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Facing Deficits, Some States Cut Summer School

By SAM DILLON

COCOA, Fla. — A year ago, the Brevard County Schools ran a robust summer program here, with dozens of schools bustling with teachers and some 14,000 children practicing multiplication, reading Harry Potter and studying Spanish verbs, all at no cost to parents.

But this year Florida's budget crisis has gutted summer school. Brevard classrooms are shuttered, and students like 11-year-old Uvenka Jean-Baptiste, whose mother works in a nursing home, are spending their summer days at home, surfing television channels or loitering at a mall.

Nearly every school system in Florida has eviscerated or eliminated summer school this year, and officials are reporting sweeping cuts in states from North Carolina and Delaware to California and Washington. The cuts have come as states across the country are struggling to approve budgets, and California's governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, declared a fiscal state of emergency on Wednesday.

"We're seeing a disturbing trend of districts making huge cuts to summer school; they're just devastating these programs," said Ron Fairchild, executive director of the National Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University. "It's having a disproportionate impact on low-income families."

The federal stimulus law is channeling \$100 billion to public education, and Education Secretary Arne Duncan has repeatedly urged states and districts to spend part of the money to keep schools open this summer.

But thousands of districts have ignored Mr. Duncan's urgings. In Florida and California, for example, government revenues have fallen so precipitously that, even after receiving federal stimulus dollars, local officials have been forced to make deep cuts to school budgets. Officials in many other states, considering summer school a frill, despite research showing it can narrow the achievement gap between poor and affluent children, have spent their stimulus money elsewhere.

An Education Department spokeswoman, Sandra Abrevaya, said the agency did not yet know how many of the nation's 15,000 school districts had cut summer school this year.

Large districts still offering robust summer programs include Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis and Seattle, according to the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents large districts. New York City has made some cuts to its summer program, which last year served 120,000 children, said William Havemann, a spokesman for the city's Department of Education. This year, classes will be offered in 369 schools, down from 562 in 2008, Mr. Havemann said, and the city expects fewer children to enroll, too, although all children who need extra work for promotion to their next grade are eligible.

Some systems have spent federal stimulus money to invigorate summer school. These include Montgomery County, Md., and Cincinnati, where officials have used \$1.5 million of the city's stimulus dollars to offer full-day summer school at its 13 lowest-performing elementary schools, nearly doubling enrollment to 1,700 students.

Mornings are devoted to math and reading, and afternoons to camp-like activities including environmental science and gardening, ballroom dancing and yoga, said Janet Walsh, a Cincinnati schools spokeswoman. Twelve other Cincinnati schools are offering half-day summer programs, Ms. Walsh said.

But thousands of districts have made cuts. In Los Angeles, where school officials are still working to remove hundreds of millions of dollars from a \$5.5 billion annual budget, they cut \$34 million last month by

canceling summer school for all elementary and middle school children except the disabled. That left 150,000 students without summer classes, and parents scrambling for child care.

Hundreds of other California districts, including San Diego, Long Beach and Sacramento, have also trimmed or eliminated summer school. An online survey in late April by the California State PTA found that about 40 percent of responding school districts had reduced summer programs and about 20 percent had eliminated them entirely.

The North Carolina School Boards Association did a similar survey of the state's 115 districts. Three-quarters of those that responded said they would eliminate summer school or reduce its scope, said Leanne Winner, a director at the association. "Things have gotten worse since we did the survey," Ms. Winner said. Wayne Blanton, executive director of the Florida School Boards Association, said, "Nearly all districts in Florida have cut summer school down, and about half have eliminated it altogether."

In Rutherford County, Tenn., school authorities cited not only money troubles but also swine flu in explaining why they cut elementary summer school after the district lost some state financing. All the cuts nationwide have put into jeopardy an institution that has turned summertimes past into nostalgic memories for millions of Americans.

"I remember as a child growing up, summer school was enriching and fun," said Tamara Sortman of Sacramento, where cuts have left her three children with no summer school option. "I took guitar one summer, creative writing another. I remember an arts class where we did tie-dying. I had a single working mom, and summer school kept me out of trouble."

Kenneth Gold, an education professor at the College of Staten Island who wrote a history of summer learning, said that in the 19th century, many American schools offered their regular classes in summer and winter, with recesses scheduled for spring and fall to allow planting and harvesting. By 1910, however, that cycle had been largely displaced by the September-to-June, 180-day calendar common today, in which summer school is an optional addendum.

Since the 1970s, however, the value of rigorous summer school has gained increasing recognition because of research by a Johns Hopkins professor, Karl Alexander, and other sociologists showing that the academic achievement gap widens during summer vacations.

Low-income students who hold summer jobs or are idle, the research has demonstrated, forget more math and reading skills over the summer than their affluent classmates, who often receive intellectual stimulation in the summer from canoe trips, language camps or ballet lessons.

Richard DiPatri, schools superintendent here in Brevard County, leaned on those findings in recent years as he made free summer school classes available to all students, both for remedial work and for languages and other electives.

"We built it up, but last year here in Florida, our funding just went over the cliff," Mr. DiPatri said.

Adrimel Marlasca, 12, who just finished sixth grade, said that in previous years, she had enjoyed summer classes at Discovery Elementary in Palm Bay, Fla.. But this summer, she is marooned at home.

The other day, Adrimel was up at midmorning, ate some cereal, then watched a show on the Disney channel. She played with her pet cockatiel and her dog, Princess, ate lunch and watched some more television. Later, she went shopping with her mother, picked up her room and read a mystery book for 45 minutes.

After dinner, her mother used flashcards to drill her in multiplication for a few minutes.

"I like the math because it's challenging, but sometimes it's like, 'Oh my gosh, I can't answer this,' and you get nerve-racked," Adrimel said.

"We're working with her at home, but it's not the same," said her father, Jose Marlasca. "She ends up watching TV. The best scenario would be to have her at school."