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At Retooled Summer Schools, Creativity, Not Just Catch-Up

By **MOTOKO RICH**

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — Just a few years ago, school districts around the country were slashing summer classes as the economic downturn eviscerated their budgets. Now, despite continuing budgetary challenges, districts are re-envisioning summer school as something more than a compulsory exercise where students who need to make up lost credits fight to stay awake inside humid classrooms.

According to the National Summer Learning Association, a nonprofit group, 25 of the country's largest school districts — including Charlotte, N.C.; Cincinnati; Oakland, Calif.; Pittsburgh; and Providence, R.I. — have developed summer school programs that move beyond the traditional remedial model. The New York City public schools offer several summer programs that mingle enrichment with academics, including an intensive arts institute and a vocational program combining course work and paid internships.

Here in Jacksonville, the academic year ended three weeks ago, but Roshelle Campbell drove into the parking lot of Sallye B. Mathis Elementary School on a recent scorching morning to drop off her son, Gregory Carodine, for a full day of classes.

Gregory is one of more than 300 students spending six weeks of his summer vacation at Mathis — not because he failed an exam or a class, but because educators in the Duval County Public Schools fret that too many children are at risk of falling behind during the summer.

“He has always been so smart,” Ms. Campbell, a security guard, said of Gregory, 6, who will start first grade in the fall. “I felt like education is really important, and I really don't want him to lose that during the summer time.”

Even in districts with severe fiscal woes, like Baltimore, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and San Francisco, education officials have enlisted the support of philanthropic organizations that believe keeping children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in school during the summer may help level the playing field for poor and more affluent students.

“I know that there are students that attend public schools who are in Europe right now, and there are kids who are participating in a soccer camp,” said Nikolai Vitti, superintendent of the Duval County Public Schools, which has quadrupled the number of voluntary summer slots it offers in the past five years. “I think that’s healthy. But I think what we should be talking about as a country is, do all of our children have access and opportunities to do that so they are not sitting at home, waking up at 11 in the morning, eating doughnuts and watching cartoons? That’s a reality for some of our kids.”

Instead, educators are increasingly viewing summer as a time to bolster the material that children, including both strong performers and struggling students, learn throughout the regular school year. Along with reading, math and science instruction, the districts are packing the summer schedule with activities like art and music; classes in forensic science and marine biology; sailing, fencing and karate lessons; and field trips to museums and theaters.

[Research](#) has shown that students regress during the summer, losing an average of about one month of instruction per year, with the so-called summer slide disproportionately affecting low-income children. The lack of high-quality summer programs can also hurt working families whose children have few options during the long months off.

Enhanced summer school “should be part of public education until we recognize that the traditional school calendar doesn’t fit the way Americans live anymore,” said Harris M. Cooper, a professor of education at Duke University who has studied summer learning loss. “Adding 20 days to the school year and having multiple short breaks rather than the one long break actually fits better with the way families live and the way kids learn.”

In an effort to evaluate what kinds of programs produce better academic results, the Wallace Foundation, a private charitable organization, has committed \$50 million to study summer schooling in Jacksonville and several other urban districts, including in Boston, Dallas, Pittsburgh and Rochester, N.Y. Beginning this summer, researchers from the RAND Corporation are following about 5,700 students in those cities who will enter fourth grade this fall.

The study will track their standardized test performance for at least two years, as well as behavioral factors like a student’s ability to work in teams or persist on tasks. Students were chosen by lottery, and the study will compare the summer school students with those who applied but did not get spots.

“We’re not assuming there will be massive inflows of new public dollars into education,” said Ann Stone, senior research and evaluation officer at the Wallace Foundation. “In a time of constrained resources, getting the rigorous evidence about what works is really important.”

In Jacksonville, the district began what it calls its Superintendent’s Summer Academy in 2009, using federal stimulus dollars. That first summer, the district enrolled about 700 students in five elementary schools.

This year, close to 3,000 students from 52 schools are attending summer sessions at 10 campuses around the county. The programs, which are financed with a mix of federal and local dollars as well as the Wallace Foundation grant, run for six weeks for eight hours a day.

Certified teachers from around the district teach academic courses, and in the classes participating in the RAND study, teachers are limited to no more than 15 students.

Partners from nonprofit groups help to run enrichment activities and take the students on field trips to local museums, the bowling alley, the movies and a wildlife reserve.

Some of the academic instruction looks similar to more traditional school-year classes, with read-aloud circles and science quizzes, but others have a more creative bent.

On a recent morning at Sallye B. Mathis Elementary, seven fourth graders teamed up at computers in the library to write scripts for short films they would later produce. “This is a lot more fun than school,” said Asi’yon Brinson, 9, as she and Danajha Camel, 9, tapped out lines of dialogue on a keyboard for their screenplay, “A Trip to Outer Space.”

Kerri Alexander, who teaches fourth-grade reading and writing during the regular school year, moved between the students, making gentle editing suggestions about pacing and punctuation.

Unlike a pedestrian English class exercise that assigns students five-paragraph essays, the script writing conveyed academic skills in a more entertaining way. “They don’t even realize that they are learning to write and present themselves while they are writing these scripts,” said Angela Maxey, the principal of Mathis.

The summer program, Ms. Maxey said, is in effect a kind of laboratory for new, more engaging instructional ideas. “It is what school should be like during the school year,” she said.

She was blunt about the fact that the Wallace Foundation financing also allowed her to provide incentives like ice cream parties for students with perfect attendance records.

“You could say we could use the money in a different way, but are the kids smiling? Are they coming? Are they learning?” said Ms. Maxey, an ebullient woman who wore a pink crown made by a student one afternoon when she threw what she told the children was her birthday party.

“Part of what the study is looking at,” she said, “is how do we motivate children so they want to learn in the summer?”