What Schools Can Learn from Summer Camps

Annie Murphy Paul

As warm weather approaches and parents sign up their kids for summer enrichment programs, many may wonder how long the effects of these programs last. Do their benefits persist into the school year, or do they disappear come September?

A study led by Stanford University psychologist Paul O'Keefe, released online this month by the journal *Motivation and Emotion*, offers some heartening news: Students' improvements in attitude and motivation stick around well after summer turns to fall.

Over the course of nine months, O'Keefe and his coauthors assessed a group of eighth-, ninth-, and tenth-graders three times: once before the end of the school year, once during their summer enrichment program, and a final time *six months* after the end of the program.

Reward intellectual risk-taking, and avoid punishing students for failed experiments.

The researchers were looking at the teenagers' "goal orientations"—were they interested in learning for learning's sake, or in showing off their smarts? The first type of attitude, called a "mastery orientation," has been linked to high levels of motivation and engagement, while the second, known as a "performance orientation," has been tied to greater anxiety and less resilience in the face of failure.

During the summer enrichment program, the students became more apt to favor a mastery approach, endorsing statements such as “It’s important to me that I learn a lot of new concepts in science,” and discounting statements like, “One of my goals is to show others that I’m good at science,” which indicate a performance orientation.

The surprise was that the teenagers’ embrace of mastery remained strong even after they returned to school —which, with its tests and rankings, often places more emphasis on performance than on learning for its own sake.

As cheering as this finding may be, it in turn raises another question: How can we carry the mastery orientation cultivated in summer enrichment programs into the rest of the year? For the answer, look more closely at what the program in this study does right. Called the Talent Identification Program, it is held on the campus of Duke University and lasts for three weeks, during which participants attend academically rigorous classes for seven hours on weekdays and three hours on Saturdays. The courses, which include subjects like Aerospace Engineering, Introduction to Medical Science, Marine Biology, and Pharmacology, are deliberately designed to emphasize mastery and de-emphasize performance.

Some key characteristics:

- The program promotes collaboration, playing down competition among students and fostering “a collegial attitude towards fellow learners.”
- Its instructors offer what O’Keefe calls “autonomy support,” encouraging students “to draw their own conclusions and justify them, explore aspects of class subjects that interest them most, and make decisions regarding what they prefer to learn and how they would like to learn those materials.”
- The program rewards intellectual risk-taking, and avoids punishing students for failed experiments.
- Feedback given to students recognizes effort and growth and focuses on the learning process, rather than on its outcome.

As O’Keefe’s study demonstrates, summer enrichment programs offer lasting benefits for those lucky enough to participate in them. What would be even better? Every student encouraged to learn for mastery, all school year long.