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SUMMER SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIPS FOR BALTIMORE CITY STUDENTS

A Plan for Reducing the Achievement Gap and Dropout Rate

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM remains in a state of crisis. A 2008 report by America's Promise Alliance supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found that Baltimore City had the fourth lowest high school graduation rate of the nation's fifty largest cities. Only an estimated 35 percent of all Baltimore City students graduate from high school.¹ Cleveland, Indianapolis, and Detroit were the only large cities with lower graduation rates.

Widespread underperformance in the Baltimore City school system imposes considerable costs on society. For individual students, the failure to master basic skills in elementary and secondary schools and earn a high school degree limits a young adult's personal and professional opportunities in life. Increased educational attainment has been linked with increased lifetime earnings, health, and life expectancy.²

Low-educational attainment also imposes collective costs on communities and society as a whole. For example, a 2008 analysis by the Maryland Public Policy Institute reveals that a single class of high school dropouts across Maryland costs state taxpayers \$42 million per year.³ It also found that Maryland's estimated 392,000 working-age dropouts earn nearly \$10,000 less per year than the state's high school graduates, lowering the workforce's annual earnings by \$4 billion.⁴ Reduced educational attainment has also been linked with increased criminal activity and incarceration rates.⁵

Improving educational opportunities for at-risk youth remains a critical priority for Maryland policymakers. This report presents a proposal for a new intervention strategy: providing summer school scholarships to improve learn-

ing opportunities for students in Baltimore City. Research evidence suggests that the traditional three-month summer school vacation leads to a loss in learning that equals at least one month of school instruction.⁶ Disadvantaged children are particularly vulnerable to academic losses during the summer vacation. Research evidence suggests that the "summer learning slide" may exacerbate the achievement gap between low-income students and their peers.

Evaluations of summer school programs have shown that students can benefit academically.⁷ Importantly, research evidence suggests that the nature of the summer school programs differ, and that program design affects student outcomes.⁸ Given what is known about summer school programs, a summer school scholarship program for low-income students holds promise as a strategy for improving learning opportunities for disadvantaged youth and reducing the achievement gap. If successful, this initiative will help reduce Baltimore City's dropout rate and improve life opportunities for disadvantaged children, which would better the quality of life in Maryland.

THE CASE FOR SUMMER LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

For decades, a focus of federal and state education reform efforts has been to reduce the achievement gap between low-income students and their peers. Measures of student outcomes, such as test scores and graduation rates, reveal that disadvantaged students perform well below their middle- and upper-income peers. Researchers have identified the "summer learning slide" as one factor that contributes to the achievement gap.

Research Evidence on the “Summer Slide” Research evidence shows that the summer vacation between the end of one school year and the start of the next produces a loss in student learning. For example, Dr. Harris Cooper of the University of Missouri-Columbia presented the findings of a meta-analysis of research evidence on the impact of summer vacation on student learning. This meta-analysis found that the summer slide equaled at least one month of instruction: “On average, children’s achievement tests were at least one month lower when they returned to school in the fall when students left in spring.”⁹

Importantly, research evidence suggests that the summer learning slide is more acute for disadvantaged students. According to Cooper, on some measures, middle-class students gained in reading over the summer, while disadvantaged children lost ground. Cooper hypothesized that these losses may be a result of missing summer learning opportunities for disadvantaged children, “with more books and reading opportunities available for middle-class children.”¹⁰ Geoffrey D. Borman and N. Maritza Dowling of the University of Wisconsin-Madison interpret Coopers’ findings and report that “[low-socioeconomic status] children’s reading skill levels fall approximately 3 months behind those of their middle class peers—a difference equivalent to about a third of the typical amount of learning that takes place during a regular school year.”¹¹

Borman and Dowling point to other research evidence that suggests that summer vacation contributes to the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their peers. For example, they report, “the findings from a long-term Baltimore based study show that the summer learning deficits of low-[socioeconomic status] children accumulate over the elementary and secondary-school years, and that their achievement scores fall farther and farther behind the scores of their more advantaged peers as they progress through school.”¹²

Further, this study reveals: “By middle school, these summer reading losses plus a relatively small initial achievement lag at the beginning of first grade produced a cumulative lag of two years in reading achievement, despite the fact that the lower- and higher-[socioeconomic status] children learned at essentially the same rate in school.”¹³ This suggests that reversing the “summer slide” for disadvantaged children should be a priority for policymakers working to reduce the achievement gap.

Research on Benefits of Summer Learning Research evidence suggests that the summer school holds promise for improving student learning and addressing the summer slide. However, the research evidence suggests a wide variance in the effects and outcomes of different types of summer learning programs.

Dr. Cooper’s meta-analysis of 93 evaluations of summer school program found that: “The research demonstrates that summer programs are effective at improving

the academic skills of students taking advantage of them.”¹⁴ Cooper’s meta-analysis revealed that the evaluations suggest that all students benefit from summer school programs, although middle-class students are more positively affected than disadvantaged students. However, Cooper also notes that “all estimates of summer school’s impact on disadvantaged students were significantly different than zero” and, moreover, that “if summer programs are targeted at disadvantaged students, they can serve to close the gap in educational attainment.”¹⁵

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— Dr. Harris Cooper
University of Missouri-Columbia

Cooper and others reviewing the available research report that program design impacts student outcomes. For example, Cooper reports that smaller summer school programs produce more positive benefits.¹⁶ Programs that provide more intimate learning opportunities such as small groups or individualized instruction produced the largest impact on student outcomes.¹⁷ Borman and Dowling of the University of Wisconsin-Madison report that: “Taken as a whole, research on summer school suggests that variation in the quality of summer schooling is greater than variation in the quality of schooling, and benefits to students may vary significantly depending on the content and focus of particular programs.”¹⁸

For policymakers, this research evidence suggests that summer school programs hold promise for improving student achievement, but that careful attention should be paid to program design to improve student achievement.

LONGITUDINAL EVALUATION OF THE TEACH BALTIMORE PROGRAM

In 2006, Borman and Dowling presented the findings of a unique longitudinal achievement evaluation of a three-year randomized field trial of summer school programs for low-income students in Baltimore City. The testing experiment compared the academic achievement of students in a treated group (who were offered the opportunity to participate in the Teach Baltimore summer program) with a control group of non-treated students. The evaluation of this program presents important lessons for policymakers in developing an effective summer school program.

Borman and Dowling evaluated participating students for three years. Their analysis found “statistically significant learning across all three literacy domains tested for those students who attended the Summer Academy at an above

average rate across two or more of the three summers that it was offered. Relative to their control-group counterparts, treatment compliers held advantages of 40 percent to 50 percent of one grade level on the final posttests.”¹⁹

The researchers noted importance differences in the outcomes of students based on their rate of attendance. Overall, the evaluation found “the outcomes for total reading indicated that students assigned to the Teach Baltimore intervention had, on average, learning rates and summer drop-offs that were statistically equivalent to those of control students.”²⁰ But when the researchers examined the performance of students who reliably attended the program during the three years, they saw meaningful improvement:

Approximately half of the students assigned to the program attended with enough regularity to make a difference. Students attending at least two of three summers at an average attendance rate returned to school in the fall of the third year of the study with achievement scores of approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1 standard deviation higher than those of their similar peers from the control group. This treatment effect for compliers was equivalent to 50 percent of one grade level in vocabulary, 40 percent of one grade level in comprehension, and 41 percent of one grade level in total reading.²¹

This research evaluation presents some relevant lessons for policymakers considering a similar summer school scholarship program for Baltimore City students. First, summer school can have a meaningful impact on student learning over time under the right conditions. Second, encouraging regular attendance is a factor affecting whether summer school students improve academically.

SUMMER LEARNING AND IMPROVING EDUCATION IN BALTIMORE CITY

The research evidence about summer learning should lead policymakers to a few important conclusions. First, that the “summer slide” in students’ academic achievement is a problem for all students and particularly for low-income students. Since low-income children experience more acute learning losses, summer vacation contributes to the achievement gap. Second, summer learning programs hold promise for improving students’ academic achievement. Third, careful attention must be paid to summer school program design to maximize the benefit of student outcomes.

Understanding these lessons, Maryland policymakers and city leaders should recognize that improving summer learning opportunities for low-income students in Baltimore City holds promise for improving student achievement and, potentially, reducing achievement gap over time. If successful, this reform strategy could reduce the city’s alarming high school dropout rate.

Efforts to improve summer learning opportunities should begin by reviewing current options. Baltimore City has shown a commitment to providing summer learning opportunities to city students.²² According to Baltimore City Mayor Sheila Dixon, the city “wants to provide all students with opportunities for summer learning.” In Baltimore City, summer learning programs include: an extended school years services for students in grades K-12 who have individual education programs (IEPs), an elementary and middle grades program for all public school students in grades kindergarten through 8 (excluding those enrolled in charter schools) to “improve students skills and prepare for the start of the August 2008” school year, and a secondary program for high school students to “make up courses, maintain course sequence, and prepare for high school assessments,” and a summer bridge program to support the transition to high school.²³

These services are organized and provided by the Baltimore City Public School System. There is little public data available examining whether these programs are having a positive academic impact. However, the poor performance of Baltimore City public schools during the traditional

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school calendar gives reason for concern that simply extending public school instruction into the summer months may not provide a meaningful benefit.²⁴ Policymakers should consider a new approach to expand summer learning opportunities for Baltimore City students.

A NEW APPROACH: SUMMER SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIPS

To improve educational opportunities for students, Maryland state legislators and/or Baltimore City leaders should implement a new program to award scholarships to low-income students in Baltimore City to enroll in summer school programs. The purpose of this approach is to give Baltimore City families a diverse range of options for accessing quality summer learning opportunities for their children. Policymakers developing a Summer School Scholarship initiative would need to consider a number of issues, including the value of the scholarship, eligible service providers, academic focus, attendance, and oversight and the potential for evaluation. The following is a discussion of these factors with recommendations for how policymakers could structure a program.

Eligible Student Population Policymakers developing a summer school scholarship program would need to determine which students would be eligible to participate. This would be determined by factors such as the program's purpose and available funding. If the purpose of the program is to reduce the achievement gap and provide remediation

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to at-risk student populations, policymakers could structure the program to award scholarships first to students from low-income families.

Scholarship Value A critical question for policymakers should be: what is a sufficient scholarship value to ensure a successful program? The cost of similar summer school programs and private school tuition provide clues about how much a summer learning program could cost. For example, the Teach Baltimore program, which relied largely on college student volunteers as teachers, cost approximately \$815 per student for the 7-week program.²⁵ However, this program also relied on approximately \$700 per volunteer in in-kind donations.

Private school tuition is another potential indicator. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average tuition cost at a K-12 private school is \$4,700.²⁶ Assuming that this average tuition amount generally covers nine months of instruction, a month of instruction at a private school may run to slightly more than \$500. This suggests that a scholarship worth up to \$1,500 would pay for up to a three-month summer program at a typical private school.

Of course, the scholarship value will likely depend on available revenue. A discussion of possible revenue sources and fiscal oversight of a potential program is presented in a section of this report that follows.

Eligible Providers Policymakers would need to determine where scholarships may be redeemed. To expand the potential benefits for students, policymakers should allow families to redeem their children's scholarships at a diverse range of service providers, including traditional public schools, charter schools, private schools, and other independent learning programs (including tutoring providers). Allowing this diversity would encourage innovation and

the delivery of quality services among potential providers while giving parents diverse choices to find a program that best meets their students' needs. To participate, eligible providers could be required to offer proof of their program and operations to the agency awarding scholarships.

Academic Focus Policymakers designing a summer school learning program could determine its academic focus. For example, policymakers could require that service providers focus their instruction on critical skills like reading and mathematics. Alternatively, the program could be structured to provide service providers with flexibility to provide other activities and enrichment to increase students' enjoyment and encourage participation and attendance. Given the importance of encouraging regular attendance and student participation, encouraging some additional activities and enrichment to improve student satisfaction might actually support academic objectives.

Academic Evaluation One requirement that policymakers could place on participating students and providers is that students participate in a basic evaluation. For example, students could be required to take a brief standardized examination at the start and conclusion of the program. The results could be reported to parents and the agency administering the scholarship program to determine whether the program is having an academic impact. Or, the agency could contract with academic researchers who could oversee a testing experiment of participating children. Participation in the exam could be a requirement for students to receive scholarships. In addition to an academic evaluation, families could also be required to complete a survey about their experience in the program to help policymakers understand its impact. This academic evaluation potentially could be conducted by a university or independent research organization, since the value of summer school learning programs is a subject of academic inquiry.

Fiscal Oversight and Accountability The state or Baltimore City school system should establish fiscal oversight and accountability procedures. For example, providers should be required to apply to the relevant agency in order to be eligible to redeem the summer school scholarships. Moreover, they should be required to track and report attendance to the relevant agency.

SUMMER SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIPS CAN IMPROVE INSTRUCTION AND LEARNING

A summer school scholarship program holds promise for improving student learning. Giving parents the opportunity to choose the best summer learning program for their children will encourage summer school providers to seek to develop superior learning programs to meet children's needs. For example, public, private, and charter schools would all be eligible to participate and interested teachers

could work to develop effective summer school programs to attract students. Moreover, private providers—including tutoring companies—likely would also seek to participate. The diverse range of summer learning options should give families an opportunity to choose an effective program for their children.

As the research evidence discussed above suggests, quality summer learning programs can lead to improved academic achievement for participating children. Allowing parents to choose the best program for their children should have the effect of increasing the likelihood that children are enrolled in quality programs. Moreover, experience with the academic evaluations of private school voucher program suggests that scholarship programs, at least during the traditional school year, can benefit students academically. The proliferation of various forms of school voucher programs across the county has allowed researchers to conduct testing experiments to determine whether students who use vouchers to attend private school perform better academically than their peers who remain in public school.

Dr. Patrick Wolf of the University of Arkansas summarized the findings of this research in a recent article for the Brigham Young University *Law Review*: “The high-quality studies on school voucher programs generally reach positive conclusions about vouchers...Of the ten separate analyses of data from the “gold standard” experimental studies of voucher programs, nine conclude that some or all of the participants benefited academically from using a voucher to attend private school. The evidence to date suggests that school voucher programs benefit many of the disadvantaged students and parents that they serve.”²⁷

SUMMER SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIPS: A POTENTIAL CATALYST FOR REFORMS

Giving families the ability to choose a summer school program for their child could create demand for greater parental choice during the regular school year. Increasingly, policymakers across the country are implementing policies to give families more power to direct their children’s education, though public school choice, charter schools, and private school vouchers and tax credits. Maryland and Baltimore City continue to lag most other states in offering families school choice. In Baltimore City, for example, many students are still assigned to local public schools based on where they live.²⁸

Baltimore City Public Schools CEO Andrés Alonso has recently called for a significant overhaul of the city public schools system. Specifically, he called for low performing schools to be shut down, successful schools to expand, greater decentralization, and a greater ability for families to choose their children’s public school. Unveiling his plan, Dr. Alonso said: “We do not want to have a school system where kids are settling for a third, fourth choice.”²⁹ By highlighting the popularity of parental choice, a summer

school scholarship program could demonstrate the need for further student-centered education reforms during the regular school year, including Dr. Alonso’s promising reform initiatives.

FUNDING SOURCES AND POTENTIAL FISCAL IMPACT

Given the current economic climate, policymakers face challenges in funding programs. In March, Governor O’Malley announced the need to trim more than \$500 million from the next state budget.³⁰ The challenging budget outlook would require state and Baltimore City leaders to examine existing revenue from current summer school programs and other possible funding sources to create a summer school scholarship program. In 2003, the Baltimore City summer school budget was \$16 million.³¹ According to Baltimore City Public Schools, total summer school funding has declined to approximately \$10 million as of 2008.³²

Nevertheless, current expenditures provide a starting point for how Baltimore City public school leaders could fund a summer school scholarship program. To supplement funds from current summer school budget, city leaders could reallocate some traditional school year funding towards the summer school program. In addition, city leaders could pursue a private partnership to help fund a summer school program. Given the promise for helping to address the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their peers, foundations and

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— Dr. Patrick Wolf, University of Arkansas

philanthropists may find merit in supporting a summer school scholarship program.

CONCLUSION

The Baltimore City public school system remains in a state of crisis. Too many children continue to pass through the city’s schools without receiving a quality education. Researchers have identified the summer learning slide as a problem that contributes to the achievement gap and the poor performance of disadvantaged students. For example, research evidence suggests that the three-month summer school vacation leads to a loss in learning that equals at least one month of school instruction. Research also suggests that the summer learning gap is particularly acute for disadvantaged students.

Summer school can potentially erase the summer learning slide and, over time, help reduce the achievement gap. However, evaluations of summer school programs reveal that programs vary widely in quality. To help give more Baltimore students access to a quality summer school program, Baltimore City leaders could offer summer school scholarships to let families choose a summer school provider of choice. A scholarship program would allow public, private, and charter schools, along with other education

service providers, to develop summer school programs that would attract students. Over time, a scholarship program should improve the quality of summer school instruction in Baltimore City. If successful, this could be an important step toward helping to reduce the achievement gap and improve learning opportunities for Baltimore City students.

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