

Educ -  
Summer School

Today's debate: Improving academic performance

## Summer school works

### Our view:

**Low-income students in Chicago, elsewhere make academic gains.**

An education success story is emerging from a place where success stories are rare: the inner-city neighborhoods of Chicago. Many of the troubled learners there who were required to attend summer school during the past three years are doing quite well: Eighth-graders show more than six months of academic gains in only seven weeks of summer school. Third- and sixth-graders see smaller, but still substantial, improvements.

And Chicago isn't the only success story. Most children attending summer school make significant progress, according to a University of Missouri study released in July at a Baltimore conference on the programs.

Yet another survey from the same conference shows that while 92 of the 100 largest school districts offer summer-school remedial programs, only 28 of those districts require failing children to attend.

Why not more? Most mandatory summer programs are tied to school districts' move to end social promotion. They give failing students a last chance to succeed before they're held back a year. Worried about their ability to put together a high-quality program, many districts fear the anger they could face from parents and students.

But there's enough evidence about what makes successful summer programs work to set aside those worries:

► The Chicago program features smaller

classes, a focused curriculum and a well-researched and highly scripted teaching program. That combination has proved so successful that beginning this year all Chicago teachers are being offered the option of using academic scripts — useful tools for new teachers and teachers forced to teach a class outside of their field of expertise.

► In Baltimore, there is high-quality research behind the "Teach Baltimore" summer-school program, which won a grant for medical-style evaluations of its program. Its ingredients: choosing and training motivated college students as instructors, using small-group and individualized instruction, involving parents and monitoring the instruction to ensure that teachers deliver the prescribed program. So far, first-year data look promising.

That's especially good news considering the alternative: During the summer, poor children typically experience no academic gain, while their middle-class classmates move forward, enriched by their home life and summer experiences.

Without summer school, the "summer loss" gap accumulates to roughly a year's worth of learning by the time children reach fifth grade, according to research done at Johns Hopkins University that tracked 700 students through elementary school.

These low-income children are not missing tennis lessons and trips abroad to attend summer-school programs. But unless more school districts follow the path taken by cities such as Chicago, they will miss their best chance to catch up.

## More school not the answer

### Opposing view:

**Summer programs burden students, fail to raise test scores.**

By Gerald W. Bracey

The question of summer school looms for two reasons: First, many states and districts now require students to pass standardized tests for promotion to the next grade and/or to graduate from high school. Second, students who are most at risk of failing these tests, namely, those from low-income families, show "summer loss" on both reading and mathematics. (Middle-class kids gain in reading over the summer, lose in math.)

The question, then, is how to improve the chances of these at-risk students. Coerced summer school is not the answer.

In the first place, the last thing students having difficulty in school might want is more school. This is especially true since summer school today does not resemble summer school of yore. Once a diffuse, general program that tended to focus on reading in the elementary grades, summer school today is two to three months of test-preparation drills in sweltering classrooms. So the whole thing could backfire.

More important, data from Chicago indicate that summer school doesn't raise test scores. In the study, some low-scoring third-

graders were forced to go to summer school and then were promoted. A second group attended summer school and was kept in third grade a second year. A third group was simply promoted. The results?

Kids in the group that went to summer school showed either no gain or tiny gains. Given summer loss, "no gain" could be considered a small success. However, those who attended summer school and then were flunked did the worst the next year. They still scored below Chicago's minimum standard for promotion. Kids who went to summer school and were promoted scored higher. But they scored no higher than the low-achieving students who were simply promoted. So what was the good of forcing them into summer school?

Whatever the policy on summer-school attendance, kids who sit in stifling classrooms in July and August should be promoted to the next grade in the fall.

Virtually all research in the area shows that retention doesn't work. Retaining kids, at best, does no good. And since the overwhelming majority of kids who later drop out are over age — kids who had been retained — that policy should be abandoned.

*Gerald W. Bracey is a researcher and writer in Alexandria, Va., whose latest book is **Bail Me Out: Handling Difficult Data and Tough Questions About Public Schools.***

## Lieberman choice sets Gore apart from history, Clinton

Al Gore's selection of Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., as his vice-presidential running mate can be viewed two ways: as a daringly inclusive move or a smart political maneuver.

In fact, it's both. By selecting Lieberman as the nation's first Jewish vice-presidential candidate, Gore breaks an embarrassing barrier in the nation's civic life and makes an important statement about the pluralistic nature of U.S. society.

Yet by choosing to share the ticket with Lieberman, the first Democrat to rebuke President Clinton publicly for his affair with Monica Lewinsky, Gore also gains a chance to put some distance between himself and the Clinton scandals. If he takes that chance, he'll undercut the efforts of George W. Bush's campaign to make that link a monotonous fall mantra.

Taken together, the dual benefits of the Lieberman selection to the Gore campaign and the nation as a whole cannot be underestimated. But the choice of Lieberman is important in other ways as well:

► Just as Republican nominee Bush did with his choice of Dick Cheney, Gore's selection of Lieberman shows that he takes the vice presidency seriously. Lieberman, only in his second term but one of the most respected members of the Senate, is clearly capable of assuming the presidency if that should become necessary.

► Lieberman's positions on many issues reinforce the reinvented image of the national Democratic Party. He has headed the Democratic Leadership Council, the party's leading centrist organization, for five years. He helped lead the fight to pass the Gulf War resolution in support of President Bush in 1991, though his enthusiasm for "final victory" over Saddam Hussein turned out to be unrealistic in light of the need to keep the anti-Iraq coalition from unraveling.

He has backed tax breaks for small business and welfare reform, pushed bipartisan compromise on health-care regulation, and



By Beth A. Keiser, AP

**Tapped:** Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., on his way to meet reporters Monday.

joined conservative icon William Bennett to decry obscene and violent entertainment.

The Bush campaign even complained Monday that Lieberman's positions on Social Security, school vouchers and other issues are closer to Bush's than Gore's. An exaggeration, but indicative that Republicans know they can't run against Lieberman as a classic liberal.

Lieberman's precedent-breaking role could help the Democrats marginally in states with significant Jewish populations, such as New York, New Jersey and Florida. But Gore was already running ahead among Jewish voters, as Democratic candidates do normally. More important is that Lieberman's a competent political moderate of unquestioned integrity who knows the value of bipartisanship and compromise in making democracy work.

Too often in the past, both parties' vice-presidential nominees have been political lightweights. Rarely has the nation had the luxury of choosing between tickets with such experienced and qualified nominees as Lieberman and Cheney.