In a 2009 government web cast, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan described summer learning loss as “devastating.”  This is what researchers have often referred to as the “summer slide.”  It is estimated that school summer breaks will cause the average student to lose up to one month of instruction, with disadvantaged students being disproportionately affected (Cooper, 1996).  Researchers conclude that two-thirds of the 9th grade reading achievement gap can be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities during the elementary school years, with nearly one-third of the gap present when children begin school (Alexander, Entwistle & Olsen, 2007).  The body of existing research demonstrates the critical importance that the early development of summer reading habits can play in providing the foundation for later success.  Summer learning research can be broadly categorized under the following themes:

1. The impact of summer learning loss on disadvantaged youth

An in-depth study of Baltimore area students, Alexander et al. (2007), concluded that students from both better-off and disadvantaged backgrounds made similar achievement gains during the school year. However, during the summer the disadvantaged youth fell significantly behind in reading.  This finding validates the importance of education but also indicates the disparities evident between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

1. Access to books and time devoted to reading

According to Mc-Gill Franzen and Allington (2004), “Too many children spend their summer with no books to read.”  Their research cites the necessity of finding novel ways to get books into the hands of children during summer breaks.  This idea is supported by research from Barbara Heyn (1978), who found that reading was the most influential factor related to summer learning.  Further studies by Krashen (2004) simply state, “More access to books results in more reading.”  These and other studies find that when schools close their doors, the opportunity to read is often closed with them, especially for those children without access to books.  McQuillan (1998) found that, “There is now considerable evidence that the amount and quality of student’s access to reading materials is substantively related to the amount of reading they engage in, which in turn is the most important determinant of reading achievement.”

1. The importance of successful reading experiences

In their studies of children’s reading development, McGill-Franzen and Allington (2003), cite the importance of extensive, successful reading experiences in the development of reading proficiency.  If children have the opportunity to listen to, discuss, and read books on topics that they select, they will develop extensive background information, which can serve as a platform from which to engage in their own independent reading.

1. The impact of innovative summer reading programs

Current research points out that increased summer reading reduces summer learning loss.  Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, has stated “A key step toward stopping the summer slide, is the development and launch of high quality programs that take advantage of time outside the school day and year to help children learn, grow, and develop” (Elling, 2009).