

July 31, 2010

## Our Opinion

### We can't afford to take summer off

Indiana spends more than \$6 billion a year trying to educate its children from August through May. It then stands aside as a significant portion of the learning achieved in a school year is erased during the long summer break.

The effects of summer-learning loss have been well documented in recent years. Research indicates that all students, regardless of family income, lose a month's worth of progress in math over the course of a summer. Low-income students are hit especially hard when it comes to reading, losing on average almost three months of progress each summer.

Yet, as Time magazine documented in its cover story last week, summer doesn't have to be a lost season for learning. Reporter David Von Drehle found special signs of hope in Indianapolis, where educators such as Terry Ogle, who guides the Indianapolis Algebra Project, and Earl Phelan, who created a program called Summer Advantage, are ensuring that children learn valuable lessons outside traditional classrooms.

The fact that Indianapolis is ahead of most cities in the nation when it comes to summer programs for children can be traced to efforts launched more than a decade ago by the Lilly Endowment and other local charities. Those organizations now pour nearly \$3 million into about 200 summer programs, most with an educational focus.

Despite those admirable efforts, many children in Marion County and throughout the state continue to languish over the summer, wasting time, learning little of value and forgetting what they were taught in school months earlier.

As state and local leaders debate how to close achievement gaps in this city and elsewhere, they should study the trails blazed by programs such as Summer Advantage. Phelan's organization is now serving more than 3,000 students in Indiana. His goal is to reach 100,000 within five years.

State legislators also should set aside a misguided push to force school districts to start the school year in late August or even after Labor Day. That debate is a distraction from far more important educational issues, including a determination of what steps can be taken to ensure that the existing summer break isn't a waste of students' time and taxpayers' dollars.

As another school year approaches, it's a perfect time for educators and lawmakers to think about summer. Children's time is too precious to continue wasting a full season of the year.