

## Will Poor Students' Learning Take a Vacation?

For some California students June marks the start of long summer days unrestricted by school schedules and perhaps filled with activities that might include vacation travel, camps and sports, or elective school courses and tutoring that support academic goals and supplement school-year courses. But for many—maybe most—summer isn't so carefree, or at least, productive. And for the state's homeless students, summer can mean losing their one stable source of adult support and regular meals (Contra Costa Times<sup>i</sup>).

Research has shown that much of the achievement gap between middle-class and poor students can be attributed to learning losses poor students experience during the summer months. These losses are compounded each year from kindergarten through high school, leading wealthy and poor students toward different educational outcomes. Karl Alexander at Johns Hopkins University has found that summer learning differences “substantially account for achievement-related differences by family SES in high school track placements (college preparatory or not), high school noncompletion, and four-year college attendance.”<sup>ii</sup>

The difference in summer learning opportunities experienced by different groups of students has long been an equity concern, but there is reason to believe that the problem has been growing. In *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*<sup>iii</sup>, researchers documented a growing gap between the amount of money that rich and poor parents spend on educational enrichment programs (i.e. tutoring, music lessons, summer camp). Affluent families now spend 2.5 times more (in constant dollars) on enrichment activities than they did in the early 1970s and almost seven times as much as low-income families (whose expenditures on educational enrichment have barely budged during the last four decades of stagnant wage growth). Further, the recent and current economic climate, marked by severe school budget cuts, has led to widespread elimination or cutbacks to public summer school programs, making the inequality worse (Education Week<sup>iv</sup>, New York Times<sup>v</sup>).

The summer gap is not limited to K-12 schools. California's public universities and community colleges are cutting their summer class offerings (ABC<sup>vi</sup>, Santa Cruz Sentinel<sup>vii</sup>). Students now compete with each other for much-needed credit-recovery classes, and classes required for transfer to four-year colleges and universities. Instead of institutions using their creativity to educate better, they concoct novel schemes to pay their bills without drastically cutting enrollment. An example of this was when Santa Monica College tried earlier this year to cope with its lack of capacity by offering a two-tiered tuition plan that would offer some high-demand classes at six times the tuition rate of regular classes.

A Los Angeles Times' headline proclaimed, "College summer school in California largely a thing of the past<sup>viii</sup>," and the article reports that an informal survey of about half the state's 112 community colleges found that more than a third had reduced summer classes, and eight campuses planned no summer sessions at all. Community college student Andrew Mestman is one math class away from completing his requirements to transfer to a four-year college or university. For several years now, he's tried to register for summer classes, and failed. "At Compton College last year, there were 60 people in class and 15 more on a waiting list, so what's the point? It's like gambling every summer," he said (Los Angeles Times).

The summer gaps could grow if voters reject Gov. Jerry Brown's November tax initiative. "Trigger" cuts could force districts to shorten the school year by weeks— (San Francisco Chronicle<sup>ix</sup>) resulting in an additional month for disadvantaged students to fall further behind. While students from wealthier families continue learning over the summer, will poor student's learning take a vacation?

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.contracostatimes.com/news/ci\\_20714283/most-students-eagerly-count-days-until-summer-vacation?source=rss](http://www.contracostatimes.com/news/ci_20714283/most-students-eagerly-count-days-until-summer-vacation?source=rss)

<sup>ii</sup> Alexander, K. L., Entwisle D. R., & Olson L. S. (2007a). Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. *American Sociological Review*, 72, 167-180.  
<http://asr.sagepub.com/content/72/2/167>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.russellsage.org/about/press-releases/press-release-whither-opportunity>

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/03/07/23poverty\\_ep.h31.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/03/07/23poverty_ep.h31.html)

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/10/education/education-gap-grows-between-rich-and-poor-studies-show.html>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://abclocal.go.com/kfsn/story?section=news/education&id=8674748>

<sup>vii</sup> [http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/education/ci\\_20730889/college-system-braces-cuts?source=rss](http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/education/ci_20730889/college-system-braces-cuts?source=rss)

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-adv-college-summer-20120527,0,5544208.story?track=rss>

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2012/05/22/MNM410M1B3.DTL>