

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

RESTORING AMERICA'S PROMISE OF OPPORTUNITY,
PROSPERITY AND GROWTH

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PORTION – MOLLY FIFER

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MS. FIFER: Hello. I am here to talk about Summer Opportunity Scholarships, a proposal to narrow the skills gaps. This is joint work, like Peter said, with Alan Krueger, also at Princeton University.

Let us start off by talking about the problem, summer learning loss. It is a robust research finding in the education literature that students lose as much as three months of learning during the summer months, and we know that the loss is greater for low SES, or socio-economic status, children than for high SES students.

Here are some graphs from Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson. This is a study of about 700 students, starting in the first grade in the fall of 1982 in about 20 Baltimore schools. The left hand side graph shows you the school year reading gains, comparing the low SES students in dark blue to the high SES students in light blue. We see, during the school year, there is not a big difference in their gains. The opposite is true during the

summer. We see that, while the high SES students show large positive gains, the low SES students show either small gains or even small losses.

It is our reading of the evidence on the interventions to remedy the summer learning loss that summer school is the most effective. So that is where my proposal is heading. But before I get there, to the details, let us talk a little about the evidence that we are basing our proposal on.

First, Cooper and his colleagues find, in a meta-analysis, that programs that focus on remedial instruction have the effect of increasing scores among low SES kids by about the same amount you would expect those scores to fall during the summer, so a pretty big impact.

In addition, we have evidence from Sipe, Grossman, and Milliner on the Summer Training and Employment Program often called STEP, which basically provides, over the course of two years, life skills training and the like during the school year but then summer employment and summer school for these 14 to 15 year old at-risk youth. They find that STEP actually staunches summer learning loss. We see that in this graph here that shows summer reading gains for the treatment students in the dark blue and the control students in the light blue. You see, while the treatment students more or less break even over the two summers, the control students fall behind.

Our solution: Summer Opportunity Scholarships. Eligible students will be young and of low income backgrounds. They will participate in a six-week summer school or enrichment program, and they will be from grade levels K through 5. They must be eligible for free lunches from school, which means their family income must fall below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Line.

Eligible providers will be school districts, private providers, and summer enrichment camps, and they will be required to use small group instruction and to align the summer and school year curricula. They will also be evaluated by a state level official with the possibility of disqualification from receiving future funding if they deviate from the plan's requirements.

A few cost estimates: The per pupil annual, or better said, per summer cost, we estimate to be about \$1,600 in 2006 rising to about \$1,800 in 2010, and these come from prorated annual expenditures per pupil during the regular school year. If, as we propose, the Federal government matches half of what the non-Federal sector pays, then there will be a \$1.8 billion annual bill when the plan is fully phased in, totaling up to a \$6.7 billion five-year total Federal cost.

A couple implications: First of all, we think parents and students want this. There are data showing that 60 percent of low income parents worry their kids are going to fall behind during the summer, and two-thirds of low income students say they would like help getting ahead during the summer or learning the skills that will help them keep up with their work during the school year. But the best data we have on the estimate of the number of kids in grade 1 through 7 who attend summer school is only about 10 percent with only marginally higher rates for low income kids. So we are hoping a program like SOS will start to close that gap.

Secondly, we think teachers shouldn't oppose SOS since their participation is voluntary and also since we are not advocating for taking away funds that are already earmarked to education spending. We are adding to the pot.

Lastly, we think the SOS may be good in its own right because it may be a more productive path for the voucher movement, to move the experimentation out of the regular school year and into the summer to see if that is a better avenue for the experimentation.

With that, I am done.

(Applause)