Changing School Structure in the Summer

By emphasizing effective instruction, increased student participation, and teacher collegiality, the SCEE Summer Program in New Orleans improves students' reading powers and stimulates structural changes in the regular school year.

Operating under myriad local, state, and federal rules, schools are locked into schedules, curriculum objectives, testing mandates, and textbooks during the academic year. During the summer, however, the story is different. Summer school offers the flexibility for teachers to increase uninterrupted learning time, to actively engage students in learning, and to improve their teaching skills by observing and consulting one another. By offering teachers and parents a vision of an alternative structure that works, an effective summer program can, in turn, stimulate change during the school year.

The Southern Coalition for Educational Equity (SCEE), an advocacy group in Jackson, Mississippi, created such a summer program in New Orleans as part of their school effectiveness work in that district. The Southern Coalition Summer Program, which began in 1983, has been refined and expanded in succeeding years; its goal is to increase students' reading comprehension and self-esteem through daily three-hour reading classes and afternoon electives.

The program was created for low-achieving minority children in grades 4 through 7, beginning with 6 teachers and about 120 students. By 1987 the program had over twice as many students and teachers, all from the New Orleans Public Schools.

Professional Growth in a Collegial Setting

Each summer school begins with a week of intensive training for teachers, followed by five weeks of classes. Teachers learn to organize classes into groups and manage multiple activities concurrently. Training includes demonstrations of effective teaching strategies such as Reciprocal Teaching and the Great Books Program—strategies that require student participation and emphasize thinking instead of recall. Teachers are also given a library of recommended books to loan students throughout the summer.

Although initially leery of three-hour classes, teachers changed their attitudes when they saw the interest of their students and the resulting learning. For many teachers, this was their first experience in working with small groups and asking questions that required more than factual recall.

Instructors teach five different activities each day: listening, writing, vocabulary development, reading extended text, and speaking; they vary their instructional approaches throughout the three-hour classes.

Because effective teaching depends on good planning and informal exchanges with colleagues, teachers are paid for an additional 90 minutes each day to plan their classes. In addition, they meet once a week to share problems, ideas, suggestions, and successes; and the program director is always available for assistance.

An Atmosphere That Encourages Reading

Each day begins with breakfast for the...
students and a brief meeting of students and staff, which creates a sense of group spirit and gives students a chance to perform. Students present book reports in the form of commercials and read their own compositions. Invited guests, often distinguished members of the community, give testimonials on the importance of reading.

Students attend reading classes from nine until noon. After lunch, students attend two or more elective classes in art, music, drama, dance, swimming, computers, sports, or video making, which are taught by high school and college students from the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts. Enthusiastic role models for the students, these talented young people also assist in the morning reading classes.

Proof of Success
If impressive test score gains are the gauge, the SCEE Summer Program is a roaring success. At the beginning and end of the five-week period, students were tested with the College Board's Degrees of Reading Power (DRP), a test that measures reading comprehension exclusively. In this short time interval, students made gains equal to or greater than the expected gain for an entire school year. (On the DRP the expected gain for these students over a school year is approximately three to five points; the four Summer Programs resulted in reading comprehension gains of seven, four, five, and four points, respectively, for the five-week period.)

Teachers also reported that students showed significant progress in reading aloud and in oral and written expression. Moreover, almost two-thirds of the students had perfect or near-perfect attendance each year. Teachers reported very few behavior problems, even from students known to be discipline problems during the school year. Now the program is so popular that each year more students apply than can be accepted.

A Model of an Alternative Structure
Without a clear image of attractive alternatives, people are unmotivated to change their work environments. The SCEE Summer Program provides such a model. At the end of each summer the teachers ask, "Why can't teaching be like this year-round?" Why not, indeed?

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