

The Summer of Their Discontent

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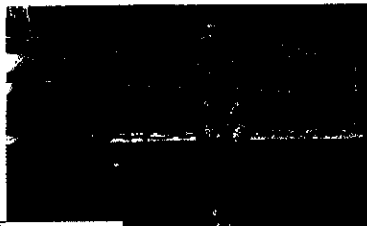
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By TOM BENNING and ANJALI ATHAVALLEY

Last year, Joseline and Mirelyne De Leon attended free summer school in downtown Los Angeles while their parents worked. It provided more than just a haven during the day. It also gave the two girls, 13 and 10 years old, the academic help they needed to bolster their grades for the following school year.

This year, budget cuts have forced the Los Angeles Unified School District to drop summer classes for elementary- and middle-school students, leaving their father, Rudy De Leon, trying to scrape up the money to pay for a few weeks at a private program that charges \$50 a week per student. He is glad his daughters will receive some teaching over the summer. But they won't receive school credit, and Mr. De Leon worries that they might fall behind.



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AJ Mast for The Wall Street Journal

Sierra Everett, a student at Lawrence Central High School in Indiana, had to pay for an online geometry course after her district canceled summer school.

"We'll try to do the best we can," he says.

Families across the country are facing similar dilemmas as state and local budget cuts are hitting school districts hard—forcing many of them to make cuts in summer programs that many educators consider critical to students' academic success.

The American Association of School Administrators found that about a quarter of school districts have cut summer and after-school programs this year, a threefold increase from 2008, according to a March

survey of more than 800 administrators nationwide. The National Parent Teacher Association and the National Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University say they have also seen evidence that cuts in summer programs have been widespread.

One mitigating factor: The U.S. Department of Education began handing out a \$100 billion pool of federal stimulus funds in April, helping some school districts avoid cuts or even expand their summer classes.

In Great Falls, Mont., school leaders are using the money to restart a 1,000-student program that was cut last year. The Cincinnati School District nearly doubled its summer-school offerings by using federal stimulus money devoted to schools in high-poverty areas.

But some districts who have applied for stimulus money will not receive the funds in time to save their summer programs, and in states with particularly large budget shortfalls, such as California, many districts are already using the federal funds for other expenses.

In recent years, summer school has become a more important part of students' education as classes have moved beyond remedial education to enrichment programs that can help close the difference in academic achievement among students from lower- and higher-income households.

Ron Fairchild, executive director of the National Center for Summer Learning, says research shows there are significant losses, particularly for lower-income students, in math and reading skills over the summer break.

But school districts from Florida to Washington State are facing a painful choice as funds run short: Eliminate teaching positions, or find programs to cut. Increasingly, summer school is the program getting the ax.

In Florida's Seminole County School District, administrators say nearly 140 teachers' jobs were saved in part by a \$1.5 million reduction to its \$1.9 million summer school budget, which had enrolled nearly 15,000 students in past years. In Litchfield Elementary School District outside of Phoenix, killing a 100-student summer school allowed the district to preserve the salary of one teacher and one support staff member, says superintendent Julianne Lein.

Many educators are now scrambling for alternative programs to fill the summer-learning void. In Iowa City, Iowa, some local nonprofit recreation programs added tutoring sessions this year at the district's behest after summer school was cut for about 1,000 students, administrators say. Other districts are trying fee-based enrichment programs, and a number of districts, including Lawrence Township outside of Indianapolis, are encouraging students to take online classes.

After the school district dropped its summer courses this year, Lawrence Township high-school student Sierra Everett, 17, paid \$50 for a Geometry II online course so she could stay on track to graduate. But her mother, Lisa, is concerned about her daughter getting timely feedback on questions and tests. "If she's in a groove, but then has to wait a long time for a response, that could totally ruin her concentration," Ms. Everett says.

As of April, more than 40% of California school districts were making cutbacks in summer programs, according to a survey of 244 districts by the California Parent Teacher Association—which was taken before an escalation in the state's budget crisis set off another rash of summer-school cuts.

In the Los Angeles district, the nation's second-largest, eliminating summer programs for 225,000 students saved \$34 million. Superintendent Ramon Cortines says he had no other choice, despite his belief that summer school is "essential" for many students.

"We are going to see an increase in issues with young people in the community," he says. "Gang activity. Family issues. Kids wandering the street. This is not a good situation."

In Port St. John, Fla., Christy Tagye's two daughters, who just completed third and fifth grade, need to attend school this summer after receiving low scores on their standardized tests. But Brevard County reduced its summer school program to about 1,800 students from more than 14,000 last year, saving nearly \$4 million, administrators say.

Ms. Tagye recently found out there won't be classes for her younger daughter at her elementary school, which is less than a quarter-mile from her home. Instead, she'll have to drop her off at a school eight miles away.

Even worse, there are no classes at all available for her fifth grader. "My frustration is more with my other daughter, who could really benefit from summer school but doesn't have the option," says Ms. Tagye.

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