Independent evaluation demonstrates BELL Summer significantly increases children’s reading skills.

Researchers from the Urban Institute completed a two-year, random assignment study of the BELL Summer program and its impact on children’s reading achievement and parental involvement. Key findings of Impact of a Summer Learning Program: A Random Assignment Study of Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL) include:

- “Scientifically rigorous evidence regarding the ability of the BELL Summer program to improve the reading skills of low-performing elementary school children.”

- Evidence of positive impacts on the degree to which parents encouraged their children to read and the degree to which they read with their children.

- “The results are of particular importance given the long-standing public policy focus on raising achievement levels of low-income students.”

“The Urban Institute’s evaluation of BELL Summer demonstrates the power structured learning can have on a child’s life during the summer months. It furthers BELL’s conviction that high-quality summer learning experiences must be made available to thousands of additional children to help them excel in school and become scholars and leaders in their communities.”

Tiffany C. Gueye, Ph.D.
BELL, Chief Executive Officer
**Why Evaluate BELL Summer?**

BELL is not only a ‘mature’ program, but has been judged to be a high quality, stable intervention that can likely be evaluated for a number of years.

The Urban Institute states the following five reasons for electing to evaluate BELL’s educational summer program:

- BELL Summer “employs well-developed curricula in both reading and math.” The program has also demonstrated effectiveness in reducing summer learning loss among children in internal evaluations.

- BELL Summer receives strong, multi-year support from several philanthropic partners. It has received significant national acclaim from leading policy makers and educational agencies, such as President Clinton, then-Senator Barack Obama, the National Summer Learning Association, and the American Federation of Teachers.

- The BELL program has been approved by several states to be eligible for Title I funding.

- At the time of the study, BELL was prepared to expand its summer program to additional sites. All sites utilize the same curricula and materials, and quality control system is in place to ensure the consistent implementation of the program model.

- BELL exhibits a “strong interest in evaluation as demonstrated by their own internal evaluations of both their summer and school year programs and the development of an Evaluation Advisory Board.”

**Evaluation Context**

The difference in learning caused by a lack of summer learning activities in grades K-8 accumulates each year. Since students from all income brackets generally learn at the same rate in school, summer learning loss ultimately accounts for 66% of the academic achievement gap between low-income and higher-income ninth grade students. Summer learning loss is also directly linked to whether students attend preparatory classes, graduate high school, and attend four-year colleges.[1]

**Methodology**

The Urban Institute study used random assignment, the “gold standard” of evaluation methods, to measure the effectiveness of the BELL Summer program model. In total, there were 1,917 applicants to the 2005 BELL Summer program at the three study sites (two in Boston, one in New York City), more than double the 750 available slots. Children were randomly chosen to be in the treatment group to participate in BELL Summer, or a comparison group that did not participate. Independent researchers collected data from student reading tests (Gates-MacGinitie), student and teacher surveys, and application forms detailing children’s race, gender, and participation status.

The Urban Institute study compliments BELL’s own evaluation. Using different parameters, the Urban Institute measured the difference between children attending BELL Summer versus children engaged in other summer activities. BELL’s internal evaluation measures the total amount of skills gained by children enrolled in BELL Summer at the beginning and end of their participation in the program.

Results

The study found statistically significant positive impacts on the reading test scores of children who attended the BELL Summer program.

- Participation in BELL Summer had a positive and statistically significant impact on reading achievement, particularly for treatment group students who fully participated in the BELL program (p<0.5, effect size = 0.14)

- Participation had a positive and statistically significant impact on parents encouraging their children to read (p<0.05, effect size = 0.15) and their frequency of reading to their children at home (p<0.05, effect size = 0.21)

- Parents in the treatment group reported a 50% increase in the hours per week they engage in reading and other academic activities at home compared to the control group. Participants spent fewer hours watching TV and playing computer games (p<0.05, effect size = 0.66)

Implications of the Study

The results of this independent evaluation are of particular importance given the public policy focus on raising achievement levels of students living in low-income communities.

Much attention has been focused on the potential of out-of-school-time programs to increase students’ achievements. In the last decade, many studies have attempted to quantify the impact educational summer and after school programs have on children’s reading and math skills. In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) created significant public funding for under-performing children to attend educational out-of-school-time programs. According to Senior Research Methodologist Duncan Chaplin, one of the report’s authors, this evaluation of BELL Summer provides “the best evidence we have right now about summer enrichment and low-income students.”

The implications of these findings are particularly relevant to national and local educational policy. Currently, federal funding from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is primarily used to fund after school programs. While the law stipulates that funds may be used to support summer learning programs, few districts have elected to disburse funds in this manner, thus limiting the ability of non-profit providers such as BELL to scale their programs and impact the lives of many more children. BELL “represents the type of organization that state education agencies will be considering when deciding how to use their Title I funds.” The evidence contained in this evaluation supports using federal, state and/or local funds for summer learning programs as a strategy for increasing children’s academic skills.

“BELL is helping me read better, and makes learning fun! I want to return next summer.” — BELL Scholar

About BELL

BELL is a non-profit organization having provided educational summer and after school programs to thousands of children in Augusta (GA), Baltimore (MD), Boston (MA), Detroit (MI), Newark (NJ), and New York City (NY). BELL’s mission is to transform the academic achievements, self-esteem and life trajectories of children living in under-resourced, urban communities.

BELL Summer is a six-week enrichment experience that operates from Monday through Friday for a full day in July and August. Every morning, certified teachers lead two hours of literacy activities and one hour of math instruction using Summer Success: Reading and Summer Success: Math Curricula published by Great Source, a division of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Company. Teachers also utilize a multi-cultural library. After an hour break for lunch and recess, specialty instructors lead structured enrichment activities such as music, art, drama, dance, and physical education. A wide variety of enrichment partners diversify enrichment activities provided to scholars. Throughout the program, highly trained college and graduate students serve as mentors to scholars and support academic instruction. On “Mentor Fridays,” scholars listen to community members as they share inspirational stories about what scholars can achieve if they apply themselves.

In 2006, BELL Summer was named the best educational summer program for children in the nation by the National Summer Learning Association at Johns Hopkins University and highlighted as a model summer program in the American Federation of Teachers’ publication, American Educator.

About the Urban Institute

The independent evaluation of the BELL Summer program was conducted by the Urban Institute’s Duncan Chaplin, Senior Researcher, Mathematica Policy Research, and Jeffrey Capizzano, Director of Public Policy and Research of Teaching Strategies, Inc. Established in 1968, the Urban Institute is one of the nation’s oldest and most prestigious organizations devoted to research on urban issues. Dedicated to nonpartisan economic and social policy research, the organization analyzes policies, evaluates programs, and informs community policy makers to improve civic and economic well-being. The Urban Institute works in all 50 states and abroad in over 28 countries to share research findings through the dissemination of reports and books to policymakers, program administrators, business leaders, academia, and the public at large.

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