

Redefining 'Summer School': How Year-Round Learning Can Shape K-12 Education

by Megan O'Reilly Palevich, M.Ed.

(NAPS)—Each day, as people across the country wake up and check their phones, turn on their morning news broadcast, or unfold their local papers, one clear message stares back at them: the COVID-19 pandemic is changing the trajectory of education. Fortunately, whether that change is for better or for worse can be decided by families and students themselves—and year-round learning is one trending approach that may be here to stay.

Year-round learning is not a new concept in K-12 education and the benefits are noteworthy. Students who stay academically engaged over the summer can get ahead in challenging subject areas, explore or expand upon their interests and build the confidence that they need heading into a new school year.

As the nation recovers from a global pandemic and the subsequent shockwaves it sent through the education system, these benefits are particularly compelling: many students need an opportunity to catch up, reengage or solidify critical skills that may have been jeopardized during the academic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis.

Kelsey Lichtenstein, founder of Aspen Learning Lab in Los Angeles, Calif., has been serving families in Southern California and throughout the United States for nearly 20 years. Lichtenstein noticed widespread concerns about learning loss due to the pandemic but she is confident that summer learning opportunities can serve as one solution for many students and families.

"In some places students have not gone back to school in person yet," Lichtenstein said. "As a result, many students need to catch up, or for younger students, get extra help building key foundational skills in reading and math."

Engaging students as they build those early skills in reading and math is paramount: they provide the foundation for the rest of a student's academic career and shape them well into their adult lives. Lichtenstein says that the primary challenge for educators is generating that engagement in the first place, and finding a program with a wide variety of courses and engaging content is crucial to achieving that goal.

"Engagement comes in many forms, and one of the ways we engage students



While this year in particular, educators say, it's a good idea for students to seize the opportunity to make up for lost time at school, summer learning can help kids get ahead or explore new academic interests on an accelerated schedule.

is through content and connection. We have to ask ourselves, 'How does this curriculum relate to real life? How does it connect?,' Lichtenstein said.

For students in middle school and high school, year-round learning can also help them overcome unique academic gaps. Angela Ling, 16, of Rockville, Md., is a junior at Laurel Springs School who enrolled in the school's summer program because she had recently moved to the United States from Canada. The curricular differences between the two countries meant she was technically behind in the areas of science and math.

"In Canada, science and math classes are taught generally, rather than by topics such as biology or calculus," explained Ling. "As a result, in 10th grade, I was behind in a few courses in the U.S. curriculum. Thankfully, I had the ability to take Honors Geometry and Honors Chemistry over the summer, and I caught up for 11th grade."

For other students, the opportunity to get ahead in their studies drew them to summer learning. Mia Hanflig, 16, of East Falmouth, Mass., is an emerging performing artist who aspires to become a professional dancer. Through her year-round approach to learning, Hanflig aims to graduate early.

"I can work at my own pace and complete additional courses in the summer to get ahead before the next school year," said Hanflig. "By taking summer classes, I have the potential to graduate early while still finishing all the mandatory credits. The extra time I have gained from being a student at Laurel Springs let me more easily attend prestigious intensives and competitions furthering

my performance experiences in preparation for a career."

Encouraging students like Hanflig to pursue their passions and interests is a cornerstone of Laurel Springs' philosophy and another unique benefit of year-round learning as a whole: exploring new subject areas, especially through electives.

"We are always trying to spark curiosity and foster discovery, which is a huge benefit of learning over the summer," said Lichtenstein. "It provides students with opportunities to explore other subjects and interests that they might not be exposed to during the traditional school year, keeping things fresh in their minds, engaging them in their learning and encouraging discovery, which are all very important. It doesn't necessarily have to be geometry or physical science: There are other ways to stay academically engaged and continue learning, and that's what I'd like to inspire in students."

As year-round learning becomes a more common practice following the pandemic, students may also find it helps them foster self-advocacy and important social-emotional skills that will help them both in school and in their professional lives.

Olivia Manson, 14, of Chicago, Ill., says: "Online school allowed me to grow more independent and responsible for my work ethic and the accelerated summer courses I took last year helped me with time management. By making my own decisions, I feel a great sense of achievement."

Incorporating summer courses into the larger picture of K-12 education should no longer be seen as a punishment or remediation effort but as an opportunity to stay academically engaged without sacrificing the rest, relaxation and recreation that normally accompanies the summer season. With a strong foothold in their coursework and ownership of their learning as they venture into the next grade level, students may find that learning beyond the traditional school year will let them adapt to, and advance in, a swiftly changing educational landscape.

• *Megan O'Reilly Palevich, M.Ed., is Head of School at Laurel Springs School. She is an award-winning educator, administrator, and thought leader with more than 25 years of experience in public and private PreK-12 education.*