

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

NEAR-TERM FINDINGS OF THE NATIONAL SUMMER LEARNING PROJECT

What is the National Summer Learning Project?

The National Summer Learning Project is the largest effort to date to understand whether and how two summers of large-scale, voluntary summer learning programs led by public school districts can help promote success in school. It is a partnership of The Wallace Foundation, the RAND Corporation, Boston Public Schools, Dallas Independent School District, Duval County (FL) Public Schools, Pittsburgh Public Schools, and the Rochester City School District.

How is the study being conducted?

Starting in 2011, the RAND Corporation looked closely at each district's summer learning program, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and helping the districts identify ways to improve their programs. This work resulted in a publication, *Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success*, offering concrete guidance to school district leaders interested in launching or improving summer learning programs.

In 2013, the project turned to the evaluation of educational impact, focusing on children who were in 3rd grade in spring 2013. It is a longitudinal study, meaning researchers are following the educational experience and progress of these children as they age.

More than 5,600 students are part of the study. The study is using a randomized controlled trial (RCT), a rigorous approach to evaluation that can provide the evidence educators, policymakers and funders need to make decisions about supporting and implementing summer learning programs. An RCT randomly places eligible children into one of two groups—children selected to take part in the program and those who are not—allowing researchers to determine that any differences in outcomes are due to the intervention, in this case a summer learning program. Random assignment also ensures fairness when more students want to participate in the program than space allows, as is the case in the participating districts.

RAND is gathering a wide range of data as both groups of children age, starting in the 4th grade, including school year grades and attendance, measures of social-emotional skills, and student performance on standardized assessments of math and reading.

What did the summer learning programs offer, what did they look like in each district?

The summer learning programs offered by the five districts included several research-based, common elements:

- A mix of academic instruction, aligned with the school year curriculum, and enrichment activities, such as art, cooking, theatre, music, and tennis, that exposed students to fun activities that complement the academic experience.
- Certified teachers providing academic instruction.

- Small class size (no more than 15 students per class).
- Full day programs, provided five days a week except holidays, offering at least 3 hours of instruction each day (math and English Language Arts).
- Five to six weeks in length.
- Offered free of charge to families, including transportation and meals.

At the same time, districts had the latitude to make numerous programmatic choices. For example, districts selected their English Language Arts (ELA) and math curricula from a list of established, well-recognized reading and math curricula including the American Reading Company and the National Geographic curricula, Voyager Math Summer Adventure, Summer Success Math, and McGraw Hill Number Worlds. And the five participating districts varied substantially in how they designed their enrichment programs. Some districts had a strong art, music, and theatre focus, while others included other activities, such as sailing, tennis, cooking, and rock climbing.

What is the study measuring?

Researchers are collecting and analyzing a wealth of data about the educational experience and progress of the children who were selected to take part in the summer learning programs and those who applied but were not selected to take part. These near-term findings are based upon:

- Students' math and ELA achievement measured by performance on standardized assessments (GMADE math and GRADE reading assessment) administered within four weeks of the start of the 2013 school year, shortly after the first year of summer programming ended.
- Surveys completed by students' homeroom teachers in fall of 2013 measuring social-emotional skills (the ability of children to successfully interact with other children and adults in an age- and context-appropriate manner).
- Summer attendance data for each student.
- Observations of classrooms to calculate the estimated number of instructional hours each student received and instructional quality.
- Surveys of academic teachers in the summer learning program to inform measures of site orderliness and perceived appropriateness of curriculum.
- A brief survey of students about their summer activities.

As the study assesses students' progress through the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grades, researchers will collect and analyze additional data items, including performance on state assessments of reading and mathematics, as well as school year grades and attendance and suspension rates.

What are the near-term findings?

Ultimately, the study will examine the impact of two summers of participating in a summer learning program on students' success in school, measured as the students proceed through the 7th grade. These initial findings are only the first set of findings from the RCT, telling us the near-term impact of participating in a summer learning program over one summer. All of the assessments, surveys, and observations that inform these near-term findings were complete by the end of September 2013. RAND will continue to follow these students through the end of the 2016-2017 school year.

The near-term findings reveal:

- Children who were selected to take part in the summer learning programs in 2013 scored higher on the math assessment than children who applied but were not selected.
- The assessment of reading comprehension and vocabulary skills conducted in fall 2013 did not reveal differences between students who were selected to take part in the summer learning program and those who were not.
- There were no differences in social-emotional skills between the two groups of students, based on surveys completed by the students' fall homeroom teacher.
- The near-term findings also reveal a number of factors related to positive outcomes. The study did not show that these factors directly caused these positive outcomes, but the relationship is clear enough to offer guidance to practitioners on program implementation:
 - In math:
 - » The more days students attended, the greater the advantage they exhibited in math compared to children who had applied but were not selected for the program.
 - » More instructional time was associated with better math outcomes.
 - In ELA:
 - » There was an association between ELA classroom instructional quality and students' reading assessment scores.
 - » Students in ELA sites that were orderly had better reading scores than children who were not selected to take part in the program.
 - » Students whose summer reading teacher had just taught 3rd or 4th grade (the grade the children had either just completed or were about to enter) performed better on the reading assessment than other children who took part in the program.

What do these near-term findings mean? What conclusions can we draw?

We can draw some conclusions from the near-term findings as long as we keep in mind that the story will build—and perhaps change—as RAND collects, analyzes and shares more findings.

First of all, we learned that public school districts can successfully plan and implement large-scale summer learning programs—a considerable undertaking. And we now know that districts can attract large numbers of children to participate and that there is strong demand among low-income students and their families for free, voluntary programs that combine academics and enrichment.

It's clear that summer learning programs can have a positive impact on math outcomes, at least in the short-term. Assessments administered in the fall following one summer of programming show that children who were selected to participate had stronger math skills than children who applied but were not selected. Indeed, the impact the study had on math skills equals 17-21 percent of the average increase in math performance that students of this age and grade level make in an average year. The impact on math performance was larger than the average impact on test scores among 89 RCT evaluations in elementary education reviewed by Lipsey, *et al.* (2012).

The initial findings point to a number of factors—including attendance, instructional time, behavior, and relevant teacher experience—that are related to positive outcomes. School districts offering summer learning programs may want to consider if and how to address these elements of the student experience.

Why did the reading assessment not show differences between students who took part in the programs and those who did not?

There are a number of possible reasons that reading differences were not detected, including the fact that improving reading skills can be particularly difficult. It could also be that the length of the programs or the number of hours dedicated to teaching ELA may not have been enough to improve reading skills, or the quality of the instruction itself was not adequate. It is also possible that the instruments and protocols used to measure reading skills failed to pick up differences between the two groups of students.

What is the schedule for releasing the future reports and findings?

This longitudinal study will determine the impact of two consecutive summers of programming. The collection and analysis of data started in the summer of 2013. It is continuing through the end of the 2016-2017 school year.

This report, *Ready for Fall?: Near-Term Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Students' Learning Opportunities and Outcomes*, presents near-term findings, based on assessments, surveys and classroom observations conducted in summer and fall of 2013. These findings are being released in December 2014.

In 2015, RAND will issue a report that will document the impact of one summer of the summer learning programs (2013) on an entire school year—the 2013-2014 school year.

In 2016, RAND will issue a report that will document the impact of two consecutive summers of programming over two school years—the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years.

Later in 2016, RAND will publish a summer learning best practices report that will explore research-based approaches for implementing a quality summer learning program as well as their cost.

Subsequent reports will share the analysis of data collected during the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years.

How much has The Wallace Foundation invested in the National Summer Learning project, and how did this investment help the participating districts?

From 2011 through 2014, The Wallace Foundation invested \$50 million to support the participating districts' summer learning programs, provide technical assistance to the districts and conduct the evaluation. With support from Wallace, the participating districts were able to expand to full-day programs as well as extend to a five-week program, and, with the help of the RAND Corporation's assessments, make improvements in curriculum, teacher training and program management. Perhaps most important, more children were able to participate in summer learning programs offering academic instruction and enrichment activities than otherwise would have been possible.

What are the next steps for The Wallace Foundation in the field of summer learning?

The Wallace Foundation has decided to continue its partnership with the five participating school districts through 2016 to 1) help these districts extend summer learning opportunities to children; 2) provide continued technical assistance and support peer learning among the districts to promote ongoing progress; and 3) develop additional knowledge and tools for use by the entire field of summer learning, including educators and policymakers.