

ECONOMIC SCENE

Vouchers for summer school could help halt the learning slide.

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A Gallup poll taken in July discovered the obvious: the Harry Potter books are being read by everyone this summer. Well, almost everyone. Children in low-income families are much less likely to read Harry than their counterparts in middle- and upper-income families.

This finding will not surprise education experts or teachers, who have known for decades that economically disadvantaged children fall behind during the summer months compared with their peers. The problem is that children from low-income families are less likely to read Harry Potter or much else during the summer, which causes their skills to atrophy when school is out of session.

What might be called the "Harry Potter divide" -- the depressed level of academic engagement in poor households when school is out -- is responsible for a major portion of the gap in achievement between low- and high-income students.

The achievement gap has important economic consequences. Several studies indicate that students who score one standard deviation higher on math and reading tests -- comparing those at the 15th percentile to those at the 50th percentile, say -- earn, on average, 15 to 20 percent more a year as adults. And a new study by Christopher Jencks of Harvard University and Meredith Phillips of the University of California at Los Angeles found that high school is not too late to make a difference: those whose math test scores increased between 10th and 12th grade achieved higher incomes later in life compared with those who started at the same level but did not raise their scores.

Clearly, raising achievement pays off, and it pays off more today than in the past because the information age has increased the demand for skilled workers.

Labor force projections, however, indicate a slowdown in the growth of skilled workers in the next two decades, so the achievement gap between lower-income students and their counterparts from more affluent families could crimp the expansion of the economy. In my view, the summer learning deficit is much more worrisome for economic growth than the trade deficit.

The latest and probably best research on the summer learning gap is in a 1997 book, "Children, Schools and Inequality" (Westview Press) by Doris Entwisle, Karl Alexander and Linda Olson of Johns Hopkins University. The three sociologists have been studying a random sample of 800 Baltimore public school students since they entered first grade in 1982. At the beginning and end of each school year, students took the California Achievement Test.

The researchers examined gains and losses in test scores over the school year and summer break. Students were classified into groups based on their parents' socioeconomic status, which depended on education, occupation and income.

Remarkably, children from families of high and low socioeconomic status made equivalent gains on math and reading exams during the school year. But the achievement level of children from low-income families either fell or stagnated

during the summer, while children from higher income families continued to make progress.

The entire achievement gap between children from low- and high-income families arises from periods when school is out and the period before children enroll in school. This pattern, which also holds in other studies, suggests public schools are doing more to help poor children overcome the obstacles they face in their homes and neighborhoods than is commonly appreciated.

While Republicans and Democrats spar over using vouchers to reform public schools, a potential solution to the achievement gap has been overlooked. Why not give low-income parents a scholarship, or voucher, to send their children to some type of a summer learning program?

The idea of school vouchers, which is frequently attributed to Milton Friedman but dates back at least to Thomas Paine, has become "radioactive" among Democrats, as Jonathan Orzsag, a former official for President Clinton's National Economic Council, put it. So call this something else, such as Summer Opportunity Scholarships -- S.O.S. for short.

Only 9 percent of students in the United States attend summer school. Unlike other voucher programs, summer school scholarships would supplement, rather than substitute for, the traditional public school system.

The 180-day school year in the United States -- a legacy of a bygone era when children were needed to work the farm in the summer -- is short by international standards. By the end of high school, children in Japan, for example, have had the equivalent of four more years of schooling than American children. Although it would be desirable to use the 180-day school year more constructively, one thing is clear: more time on task helps students learn.

Summer school bolsters achievement if it is focused on specific academic goals, said Harris Cooper of the University of Missouri. Professor Cooper, who just published a review of 93 evaluations of separate summer school programs, said the effect of summer school on student achievement was "clearly positive" when performance was compared either with participants' pre-summer scores or with a randomly selected control group of nonparticipants.

But summer school runs into a roadblock. Many families and teachers do not want to be in school year round. Mandated summer school attendance also carries a stigma, and such programs typically cater to older children who are already far behind.

Summer scholarships offer a solution. Families could be given a refundable tax credit or cash grant if they sent their children to a competent academic enrichment program during the summer. A range of options already exist, including public school-sponsored summer schools, private tutoring organizations like the Sylvan and Kumon learning centers, and education-oriented camps.

Too many children are forced to endure summers like the mythical Harry Potter of Privet Drive. No books, no trips, no visits to the library; only a television and loyal owl for company. Giving low-income families scholarships to send their children to summer enrichment programs could help narrow the achievement gap and better prepare the work force of tomorrow.