

# Summer Snapshot:

## Exploring the Impact of Higher Achievement's Year-Round Out-of-School-Time Program on Summer Learning

Carla Herrera, Leigh L. Linden, Amy J. A. Arbreton and Jean Baldwin Grossman

Executive Summary



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survey development and analysis. Nora Gutierrez and Becca Raley conducted site visits and interviewed staff and mentors to provide implementation feedback to the program. Nadya Shmavonian and Wendy McClanahan reviewed drafts of the report and provided excellent feedback that helped structure the final text.

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Cara Cantarella helped to set up the initial structure and direction of the report and provided final copyediting. Chelsea Farley wrote the executive summary for the report, edited several drafts and provided excellent feedback that shaped the direction and tone of the report. Malish & Pagonis designed the report, and Laura Johnson coordinated its publication.

# Executive Summary

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*Authored by Chelsea Farley*

**F**ar too many young people—including those with enormous drive and potential—fall through the cracks of the American education system every year. Children from poor neighborhoods rarely have access to the best schools, and as a group, they consistently perform worse than their more advantaged peers. A dearth of learning opportunities over the summer compounds the problem, as youth typically lose a month's worth of their school-year academic progress over the summer (Cooper et al. 1996). Research has shown that economically disadvantaged youth experience particularly big slides, and experts attribute a major portion of the achievement gap between privileged and disadvantaged children to this “summer learning loss” (Alexander et al. 2007).

Programs that augment school-day learning with long-term academic support and that carefully integrate school-year (i.e., after-school) and summer learning would seem to have great promise for stemming the summer learning loss and offsetting educational disparities. But few such programs exist. Even fewer explicitly focus on youth who are highly motivated but could fall behind without additional support—a group that is easily forgotten, since they are often performing adequately in school and don't appear to need “extra” help.

Higher Achievement is one such program. It targets rising fifth and sixth graders who have the motivation to succeed academically but lack the resources to foster that success. Higher Achievement provides youth with intensive, academically focused programming after school and during summer vacations throughout their middle school years—a time when many young people begin to falter academically (Crockett et al. 1989; Petersen, Crockett 1985). The program's goal is to help participating youth develop skills, behaviors and attitudes that will improve their academic performance and ultimately increase their acceptance into the competitive high schools that could launch them toward college and careers.

## The Higher Achievement Program

Higher Achievement is a multiyear, intensive, academically focused out-of-school-time (OST) program located in Washington, DC; Alexandria and Richmond, VA; and Baltimore, MD. Through its After-School and Summer Academies, the program aims to help academically motivated but underserved middle school students improve their academic performance, with the ultimate goal of increasing their acceptance into—and scholarships to attend—competitive high schools.

## Findings From the Summer Learning Study

This study is part of a larger random assignment impact study focused on five of the six Higher Achievement centers in DC and Alexandria. This “summer snapshot” assesses Higher Achievement's effect on youth's experiences and learning during the summer of 2010.

Our findings show that youth who were randomly assigned to participate in the program—i.e., the treatment group—fared better than their control group counterparts in several areas. Specifically:

- They had higher scores on standardized tests in the spring of 2010 (before the summer break).
- They were more likely to participate in academic programs and to engage in a wide range of academically focused summer activities, including those related to selecting and applying to high schools and pursuing careers.
- They had larger increases in their enjoyment of learning, and they were more likely to end the summer wanting to attend a competitive high school—which is notable, given Higher Achievement's ultimate goal of enrolling youth in such schools.

But:

- *Neither the treatment nor the control group exhibited the expected summer learning loss.* Indeed, there is no evidence that Higher Achievement affected youth's academic progress relative to similar peers over the course of this particular summer.

### Youth in the Study

The youth in our study are reflective of Higher Achievement's target population:

- At the start of the study, they were performing fairly well in school, but 39 percent scored below the national average on standardized tests, suggesting they could benefit from additional support.
- They are largely African American and Latino youth, from low-income families.
- They started the study in fifth or sixth grade, and were entering seventh or eighth grade at the time of our summer snapshot.

As part of a larger, ongoing evaluation of Higher Achievement's impact, P/PV and Leigh Linden, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, launched a smaller study to assess the program's effect on summer learning. Commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, the Summer Learning Study focuses specifically on the summer of 2010 and draws on data from a number of sources.<sup>1</sup> It examines whether access to Higher Achievement's school-year and summer programming increased youth's involvement in positive activities, and whether it indeed stemmed the summer learning loss that other studies have identified, focusing specifically on the summer of 2010.

### The Results and Their Implications

The youth recruited for Higher Achievement—both treatments and controls—are a highly motivated group; at the start of the study, they were generally performing well in school and had families who had the motivation to complete an intensive application process.<sup>2</sup> Many youth in the control group took advantage of academically focused programs and activities during the summer of 2010, though at much lower rates than did treatment youth. It seems that even without the chance to attend Higher Achievement, these families sought out enriching summer experiences. Neither treatment nor control group youth experienced the dearth of summer opportunities faced by many other youth in economically deprived communities.

Given this reality, it is not entirely surprising that Higher Achievement had no measurable relative impact on summer learning; youth in the treatment and control groups made similar progress over the course of the summer. But the program produced other important benefits for participants—namely, increased involvement in positive summer programs and activities; increased aspiration to enroll in competitive high schools; and even before the summer, higher test scores at the end of the prior school year (see the text box on the previous page). These findings suggest a number of key lessons for school district officials and public and private funders of education initiatives:

1. **Keeping middle school youth engaged in additional instructional time during the out-of-school hours is challenging, but this study indicates that it can be done.** More than half of the youth in the treatment group were still attending Higher Achievement in Summer 2010, *two to three years* after their original enrollment. And youth who attended did so fairly intensively. In addition, there was a rather seamless “bridge” between the spring and summer programs: 73 percent of the youth who attended Higher Achievement in the spring continued to participate in the summer; and almost all youth (97 percent) who attended in the summer had also participated in the spring. As youth progress through middle school, they are at increased risk of falling behind academically, getting involved in dangerous behaviors, and ultimately failing to successfully transition to high school. Ironically, this is also a time when youth become difficult to engage in positive activities. A program that does so successfully, and that *keeps* them involved over time, is noteworthy.
2. **Indeed, a range of positive supports in communities may help keep middle school youth engaged during the summer months and help stem the summer learning loss.** The fact that there was no summer learning loss for either group of youth suggests that the myriad of supports they have been receiving—both before and during the summer—may be important for sustaining gains made in the previous school year. The youth in this study had families who were clearly resourceful at making the most of what their communities have to offer. While Higher Achievement pushed

a greater proportion of youth to get involved in summer programming and activities, control youth also engaged in these activities.

3. **For financially strapped school districts that seek to motivate their students to aim for college or competitive high schools, programs like Higher Achievement may help fill a gap in opportunities available to low-income students.** The activities Higher Achievement offers—such as high school visits and career-oriented activities—can supplement what youth have access to at school, offering enriching academic activities after school and over the summer that can help put them on a path toward higher educational attainment.
4. **Higher Achievement is a very comprehensive, long-term investment in children's lives, and any findings from this study should be considered within that context.** This program is not a drop-in OST program. It provides youth with academic instruction and enrichment activities for 650 hours a year, over three to four years of their lives. Staff and mentors are well trained and supported. The curriculum is integrated with the school-day curriculum, and it is reviewed and updated regularly. Parent involvement is also a key component of the program. A look at the benefits that accrued during one summer period, two or three years in, provides insight about the program's effects but certainly not a comprehensive assessment of its value.
5. **The benefits of this type of long-term investment may show up more strongly when measured in high school and beyond; therefore, long-term evaluations—like the one being conducted on Higher Achievement—are important.** One of Higher Achievement's potential strengths is its *long-term* combination of school-year and summer programming, but the data gathered for this study focus on one brief time period, two or three years after youth first enrolled. Additional reports will explore in more detail the annual effects of Higher Achievement, as well as its longer-term impact as youth go through the high school application process and begin their freshman year. Understanding these more enduring effects will be crucial in determining the true impact of this long-term, intensive program.

It should also be noted that, *with this study design, we could not test the effects of the Summer Academy in isolation from the rest of the year-round program.* The benefits we observed resulted from youth's access to Higher Achievement as a whole—a *combination* of summer and school-year programming—over the previous two to three years. We do not know exactly which components contributed to the positive outcomes we identified. We also don't know if the program affected learning loss during any other summer—for example, during youth's first summer of participation. More research is needed to precisely discern both the effects and role of the summer component within the broader program.

## Final Thoughts

Higher Achievement's impact on summer experiences is clear: Youth in the treatment group participated in far more summer learning opportunities than members of the control group. However, we did not see a comparable impact on youth's academic progress over the summer. In fact, both treatments and controls avoided experiencing the summer learning loss that other studies have documented. As such, it might be tempting to conclude that the summer component of Higher Achievement is not needed; however, the findings from this study do not support that conclusion. To the contrary, our results indicate that Higher Achievement (with its school-year and summer programming) is boosting children's standardized test scores, increasing their involvement in positive summer activities and raising their aspiration to enroll in competitive high schools. Whether this type of investment is ultimately worthwhile will only become clear as we continue to follow these young people into high school.



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## Executive Summary Endnotes

1. These included: surveys of parents and youth measuring attitudes, behavior, summer program participation, and demographic and background information; standardized tests to assess youth’s performance in reading comprehension and problem-solving; and interviews and surveys of Higher Achievement program staff and teachers to collect information about the program’s implementation.
2. To enroll in the program, youth must complete an application, attend an interview both alone and with their parents, and be deemed “academically motivated” by Higher Achievement staff. Parents must bring application materials to the interview and are required to attend a “new family induction” and orientation if their children are accepted. More than 95 percent of youth who complete the application and participate in the interviews are allowed to join the program, but about 20 percent of recruited families do not follow through on all of these steps. Higher Achievement believes that completing these steps, in itself, is a strong indication of how motivated both the student and his/her family are.



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