gains in the early grades, summer learning loss may account for 80 percent of the achievement gap between advantaged and economically disadvantaged youth. Gender and race do not appear to have an influence on summer learning loss.^{29,30}

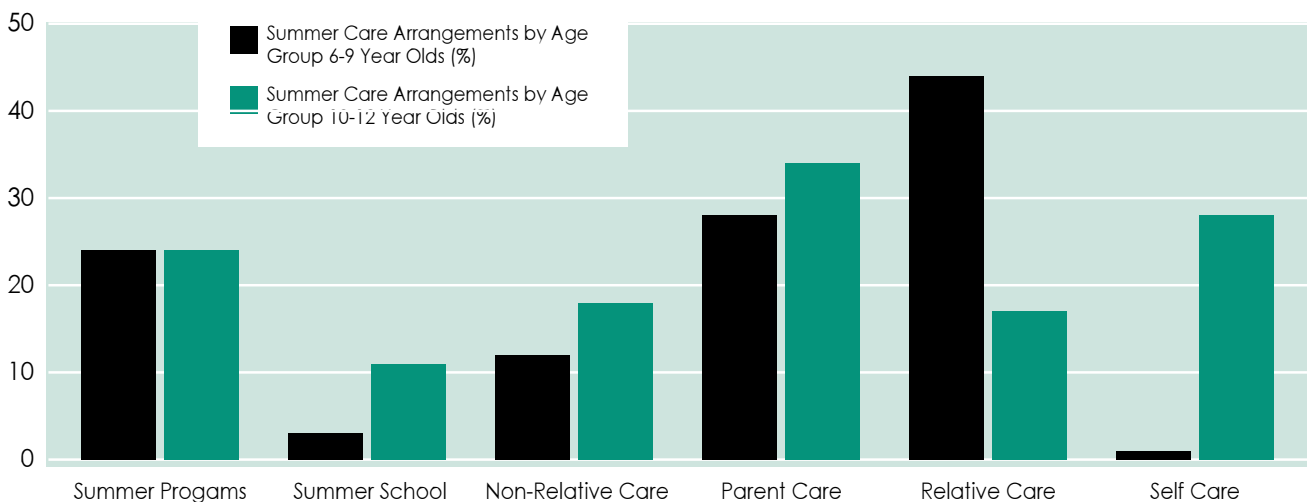
One program designed specifically to stem summer learning loss among low-income children is the BELL Accelerated Learning Summer Program. BELL is based in Boston, New York City, and Washington D.C. and targets K-6 children from low-income households who attend low-performing elementary schools, engaging them eight hours a day for six weeks. BELL has an academic focus, using literacy and math curricula that are aligned with national learning standards and certified teachers with trained assistants during the morning, and featuring afternoon activities and instruction in areas such as art, music, sign language and journalism. A recent evaluation

yielded encouraging results: participants improved their performance in reading and math, moving closer to the national average of their peer groups, and the achievement gap narrowed, as students gained more than six months of grade equivalent skills. Parents and teachers also identified improvements in participants’ self-esteem and social development.³¹

Traditional summer school programs have a mixed track record. While summer school programming is on the rise, largely due to increased national attention to academic performance, little research exists to show how well it works, how it should be approached, or how it compares with other interventions designed to raise achievement. Several small-scale evaluations have demonstrated learning gains and increases in standardized test scores following participation in summer school, yet in some cases those gains do not persist over time. For example in Chicago, a 1999 study showed that the city’s expanded summer school raised scores of many students who were going to have to repeat a grade, however a year later, many of those students were again at risk of failing.³² New Haven, Connecticut’s mandatory summer school program for struggling third graders was found to have a positive impact in the short term, with 64 percent of participating students promoted to the fourth grade. On the other hand, an “academic boot camp” run by the Seattle public schools for low-performing fifth graders in the summer of 1998 was only able to raise achievement levels for a few students.³³

Summer programs can impact the full range of developmental outcomes. The benefits summer programs can provide reach far beyond academics. Effective programs

FIGURE 2: CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS FOR SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN (AGE 6-12) WITH EMPLOYED PRIMARY CARETAKERS, BY AGE OF CHILD



can address a broad range of outcomes through their offerings – providing children and youth opportunities to grow and develop in the social, physical, emotional, cultural, civic and other domains. Summer camps have a long-standing history of contributing to developmental growth. One program, High/Scope's Institute for IDEAS, boasts nearly a 40-year history. This month-long residential program serves low-income teens from urban and rural areas within the United States as well as from several countries including Mexico, Hungary, the United Kingdom and Colombia. The program includes a highly structured day with varied opportunities to engage in specialized workshops in the arts and sciences, leadership opportunities, community work projects, informal time, non-competitive sports and large group community-building activities.

In the early 1990's High/Scope conducted two quasi-experimental evaluations of the Institute for IDEAS. In the first study, participants were more than twice as likely than a carefully selected comparison group to have engaged in post-secondary education five years after participating (65 vs. 29 percent). In a second evaluation that assessed pre-post change in attitude and behavior, participants demonstrated positive changes in academic motivation, self-confidence, development of diverse relationships and cross-ethnic friendships.³⁴

BEYOND THE "DOG DAYS" OF SUMMER: POLICY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

"I think summer is the next frontier, from a policy and program and probably also from a research perspective. Policies in this area are sporadic at best, and largely non-existent."

- JANE QUINN*

While summer represents a unique opportunity for enriching experiences that can help young people develop in a range of areas, and in particular, can help bolster academic achievement, the public and policy communities still view summer primarily as vacation. What follows are some specific opportunities in the policy arena that if addressed, could help shift summer expectations, and eventually, summer experiences.

Funding for summer programming remains difficult to come by despite evidence that suggests such investments are worthwhile. Because few public funding streams are available for summer programming and because public supports that are available are often over-taxed during the summer, providers must find creative ways to weave together support from a combination of federal, state,

local and private sources. Opportunities do exist to partner with schools by becoming approved Title I Supplemental Educational Services providers. Child Care Development Fund and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) dollars can also be used to support expansion of services to specific populations, and similar strategies can be employed using state and local dollars.³⁵ But much work remains to be done to increase access to summer funding.

Pressure to improve student achievement may have both positive and negative implications for summer time use. Many school districts are beginning to think about how summer time can be used to help them and their students meet the goals mandated by No Child Left Behind. The fact that schools are overcrowded for nine months and then nearly empty for three may be changing as more schools use summer to help students catch up before fall and as recognition grows that summer presents an opportunity to help close the achievement gap. With the focus on summer learning loss and helping students catch up, however, policymakers can miss opportunities to use summer programming to help some students get ahead or to help all students develop new skills. And, with the pressure on to increase test scores, the focus on what children need to learn over the summer in order to not fall behind could overshadow important discussions about the best way for them to learn. Fun and learning are not mutually exclusive, and summer, just like the school year, is an important time to keep that in mind.

Public institutions in communities across the country – parks, libraries, and sports facilities – are often over-worked, sometimes under-utilized, and generally under-appreciated when it comes to summer programming. Children and youth, especially from low-income families, rely on these institutions for safety and enrichment; institutions that often end up overtaxed in the summers, unable to play as significant a role as they might. In some cities, resources don't correspond well with need when it comes to the location of such facilities. A 1995 study of Detroit neighborhoods found that 15 of the city's 38 recreation centers were located in communities with the lowest population densities; 16 of the communities with the highest population densities did not have a recreation center; and only one center was located in a community with a high density of youth.³⁶

In conclusion, economic conditions and a weak policy infrastructure have created what is essentially "a tale of two summers" – a busy, multi-faceted season experienced by high-achieving, sometimes over-scheduled, disproportional

tionately upper-middle class youth, and an idle, perhaps boring summer experienced by the many youth who have little to do and for whom access to programming is limited. Whose responsibility is it to address this inequity? As Jane Quinn put it, “is summer to be dictated strictly by the marketplace – if you can buy it you can have it?” Or, is there a greater social good to come from an increased public role? From our vantage point, the value of a stepped up public commitment to engaging children and youth during the summer seems clear, as are the risks of doing nothing.

* Interview with the Forum for Youth Investment, Spring 2004.

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7

SCHOOL'S OUT: A LOOK AT SUMMER LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

Issue 7 • July 2004

This commentary focuses on the opportunities and challenges of summer learning and its influence on policy and practice in the U.S. While relaxing summers may be the cultural norm, several factors suggest a need to question the thinking and expectations of policymakers and the public and to acknowledge the unique opportunity presented by summertime.

What are the risks of summer learning loss and how can communities address them?

Should the focus of summer learning be remediation or enrichment?

Are certain populations of young people at a greater disadvantage in the summer months?

