



A city partnership for smarter summers

By Ron Fairchild

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Amid the alarming headlines about facility closings, there is a glimmer of good news for Baltimore students: For the first time, city recreation centers - a total of 35 - will partner with the city public school system to provide high-quality, seamless summer learning programs.

That means a full day of integrated educational enrichment and healthful physical activity, and a more consistent program across the city. It also means that students will have access to breakfast, lunch and an afternoon snack - key to keeping kids eating healthily during the summer months.

Why is this important?

We know that the summer months are a time when students tend to backslide academically. And we know the problem is more pronounced among students from low-income families.

Research has found that students from low-income families lose two months in reading over the summer, while their middle- and upper-income peers make slight gains. Most students also fall behind two months in math.

John Hopkins University researchers have found that 65 percent of the achievement gap in reading between poor and affluent ninth-graders is due to unequal summer learning experiences they had as elementary school students.

When classes end in June, many Baltimore children are set loose to play on the streets unsupervised or, because of safety concerns, are forced to stay indoors, isolated and lonely.

This summer, the city plans to spend \$8.7 million on school-based summer learning programs - including \$2.36 million in federal Title I funds intended to improve the academic achievement of the disadvantaged - an increase of \$2.7 million over last year.

Some 21,307 children, most of them of elementary- and middle-school age, are expected to take part in learning programs this summer. That represents a slight bump over last year and moves us back toward the recent peak in 2007, when 23,738 students participated.

Even more importantly, plans call for a full day of activity: four to six hours of academics plus another two to five hours of cultural enrichment and recreation. That's a big change from the past, when working parents had to choose between academic or recreation programs, many of

which ran for only half a day, and then had to worry about how to take care of their children afterward.

Officials with the city recreation department and school system worked hard over several months to overcome the logistical and administrative issues that had long prevented them from collaborating.

This year, principals and the directors of 35 city recreation centers that are connected to or near schools will coordinate scheduling to make the most of their resources, decrease unnecessary duplication and reduce inefficient competition between the two summer program providers.

That is an important breakthrough and one that city officials should be proud of. And hopefully it's an indication of things to come, when other city agencies will partner with the school system in a focused manner to provide even more coordinated summer opportunities.

It's a sensible and necessary path for the future of our children and our city.

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