



Each and Every Child

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Keeping kids on their (learning) toes during summer

Igniting children's passions, imaginations make the break a great academic experience

BOONE – Angela Lange has a sort of love-hate relationship with the summer break. Sure, she loves the

time off. But she hates what summers can do to her students: Studies show some students – especially students

on Individualized Education Programs – fall behind their peers during the break.



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Teacher Angela Lange works with one of her students.

Historically known as the summer slide, it's actually not so much a slide. Rather, it's where some students simply don't progress during the summer months as much as other students. As such, by the beginning of the school year, some students appear to have gone backwards.

Slide or not, Lange is determined to put that in the history books. And to that end, the kindergarten-first grade special education teacher at Page Elementary in Boone equips her parents with tools to help students over the summer break.

As a rule of thumb, Lange tells the parents to spend an hour a day brushing up the children's skills – 20 minutes each on reading, writing

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and math.

“The hardest thing the parents will face is that the kids don’t want to do it,” she said. “So, just like in class, you have to make it relevant to their lives.”

Lange suggested a math lesson could involve a trip to the store.

“Give them \$5 and have them go around the story to pick up things they can purchase for \$5,” she said.

“Find real-world applications for their lessons.”

And Lange said she likes to make every lesson multisensory.



Whether it’s math or reading, there are plenty of creative ways to get children to learn during the summer break.

“The more connections they can make in their brains – the more they hear it and see it – the better it goes into their learning capabilities,” Lange said.

When it comes to reading, Lange stresses that the objective should be comprehension, not speed.

“We are so focused on timed tests,” she said. “But fluency isn’t as important as comprehension. Don’t push for fast reading. Instead, focus on accuracy.”

But don’t let the parents go it alone without giving them some tips.

“You want to make sure that everything the parents do is evidence based,” she said.

Getting out in the community will provide what Lange calls “awesome

adventures” for the kids.

“Get to know what your community has and turn it into a fun learning experience,” she said. “Here in Boone,



Angela Lange

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we have the Scenic Valley Railway which enables kids to get to know railroads.”

Summer also is an opportunity for parents to get to know their child’s



learning style.

“What makes them learn in the best way?” Lange said. “Make sure you understand their IEP, such as what are their goals. Become an advocate for your child, and teach them how to advocate for themselves.”

Above all, parents need to have lots of varied conversations with their children.

“The parents need to regularly talk to their kids – just talk,” she said. “The vocabulary goes way up.”

Q-and-A: A chat with Deborah Reed

Why does the summer slide occur?

Based on the data we have gathered through our studies of summer school across Iowa and with individual school districts in Iowa, we think the concept of “summer slide” is misunderstood. The current notion would suggest that students know certain letters, words, skills, etc. and somehow completely erase them over the summer. In fact there are organizations that are claiming students regress by two months over the summer as though instruction in August actually should start with content from about April of the previous school year.

From what we are seeing, that is not what occurs. Rather, students who have difficulties reading, including those on Individualized Education Programs, for literacy, experience a loss of ability relative to their typically achieving peers or relative to peers who participated in summer academic programs. The average student of all ability levels seems to be growing over the summer. The issue is that some students are growing faster than others.

Therefore, the students with reading difficulties appear to be worse in the fall because other students arrive more prepared for the new, higher-level requirements. So the question is not “Why does the summer slide occur?” but rather, “Why do some students grow faster in the summer when school is not in session?”

We think the answers are that the faster-growing students are reading for



Editor’s note: Deborah Reed is the director of the Iowa Reading Research Center.

Reed earned her Ph.D. in special education at the University of Texas at Austin. She spent the first 10 years of her career as an English language arts and reading teacher and pre-kindergarten-12th grade reading specialist.

Since 2003, she has been active in the field as a researcher and technical assistance provider. Most recently prior to joining the Iowa Reading Research Center, Reed has served as an assistant professor at Florida State University and the Florida Center for Reading Research. She has developed numerous instructional materials and professional development programs on evidence-based literacy practices, particularly for middle and high school students.

The Iowa Reading Research Center’s website – which contains lots of great information for educators and parents alike – is located at iowareadingresearch.org

pleasure, involved in informal and formal literacy activities, exposed to richer oral language experiences, etc. Basically, students are learning incidentally. Those who are more capable and have certain advantages due to their families or circumstances may have richer experiences or are able to capitalize on the incidental learning more so than others.

That said, we do not advocate for incidental learning in the classroom. It perpetuates what we refer to as the Matthew Effect: the rich get richer, which makes the poor look poorer. When we have students in formal education, we want to offer direct, systematic instruction to reduce the likelihood that learning is left to the chance of whether an individual student can “pick it up and run with it,” so to speak. We want to be sure everyone has an equal opportunity to learn and achieve at high levels.

Do you have statistics on how much time a student loses to the summer slide?

The “loss” is relative to a moving target of typical maturation. The statistics would be dependent upon the ways in which students’ skills are measured,

so I would encourage people to examine their own data to better understand how different students (such as those on IEPs) are performing in spring versus the subsequent fall.

The other important issue to consider is that we see seasonal differences in students’ growth. That is, students experience faster rates of growth from fall to winter than from winter to spring. Considering this in light of the summer “loss,” we think it is possible that students arrive in the fall with rusty habits and skills. They haven’t lost them entirely; they are simply out of practice or not immediately recalling what they have learned.

We assess students shortly upon their arrival at school in the fall when they are the most out of practice. Therefore, it stands to reason that the winter testing would demonstrate higher rates of growth because it reflects both rekindling of the previously learned skills as well as growth in new skills. Whereas, the spring testing would reflect only the growth in new skills.

Why is the summer slide problematic?

It is bad to have students continuously falling further behind their peers because this accumulates over the years and becomes more challenging to overcome as students get older. If we could at least keep students parallel in growth over the summer to their better-

achieving peers, then the teachers’ well-planned instruction during the school year has a better chance of accelerating students’ learning.

What specific things can parents/guardians do to help prevent or minimize the slide? Are there tasks?

Families of students with reading disabilities often think of summer as the time to give their children a break from something that is difficult, but doing that validates for children that reading is something they should choose to avoid whenever possible.

If we want students to think of themselves as readers, we need to help them see how reading is a part of their lives and not just what they endure during school. We don’t want the summer experiences to feel like a punishment. The key is to present reading as an enjoyable activity.

To highlight how reading can be relaxing, families can encourage children to read for a minimum of 20 minutes per day. Children should read high-quality books that offer exposure to a wide range of ideas and vocabulary words. Families can support this by sharing in the reading time. Seeing adults read sends a powerful message to children that this is an important part of life.

When they take trips or visit sites, families should have children read about the area or exhibits before they go, spend time learning about the history or important features while they are visiting a place, and write about their experiences afterward. Even a trip to the store can present an opportunity to research a product by comparing prices, reading reviews, and evaluating the marketing claims made by the company.



When time allows, Deborah Reed enjoys going to schools to see progress first hand.