

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## More Districts Add Summer Coursework

*Many Programs Target  
Struggling Students*

By Catherine Gewertz

Cory Piatt isn't too thrilled with the way summer is shaping up. He has been daydreaming about going fishing as the sun rises on the lake near his rural Kansas home, but reality is shoving those sweet visions aside. Cory will be spending his mornings in a classroom.

"I got a letter from the principal saying my grades weren't high enough," said the 14-year-old from Burden, an hour's drive southeast of Wichita. "So now I have to go to summer school. It kind of bothers me that it takes up my morning. But I'm the one who slacked off. It will help me in the end."

This summer, Cory will have lots of company. Powerful national movements to end the automatic promotion of students who aren't ready for the next grade and to hold all students to stricter academic standards have converged to swell the ranks of summer school. Districts as small as the 440-student Central district in Burden and as big as the 1.1-million New York City system are increasingly making summer school mandatory and retaining students who don't improve sufficiently.

The trend has been praised in many quarters as a long-overdue response to poor student performance. But some educators question whether the investment in summer school is properly placed, especially in light of emerging research showing such programs' mixed record of success in improving long-term student achievement.

Others see the national zeal for a summer boost-up as an unprecedented chance to redefine and expand oppor-

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# In Many Districts, Summer School Is Taking on New Roles

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tunities for all students, not only those in need of remedial classes.

"If we choose to view it that way, this new focus on summer school can be seen as an opportunity to change the way we think about education year round," said Harris Cooper, a University of Missouri-Columbia psychology professor who has studied the effects of summer school.

Little research exists to document the trend toward mandatory summer programs that began after Chicago launched its widely publicized program in 1996. The U.S. Department of Education reported that in 1998, 27 percent of school districts had some form of mandatory summer program.

But some of the biggest districts have begun or greatly expanded mandatory programs since then, changes that will force hundreds of thousands more students into summer school this year.

In New York City alone, an estimated 250,000 students—nearly one-fourth of the district's enrollment—are expected to head for the classroom this summer. That marks a sevenfold increase over last year, when summer school was offered voluntarily only to students in grades 3, 6, and 8.

Florida's Broward County, which includes Fort Lauderdale, expects 65,000 in its new program. Detroit, also a newcomer to mandatory summer school, anticipates 36,000 students, quadrupling the size of last year's voluntary program.

## 'Meat and Potatoes'

"Especially with the move toward ending social promotion, summer school is bigger than ever," said Margaret E. Goertz, a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Most of the expansion in summer school concentrates on providing extra help for low-performing students. For example, California's Long Beach Unified School District, a 92,000-student system south of Los Angeles, has drawn notice for its highly academic program.

Parents of 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 5th graders are notified in November if their children's performance is lagging, and improvement plans are drawn up by school officials that might include small-group work with another teacher or after-school tutoring, said Chris J. Steinhäuser, who as the district's deputy superintendent oversees the summer program.



Chris J. Steinhäuser

Those children who are not reading at grade level by March attend summer school four hours a day, grouped not by grade but by skill level for intensive, phonics-based reading and writing work.

Teachers teach from notebooks of 25 "very structured" lessons, Mr. Steinhäuser said. "It's very back-to-basics," he added. "It's meat and potatoes, no frills. We aren't doing anything that isn't going to get us directly to our point."

Mr. Cooper of the University of Missouri recently published a study that concluded that summer school produces academic benefits for participants. He supports the focus on remedial instruction but worries that it could shortchange other students who could benefit from enriched or accelerated coursework during the summer break.

"I do think that remediation is where our primary focus should be, but it's also important to ensure that opportunities are available for children at all levels of ability and achievement," he said.

The Parkway, Mo., district, southwest of St. Louis, takes a path different from that of Long Beach. The 20,000-student

system emphasizes enriched summer coursework for all students, including those who are lagging.

Its program includes such offerings as a history mock-trial class, where 8th, 9th, and 10th graders put President Harry Truman on trial, for example, to explore whether he was right to order the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan.

Another offering is "snack attack," in which elementary pupils design a cookbook, learning the math and science that go into recipe preparation.

Students who need help with language skills might practice by producing a newspaper.

The program is not mandatory. That would be antithetical to its philosophy, said Craig H. Larson, the Parkway district's area superintendent who oversees summer school. Instead, he said, students are drawn into learning by high-quality teaching and well-designed offerings.

In 10 years, the program has grown from about 1,000 students to more than 7,000, Mr. Larson said. "You can't force people to learn," he explained. "A good program brings them here."

## Preventive Measures

Even as pressure mounts for programs geared to the academic basics, other districts also are stepping up their emphasis on enriched summer curricula. In Minneapolis, where student performers sang a "summer school rap" to promote enrollment, 73 enrichment courses will be offered this summer, alongside a mandatory program for students needing improvement.

The District of Columbia's program has expanded its offerings for high-achieving students, such as an interdisciplinary study of the Harlem Renaissance for high schoolers and a "community hospital," designed and run by 2nd and 3rd graders.

Even those children required to attend will learn in a highly involved, hands-on way. "Our summer program used to focus on those needing remediation, but we have expanded to include kids at the advanced end," said Mary H. Gill, the deputy academic officer for the 71,000-student Washington system. "Our vision is that all of our students can move into the highest levels of their capability."

As the trend toward expanded summer schools continues, however, some educators have warned against using the summer to make up for the deficits of the regular school year.

"You have to do things right all year long, not just play catch-up in summer school," said Diane Ravitch, an education historian at New York University. "If teachers are not using appropriate and effective methods from September to June, summer doesn't solve the problem."

Though summer school and high-stakes testing are highly

visible symbols of the push toward higher standards, another trend has begun to emerge from that pressure: a heightened awareness of the need for preventive measures. Experts say districts are increasingly targeting struggling students at a younger age and creating safety-net programs to help ensure their success.

"Districts are taking a more preventative approach, which is a good thing," said Rhonda Munford, a senior project associate at the Council of Chief State School Officers, who saw that trend in a recent study of state-sponsored extended-learning initiatives she did for the Washington-based organization.

"It strengthens outcomes for students," she added. "It's more cost-effective because they don't fall as far behind."

That strategy is evident in Houston, where Spanish-speaking prekindergartners will be taught English this summer. It's also evident in Chicago, which led the way toward the current push for mandatory summer school to end social promotion when it began its program four years ago.

Cozette M. Buckney, the chief educational officer of the 430,000-student Chicago district, said officials there quickly recognized that they had to "reach down as far as possible" into the lower grades to help struggling students avoid being held back a grade.



Cozette M. Buckney

As a result, the system began programs for younger students who are at risk of failing, such as play-based academics before and after school and voluntary summer classes for 1st and 2nd graders and for students with limited English proficiency.

Ms. Buckney credits those programs with helping students progress, thus minimizing the need for summer study. Chicago's summer enrollment has remained essentially flat—28,000 in grades 3, 6, and 8 in 1997 and 25,000 this summer—despite significant growth in the district's overall enrollment and promotion criteria that toughen slightly each year.

Chicago has found that summer school is most effective when it uses a uniform and highly structured curriculum, but one that is fun, hands-on, and conducted in small class sizes, Ms. Buckney said.

In addition, teachers should be trained to teach that curriculum and should ideally have a record of reaching students who are below grade level, she added.

## Early Findings Inconclusive

Even with good practice in place, summer school's record of helping students is mixed. In

Chicago, for instance, 56 percent of those who attended last summer improved enough to be promoted to the next grade.

An independent study released in January showed that the district's summer program had helped some students raise their scores for promotion, but also indicated they were not able to maintain that progress. A year later, many were at risk of failing again, according to the study from the Chicago Consortium on School Research, a local research organization.

Studies of other summer school programs, dating back to 1972, have found they may offer some benefit to some students, but have not documented a clear long-term benefit. Few of the programs begun during the recent boom have collected sufficient data to yield conclusions.

Historically, academic improvement was not among the aims of summer school. The current school calendar, driven by the need to have the help of children on farms in the summer, left children in nonagricultural areas little to do once child-labor laws took effect in 1916. Mr. Cooper notes in his monograph "Making the Most of Summer School."

Community leaders in many areas pressed for summer programs to provide recreation and enrichment. It wasn't until later that they were seen as opportunities for learning.

Mr. Cooper's recent analysis of 93 evaluations of summer school programs suggests that they can help prevent learning loss over the summer, especially when programs are small and instruction is individualized.

But he and other scholars still argue for a broader approach to improving achievement. In that view, summer school is only one piece of a profound redefinition of the learning calendar.

Nancy Karweit, a retired professor at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore whose research has also found limited benefits from summer school, believes that students would benefit immensely from a conception of school as a year-round, flexible activity.

Instead of rigid periods of nine months and three months capped by assessments and block steps forward or back, she argues, school could be viewed in terms of four quarters in twelve months, with students clustered in more flexible groups. That would enable students who need more work to have time for it, and those who don't to use the time for enrichment, advanced course work, or flexible class scheduling to fit in a job or other activity.

"It opens up a whole world of using time differently and gets us out of the lock step of everyone progressing a year or not at all," Ms. Karweit said. "We think of progress in terms of steps and grades, but in fact, that is not how kids learn."

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