

Superintendent's Message

June 2009

Summertime: A Time to Learn

Español/Spanish

The idea of a three-month summer break came about at a time when 85 percent of all young people lived on farms. The agricultural calendar was designed to give young people a chance to work in the fields. Yet, looking back at my time in rural Iowa, the school calendar didn't work like it was intended. The corn was planted in April and harvested in October. The cows were milked twice a day and occasionally one of my high school students arrived late for school because of a mechanical breakdown in the daily hog-feeding process.



Extending the school year for all students from 180 to 225 days is as common elsewhere in the world as it is unpopular in the United States. While we'll be able to serve perhaps one-fifth of our students in various summer programs that add another 20 to 25 days to the school year, that falls far short of what's really needed. The lack of summer school for all children and young people is the cause of one of the greatest learning roadblocks of childhood—summer learning loss.

The research confirms what all of us who ever taught will confirm: children and young people atrophy in their knowledge and skills over the 10-week summer break. What we don't use, we lose. Consider the following research collected by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Summer Learning:

- **All young people experience learning losses when they do not engage in educational activities during the summer.** Research shows that students typically score lower on standardized tests at the end of summer vacation than they do on the same tests at the beginning of summer vacation.
- **On average, students lose approximately 2.6 months of grade-level equivalency in mathematical computation skills over the summer months.** Studies reveal that the greatest areas of summer loss for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, are in factual or procedural knowledge.



Studies show that out-of-school time is a dangerous time for unsupervised children and teens. They are more likely to use alcohol, drugs, and tobacco, engage in criminal and other high-risk behaviors, receive poor grades, and drop out of school than those who have the opportunity to benefit from constructive activities supervised by responsible

adults.

So it's vitally important that we look at the summer break as a time to learn and a time to use and add to the knowledge and skills that our young people have gained over the course of the academic year. Our number one goal is to prepare all of our students for post-secondary education, whether that's having the academic skills to go to community college without remediation, pass the apprentice test for one of the skilled trades, or get into a four-year degree program. To meet that goal, we not only have to prevent summer learning loss but also gain background knowledge, information and experiences that will contribute to meeting the goal.

The district publishes a [Summer Resource Guide](#) in both [Spanish](#) and [English](#) that has 30 pages of programs and opportunities that are available in our community. Most are free but do require that parents spend some time planning and working with friends, relatives and neighbors in order to be able to balance work, child care and learning. Another source for many parents is the internet where ideas for how parents can engage their children learning abound.



As a parent of three children and science and math teacher, I have several suggestions that cost nothing, can be done in the home and don't require a computer.

1. Read, Read, Read. To develop fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension, students need to read aloud and have someone with greater fluency read to them. Most of us see the value in reading to very young children, but it's equally important to continue to read to children even as they get into and through middle school. Older sisters and brothers as well as others who provide child care in the home are a great asset in the pursuit of improving reading. Older children benefit from reading to younger ones as well.

2. Find Math Everywhere. Math is everywhere and we use it all the time. The key for parents is just to make it explicit and do it out loud. From measurement in the kitchen to fractions in cooking, to money math, to estimation, to grocery store calculations, to distance, rate, and time problems—everyday examples abound.

While many of the parent resources suggest crayons or pencil and paper, I stressed “mental” math with my own children. In the clothing store, I'd ask them to estimate the total cost of things they'd buy if they had the money. Then, I'd ask them to tell me how many hours they'd have to work to buy them, or how many times they'd have to complete some paid chore.

As my children got older, I'd find more complicated situations for them to think through. By the time all three of them were in high school, they attempted to end all math at the dinner table. Fortunately I didn't give in and simply found more subtle ways to put math into the conversation.



3. Science is Problem Solving For Life.

When I taught middle school science, I invariably spent some time on the scientific method which, when boiled down to its essence, has six steps: 1.) Ask a question; 2.) Do background study; 3.) Make a prediction; 4.) Do an experiment; 5.) Analyze the data from the experiment; and 6.) Draw a conclusion and communicate the results.

Children and young people have lots of questions, so it's easy to build if we can resist always answering them. Parents

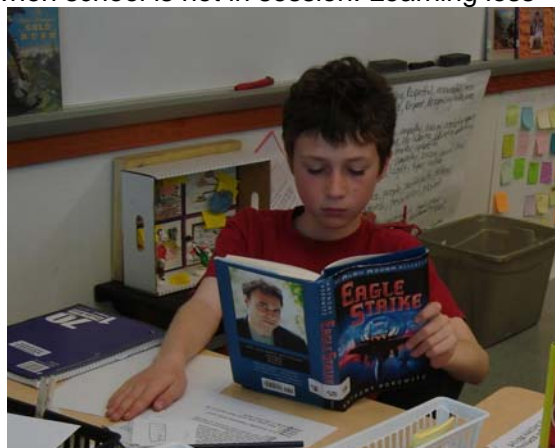
can launch a child into the world of science simply by responding to a question with the question, "How could we find about this?" Making predictions is a core learning skill in all school subjects. Encouraging children and young people to make and test predictions will help keep the learning moving.

4. Today's Problems are Social Studies in Action. Wouldn't it be great if our children would sit with us around the table after dinner or on Saturday morning and read and discuss the newspaper with us? Wouldn't we all enjoy watching the television news with our children so we could talk about what's happening in the Bay Area or around the world? That doesn't happen regularly in my home, and it's not likely to be a regular happening in too many other homes.

But we can watch a television show with our children. The younger ones in particular will enjoy having a parent in the room. Turning off the sound during the commercials allows nearly 20 minutes in most one-hour programs to ask some questions and engage children in conversation about what's happening. When families watch a DVD movie together, older children and young people will sometimes let a parent hit the pause button to talk about the social issues faced by the characters.

Summer jobs and volunteer experiences are important and effective learning experiences but should be in addition to summer reading. It's up to us as parents and teachers to do all we can to make sure that the learning goes on when school is not in session. Learning loss is something we can prevent. Keeping the focus on learning in the summer also sends a strong message to children about what their parents expect from them.

Again and again, we must give our children and young people three messages: 1) This is important; 2) You can do it; and 3) I won't give up on you. An effective way to ensure that young people leave high school prepared for the next round of schooling is to make summertime into a time to learn.



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Superintendent