

On the Need for Summer Learning

A Q&A with Shauntell Dunbar

For the last three years, Shauntell Dunbar has taught first grade at Young Achievers Science and Math Pilot School in the Boston Public Schools. Last year, she taught reading and math in one of the school district's summer programs. Below, she shares her experience supporting student learning during the summer.

—EDITORS

Q Tell us about the summer program where you taught.

A In recent years, the school district has revamped its summer programs so that students can not only strengthen their academic learning but also participate in enrichment activities. One of these programs is Early Focus, where I taught math and reading to 12 first-graders. Early Focus is designed to help students who are almost, but not quite, meeting benchmarks in numeracy and literacy.

The program runs for six weeks. I taught during the academic part of the day, from 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. After that, students participated in activities, such as arts and crafts, sports, and games, offered through the YMCA. Literacy activities and time for independent reading were also built into the afternoon. The fact that the program lasted until 5 p.m. was great for families, since many parents work and need full-day child care in the summer.

Boston's summer programs take place at sites throughout the city. I taught at an Early Focus site located at another school, Mildred Avenue K–8 School, which is down the street from Young Achievers. Because many school buildings are old and lack air conditioning, programs only operate in schools that have it, such as Mildred.

Q How do students qualify for Early Focus?

A Teachers at each grade level from Boston elementary schools select four students from their classrooms to enroll. The number of students is capped because funding is limited. Early Focus is for students in kindergarten and first and second grades. The city also runs summer programs for a variety of student populations—English language learners, homeless students, and upper elementary students, as well as those in middle and high school.

In my class at Young Achievers, I would have loved to recommend six or seven students for Early Focus, but there wasn't enough room. These are middle-of-the-road students who work hard but have not met

certain benchmarks by the end of the school year. And I know they could, if I just had a few more weeks to work with them.

Q Do you know how your students who do not have access to Early Focus spend their time during the summer?

A They're probably just hanging out and watching TV. They're not engaged in activities. The community where Young Achievers is located is low-income. All students at my school receive free or reduced-price meals because so many qualify for them. A lot of times, it's unsafe for students to be outside because of violence in the community. Since parents work, students often spend time on electronic devices at home. The neighborhood just does not have many programs for young children in the summer.

Q When you start the school year, in what ways do you see that summer learning loss has affected your students?

A Many are behind because they've done little or no reading over the summer. So, if students were meeting the standard for literacy in kindergarten but did not build on their skills or their knowledge base over the summer, we must catch them up. That's what we do for the first two months of school—we review phonics and math just to catch them up to where they were when they finished kindergarten.

Q At the end of the school year, what do you do to help students continue learning in the summer?

A As a school, we send home books with our students. Many teachers at Young Achievers actually provide the books themselves. For instance, I buy each of the 20 students in my class at least three books. That money comes out of my own pocket. I also give students a packet of materials to review what we did in first grade. And the school continues to give them free access to online literacy and math programs, such as Raz-Kids, MobyMax, and Lexia Learning.



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However, what students really need is a summer program, where the day is devoted to academics and enrichment. That enrichment piece is very important, especially for young children, because it enables them to continue building social and emotional skills.

I had one student last year who had a very tough time during the school year. She didn't make any significant learning gains until April and May. But then the school year was over. I selected her for Early Focus, and, fortunately, I was also her teacher for the summer, and she maintained and built on those gains. Now she's in second grade and performing above benchmark.

I often check in with her teacher, who says her academic and social skills have flourished. She used to be a student who threw a tantrum practically every day. And I know the improvement in her behavior and academics is because of the work we did during the summer.