Issue Brief: Summer Learning – Closing the Achievement Gap

Keeping the Promise
With the passage of the Education Reform Act of 1993, Massachusetts gave the promise of a better education for everyone.¹ In 2015, the National Assessment on Student Progress (NASP) ranked Massachusetts students first in the nation in Reading and Math.² Massachusetts students performed so well that they would rank 9th internationally, tied with Japan.³ Despite these remarkable statistics, the promise of better education for everyone has not yet been met.⁴

There is a growing educational gap, dubbed the “achievement gap” by afterschool and summer learning experts, between children from low-income families and children from higher-income families. The gap is exacerbated by a lack of enrichment opportunities during the summer months for low-income children, leading them to fall behind their peers. The achievement gap has become so severe, it is hindering academic success and college access for many of our students — and the gap widens each summer.⁵ Nevertheless, Massachusetts has the opportunity to fulfill its promise to all children by increasing its investment in access to quality summer learning programs.

The Achievement Gap and Summer Learning: What the Research Says
The research is clear: quality summer learning programs significantly help close the achievement gap. Summer learning narrows the achievement gap in Reading and Math accounts for about two-thirds of the ninth grade achievement gap in Reading⁷

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The Achievement Gap Initiative — Harvard University comprehension and improves graduation rates.⁶ Summer learning has a significant positive impact on what happens in-school for millions of students.

One study found that over a 4-year period, students that participated in Summer Learning Programs scored 20 points higher on Reading and Math tests than their peers who did not attend these programs.⁷

Summer learning especially supports low-income families who face the largest hurdles. Lost education time in the summer slows students’ progress toward third grade Reading proficiency. Low-income children lose ground over the summer while middle-income students, who are in summer enrichment programs or reading at home, make gains over the summer. “Eventually, the summer learning loss and achievement gap influences whether students graduate from high school and go on to college.” By attending summer programs, these students advanced their academic and social growth, were kept safe and healthy during the summer, and went back to school ready to learn. “Reading achievement increased by up to 3.5 months, 62% increased their Math grades by a whole letter grade, 73% attended school more frequently, and 45% improved their tardiness.”⁸ Longitudinal studies have concluded that quality summer enrichment can help close the achievement gap.⁹, ¹⁰

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Solutions

Even at a time of growing demand for summer learning in Massachusetts, less than half of Massachusetts’ families are able to have their children participate in a summer program. Summer learning is increasingly vital to maintaining the high level of educational achievement of Massachusetts’ students. State lawmakers can ensure continued access to these programs by investing in a mix of state grants and federal programs that have proven positive impacts on student success.

Increase Access to Summer Grant Programs

The growing demand for summer programs can be alleviated through state grants. Currently, there are few grants that enable seed funding for afterschool or summer programs.

Increase the Afterschool and Out-of-School Time Quality Grant $5.5 million (ASOST-Q line item 7061-9611)
Provides funds to help improve quality for programs that serve low-income populations during the summer. More funds enable new programs to emerge and serve more low-income families.

Support House 4033 2016
H4033 will create a new grant program for districts with high populations of low-income students such as Gateway Cities. Summer programs will focus on college and career readiness, critical thinking, and collaboration.

Increase the ELL Summer Learning Academies Grant to $2 million
The achievement gap is greater in communities where English is not a primary language. The Summer Learning Academies Grant provides measurable increases in students’ English language Reading and Writing skills, closing the achievement gap with their peers.
Don’t Leave Federal Funds on the Table

There are resources across many federal agencies which can provide support for a comprehensive summer learning system in Massachusetts. Many federal programs offer direct grants for specific programs, while others offer summertime workforce initiatives for older youths. Lead agencies responsible for federal grants should make information more available and accessible to the average summer provider ensuring no federal funds go to waste.

In 2014, only one in six youth eligible for the Federal Summer Food Service Program received these subsidized meals during the summer, leaving millions of dollars in Federal funding on the table and many young people to needlessly go hungry when school is not in session.

Summer Job Grants
Summer job grants provide employment and education opportunities, and support services for youth in the summer giving them access to real-world experiences that help them later in life and close the achievement gap. This includes the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act which gives funds directly to summer job opportunities.

Summer Service Opportunities
Summer service opportunities offer direct service and capacity building to address critical community needs. These opportunities have profound impacts on communities taking aim at combating summer learning loss and closing the achievement gap. These opportunities include AmeriCorp VISTA which can provide funding for expanding services, mobilizing volunteers and building capacity during the summer.

Encourage More USDA Summer Food Service Sites
Although jobs and education address crucial needs, support services, like free meals and low-cost savings programs, provide additional resources that make a significant impact on youth. This includes the USDA Summer Food Service program allowing schools to become summer food service sites.
With these changes, the state of Massachusetts will increase access to critically needed summer programming, reduce the Early Education and Care wait list, and help close the achievement gap. Summer learning is a growing and fundamental piece of the educational foundation of Massachusetts’ children and youth. Supporting summer learning now will yield great rewards for communities for years to come.