



## Ending Social Promotion: Results from Summer Bridge

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**W**hile not the largest, Chicago's Summer Bridge program was the harbinger of a national trend, the most ambitious in design, and the most closely linked to the success of the school system's effort to end social promotion. *Results from Summer Bridge* presents findings from a rigorous and careful study of Summer Bridge, its outcomes, and the factors that affected student and teacher experiences. Was the program effective in establishing high participation rates, raising test scores, and increasing students' likelihood of promotion? How did students view the learning environment in Summer Bridge? And, how did teachers approach instruction?

### Overview of Summer Bridge Program

As part of its effort to end social promotion, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) requires that students in the third, sixth, and eighth grades who do not meet a given score on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) must attend Summer Bridge. Between the policy's inception in the 1996-97 school year and the spring of 2000, about one-third of students in the promotional gate grades did not meet the established ITBS scores. Ninety-seven percent of these students were African-American or Latino.

The goal of Summer Bridge is to give low-achieving students the extra help they need to remediate poor skills and meet the promotional test-score cutoffs. Between the summers of 1997 and 2000, over 21,000 students in the third, sixth, and eighth grades attended Summer Bridge, making it one of the largest and most sustained summer school programs in the country. Third and sixth graders attend the program for three hours per day for six weeks for a total of 90 hours of instruction. Eighth graders attend four hours per day for seven weeks for a total of 140 hours of instruction.

Summer Bridge teachers are expected to follow a prescribed curriculum that is aligned to the ITBS and are provided with all classroom materials. Students are taught by regular CPS teachers in small classes (of approximately 16) and most often attend their own schools. Eighth-grade Summer Bridge teachers were much

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more likely to have taught eighth grade during the school year. Reflecting this, over twice as many eighth-grade teachers than third-grade teachers (41 percent compared to 18 percent) reported knowing almost all (80 to 100 percent) of their students prior to the summer. Testing rates suggest that student participation in Summer Bridge was high. A conservative estimate indicates that over 80 percent of students who were required to attend the program were retested at the end of the summer.

### The Policy Context

The recent expansion of summer school programs in urban school systems is largely the result of the introduction of high-stakes testing and efforts to end social promotion. Over the past several years, almost every major school system in the country has adopted a policy to end social promotion.<sup>1</sup> Although their details vary, a common theme of all these policies is that students must meet minimum test-score cutoffs or face retention. At

the same time, many school systems are struggling with the question of how to best provide low-achieving students the extra support they need to meet these new expectations. An increasingly popular option is to use the summer for extended instructional time.

Extra instruction during the summer is an appealing strategy. Past research finds that increased instructional time has positive effects on low-achieving students.<sup>2</sup> Multiple studies also document that impoverished students lose ground during the summer months, particularly in reading, and that “summer learning loss” may be an important reason why low-income children fall behind their more advantaged peers.<sup>3</sup> All of this suggests that summer is an opportune time to intervene and provide low-achieving students with extra support.

At the same time, summer programs are costly, both administratively and fiscally. They require keeping buildings open all year, mounting programs in short periods of time, and the capacity to turn around test results quickly. Summer programs take away from professional development and programming time and they require convincing tired teachers and students to gear up and commit to working during what has historically been

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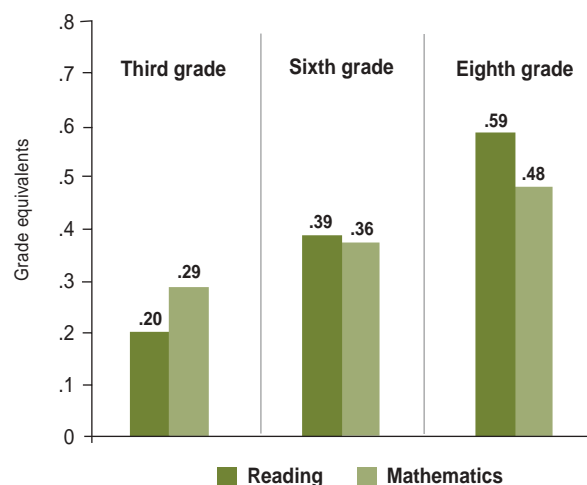
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The Consortium on Chicago School Research is an independent federation of Chicago area organizations that conducts research on ways to improve Chicago’s public schools and assess the progress of school improvement and reform. Formed in 1990, it is a multipartisan organization that includes faculty from area universities, leadership from the Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Teachers Union, the Chicago Principals and Administrators Association, education advocacy groups, the Illinois State Board of Education, and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, as well as other key civic and professional leaders.

The Consortium does not argue a particular policy position. Rather, it believes that good policy is most likely to result from a genuine competition of ideas informed by the best evidence that can be obtained.

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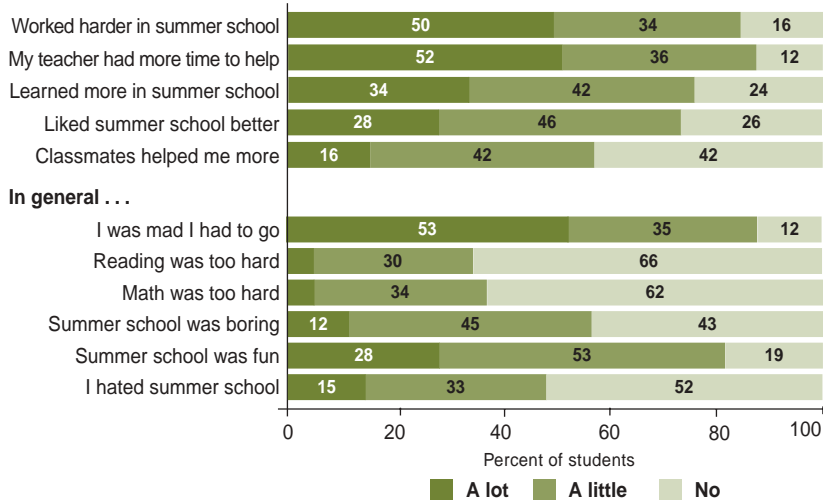
**Eighth Graders Had the Largest Summer Bridge Test-Score Gains in Reading and Mathematics**  
*Average Adjusted Test-Score Gains 1997-2000*



## Summer Bridge Students Are Very Positive about Their Summer School Experience

*Eighth Graders*

### Compared to regular school year . . .



Results are from the 1999 Summer Bridge survey.

thought of as a time to slow down the pace. Is it worth the effort? Are mandatory summer programs an effective means of providing support to students under high-stakes testing?

### Concerns about Summer Programs

Critics worry that providing summer school programs under high-stakes testing could fall short of the goal of truly improving student achievement. First, there is a concern that summer programs linked to high-stakes exams focus primarily on short-term test preparation and do not provide students with meaningful learning experiences that will be sustained over time. Second, some worry that summer programs will not adequately meet the needs of low-achieving students. The short duration and the second chance to meet the test-score cutoffs may benefit only those students who are close to the cutoffs, leaving struggling students behind. Third, the large size of many of these programs raises questions about quality. Can large urban school systems maintain high-quality programming while mounting

not only these expansive efforts but also the existing school structure? Without addressing differences in the quality of instruction across schools, critics worry that such initiatives will exacerbate existing differences in school quality and that students in better performing schools will receive higher quality programming than students in lower performing schools.

Furthermore, prior research has found that low-income students often do not benefit as much as middle-income students from summer programs.<sup>4</sup> In addition, much less is known about the impact of summer support programs under high-stakes testing. Does Summer Bridge's mandatory nature and highly structured approach remedy problems that often plague similar programs in urban areas such as low attendance, uneven program quality, and short duration?<sup>5</sup>

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*It's much more boring in regular school. Like, teachers should be like Ms. D. She teaches us and when we do something wrong she comes and helps us. But see, regular teachers don't do that. Summer school teachers, they like to tell you, "Ok, this is wrong," and they fix it for you . . . regular teachers, they're like, "This is wrong, try it again." But the summer school teachers explain it, and usually in regular school they don't.*

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## Key Findings

In the short term, the CPS Summer Bridge program has been effective in producing test-score gains, particularly among sixth and eighth graders, and offering students a second chance to meet the promotional ITBS cutoffs. The results of this study suggest that summer programs may be a promising approach to provide students with extra instructional time and remedial support. Sixth and eighth graders experienced substantial test-score gains. In all three grades, the rate at which Summer Bridge students increased their test scores was above their school-year rate.

Summer Bridge gains were relatively uniform across demographic and achievement groups. There is little evidence to support one of the chief concerns about the use of summer programs under high-stakes testing, namely that such programs will produce benefits only for those

students who are close to the test-score cutoffs. Third graders at the highest risk of failure benefited the most from Summer Bridge.

Students were extremely positive about their experiences in Summer Bridge. Sixth and eighth graders reported that their classrooms were environments where they were expected to work hard. They also reported that their teachers were supportive. Most importantly, students were significantly more positive during the summer than during the school year about the academic environments of their classrooms and the attention they received from their teachers.

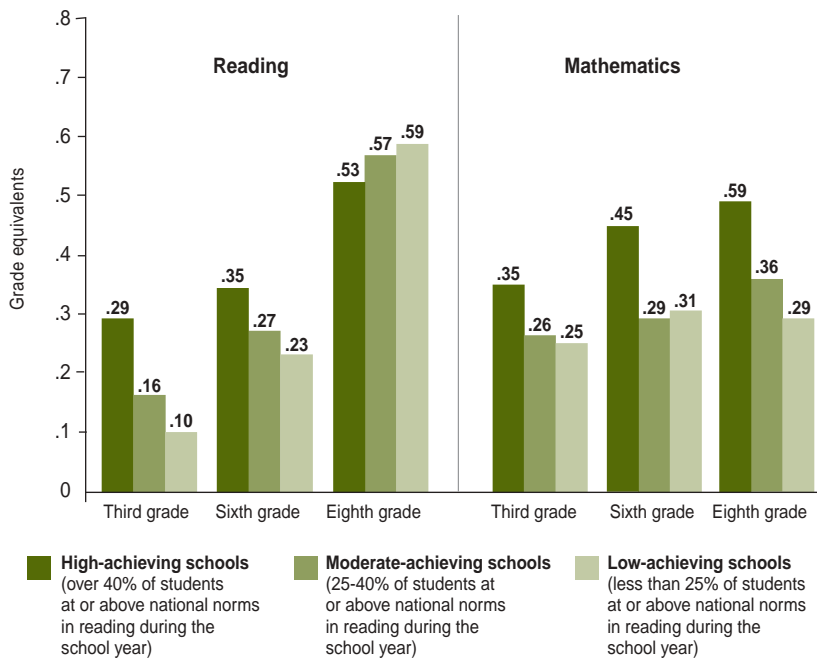
Whether teachers knew their students prior to Summer Bridge influenced their instructional practice and predicted the extent of students' test-score increases. Teachers who knew a large proportion of their students before the start of Summer Bridge were more likely to

report adapting the curriculum to meet students' needs and working more closely with students outside of class. This was especially true for older students. These results suggest that summer programs may be more effective when teachers know their students, are familiar with their learning styles and behaviors, and are able to extend school-year relationships into the summer.

There is evidence that Summer Bridge students had slightly larger learning gains over two years than students who were close to the cutoffs but were not required to attend the program. Although these results are encouraging, the effects were small. Summer Bridge did not substantially alter the learning rates of low-achieving students during the school year. It appeared to help keep these students "on track," but did not change their learning trajectory. The short-term

### Students in Schools with Higher School Year Achievement Have Larger Test-Score Gains in Summer Bridge

*Adjusted Summer Bridge Gains by School Achievement in 1999*



Results are significant for third grade reading and sixth grade math. Results shown are after controlling for student and school characteristics.

## Calculating Test Score Increases and Adjusted Gains

A student's adjusted gain is based on the difference between her actual score on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) at the end of Summer Bridge and her predicted score in the spring. In other words, it is an estimate based on the student's entire test-score history. The adjusted gain provides a better measure of a student's "true" ability because it reduces the effects of a single "bad" or "good" test day—it measures the amount learned beyond what was expected given her ITBS history.

intervention that Summer Bridge provided allowed low-achieving students to raise their test scores and provided an extra boost to keep them from falling further behind.

**Higher-achieving schools ran more effective Summer Bridge programs.** Students who attended Summer Bridge at a higher-achieving school had larger test-score gains than students who attended lower-achieving schools. These differences were most pronounced in the third grade. Moreover, teachers in higher-performing schools were more positive about the program's learning

environment and reported paying more attention to the individual needs of students. These practices were associated with larger test-score gains. Thus, Summer Bridge, even with its mandatory curricula and uniform materials, did not ameliorate differences in the quality of schools.

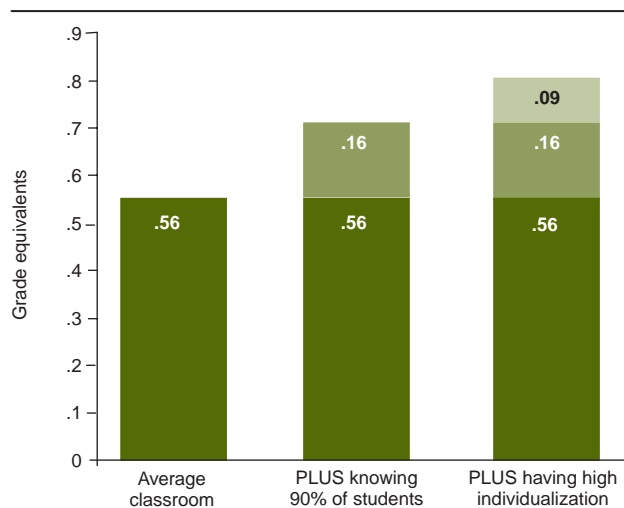
**The quality of interactions between teachers and students distinguished the most effective Summer Bridge classrooms from those that were average.** The Summer Bridge curriculum contributed to the consistency in the topics teachers covered, pacing, and skill focus in the classroom. For the most part, teachers followed it. This seemed to play a critical role in ensuring exposure to similar content across classrooms and schools. Nonetheless, there were still substantial differences in instruction. A relatively small proportion of teachers taught in ways that engaged students, provided substantive feedback, and worked to address individual learning needs. Students in classrooms with higher quality instruction also made larger learning gains.

Teacher surveys and classroom observations suggest that summer programs that rely on mandatory curricula are not "teacher proof." Students whose teachers spent more time individualizing instruction and working with students outside of class had greater learning gains than students in classrooms where teachers spent less time adapting the curriculum and providing individualized instruction.

**We find that although summer programs may be a useful intervention for students who are behind, they are not a substitute for effective instruction during the school year.** There is no evidence that Summer Bridge

### Students Had Larger Test-Score Gains When Teachers Provided More Individualized Instruction and Knew Them before Summer Bridge

*Eighth-Grade Adjusted Summer Bridge Reading Gains*



In the average Summer Bridge classroom, the teacher knew 44% of students before Summer Bridge, no tutors were available, and 13 to 17 students attended. Results are from the 1999 Summer Bridge teacher survey and student test scores. "Knowing students" is 99% significant. Individualization is 90% significant.

affected school-year learning rates, or addressed the fact that students who attended the program continued to show low school-year performance. Summer Bridge did not change students' experiences during the school year. We did learn, however, that summer can provide an opportunity for teachers to work closely with students in an environment that is different from the school year and can benefit students who are in need of extra support. Indeed, our analysis suggests that part of the reason students had such a positive reaction to Summer Bridge was that it contrasted dramatically with their school-year experiences. Not surprisingly, when Summer Bridge students return to their regular school-year environments, they appear to return to their previous learning rates. Thus, we do not find evidence that a one-time summer intervention is an effective means of addressing the long-term learning needs of low-achieving students.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See M. Kasindorf and D. Howlett, "Summer seen as critical to improving schools," *USA Today*, 17 July (2001): A01.

<sup>2</sup> See C. Denham and A. Liberman (Eds.), *Time to Learn* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 1980); H.M. Levin and M.C. Tsang, "The economics of student time," *Economics of Education Review*, 6, no. 4 (1987): 357-364; and B. Smith, *It's About Time* (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> See K.L. Alexander, D.R. Entwistle, and L.S. Olson, "Schools, achievement, and inequality: A seasonal perspective," in G.D. Borman and M. Boulay (Eds.), *Summer Learning: Research, Policies and Programs* (Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: forthcoming); H. Cooper, B. Nye, K. Charlton, J. Lindsay, and S. Greathouse, "The effects of summer vacation on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review," *Review of Educational Research*, 66, no. 3 (1996): 227-268; D.R. Entwistle and K.L. Alexander, "Summer setback: Race, poverty, school composition, and mathematics achievement in the first two years of school," *American Sociological Review*, 57 (1992): 72-84; B. Heyns, *Summer learning and the Effects of Schooling* (New York: Academic Press, 1978); and B. Heyns, "Schooling and cognitive development: Is there a season for learning?" *Child Development*, 58 (1987): 1151-1160.

<sup>4</sup> H. Cooper, K. Charlton, J. Valentine, and L. Muhlenbruck, "Making the most of summer school: A meta-analysis and narrative review," *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 65, no. 260 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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## MORE ON THIS TOPIC

*Results from Summer Bridge* is one in a series of Consortium reports on efforts to end social promotion in Chicago. Earlier reports provided initial findings on students' passage through the promotional gates; passing rates; Iowa Tests of Basic Skills achievement trends; and differences in exclusion, passing, waiver, and retention rates. The series will include two additional research reports. The first will be an analysis of instruction in Chicago public schools since the introduction of accountability for students and schools in 1996. The second will be an extensive analysis of grade retention. This report will examine the effects of retention on students and the system as a whole. It will also include analysis of the impact of this initiative on dropout rates, on students in special and bilingual education, and on students who are sent to Academic Preparatory Centers.

### Other reports from this series:

*Ending Social Promotion: Results from the First Two Years*

Melissa Roderick, Anthony S. Bryk, Brian A. Jacob, John Q. Easton, and Elaine Allensworth  
December 1999

The first in the series, *Results from the First Two Years*, compares the progress of students who faced the promotional test cutoffs in 1997 and 1998 with that of a group of students from before the policy was in place. The report's main findings are the following:

- There have been impressive increases in the proportion of students who meet the test-score cutoff for promotion.
- The picture is mixed on whether getting students up to a test-score cutoff in one year allows them to do better the next year.
- Retained students continue to struggle.
- Overall results are much more positive for sixth and eighth graders than for third graders, suggesting that the policy might be more appropriate for older than younger grade levels.
- Administrative issues, such as decisions to exclude students or to promote them despite scores below the cutoff, shape students' experiences under the policy.

*Update: Ending Social Promotion Passing, Retention, and Achievement Trends among Promoted and Retained Students* (Data Brief)

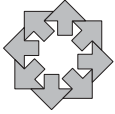
Melissa Roderick, Jenny Nagaoka, Jen Bacon, and John Q. Easton.  
September 2000

An update to the Consortium's December 1999 study of the first two years of the district's efforts to end social promotion. This data brief reports on the progress of students who faced the test cutoffs in 1999—the third group of students since the policy was implemented. It also adds a new year of data on the students who faced the policy in 1997. The authors track these students' progress over three years. For those students who were enrolled in the sixth grade in 1997, the authors examine what happened when they faced a second promotional gate in eighth grade.

## Contents of Full Report

- Introduction: Overview of the Summer Bridge Program
- Learning Gains and Passing Rates
- Students' Experiences
- Teachers' Experiences
- Teachers' Views: A Closer Look at Instruction
- Sustainability of Summer Bridge Gains
- Interpretive Summary

For a copy of the full report, visit the Consortium's website at:  
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