

Nation & World

OPINION



All Stars Project of Dallas

The All Stars Project of Dallas is an extracurricular program that introduces young people to the professional world, writes Antoine Joyce. Such opportunities are important to help kids avoid the "summer slide" when not in school.

Overcoming the 'summer slide'

Dallas program fosters skills development for lower-income kids

By ANTOINE JOYCE

Since arriving 10 years ago to launch the All Stars Project of Dallas, I've had the good fortune to interact with young people and adults from all walks of life, and something that just about everyone has in common is that they love summer — closed schools, vacation time, outdoor sports and barbecues.

At the same time, there are real differences between what summer is like for kids who grow up in poor communities and for those who come from affluent families.

The latter can travel, have new experiences, come into contact with

arts and culture, and enjoy the good life.

Young people who are part of our programs in West Dallas, South Dallas and Oak Cliff often have a far different experience.

Some are at home caring for siblings or just hang out in the neighborhood. Others may be lucky enough to go to a church or recreation center camp. Of course, all parents want the best experiences for their children, especially the kind that contribute to their growth and development, but the reality is that money and circumstances largely determine what kinds of developmental experiences are possible.

By now, many of us are aware of the "summer slide" concept without fully understanding how devastating it is in poorer communities.

So, while summer can be fun, in the poor communities it also has hidden dangers.

Landmark research conducted by sociology professor Karl Alexander and others found that youths in underserved areas suffer a significant loss of academic skills over the summertime.

According to the National Summer Learning Association, during the school year, "lower income children's skills improve at close to the same rate as those of their more advantaged

peers." However, over the summer, "middle- and upper-income children's skills continue to improve, while lower income children's skills do not." This has everything to do with the quality of experiences that young people have during the summer.

To thrive, young people growing up in poverty need more than what school alone offers.

Research shows that young people learn best when they have richer lives outside of school: taking trips, meeting different kinds of people and trying new things. Young people from privileged environments have a multitude of these experiences, but these development experiences are few and

far between for young people in poor communities.

The organization Big Thought has partnered with many in the nonprofit arena to mitigate the summer slide, developing a network of experiences and opportunities called Dallas City of Learning. One of the programs All Stars Project has created to challenge students in the summer is the Development School for Youth, an out-of-school program that trains young people to perform as professionals, learn the culture of business and the arts, and practice becoming someone who is more worldly than they are.

Youths who may have only seen the outside of buildings downtown receive internships that allow them to see what the buildings and the people look like on the inside and to learn what happens there.

The more the positive impact of the DSY became apparent, the more important it was to quantify the actual features of development. We partnered with SMU's Center on Research and Evaluation to come up with some answers.

Together, we identified eight dimensions of development that are at the heart of All Stars' model, eight capabilities that produce growth and success in school and in life: appreciation, improvisation, personal responsibility, vocational competence, confidence, giving, interpersonal competence and an open worldview.

Not surprisingly, these 21st-century skills closely align with what the modern workforce urgently needs. Companies have seen that employees with "soft skills" are often more resilient, and such skills can be the key to success for young workers.

All children deserve to have a summer experience that challenges them, makes them happy and prepares them for the world that awaits. We can turn the summer "slide" into the summer "stride," when underserved youth can hit a new stride of becoming fulfilled participants in the world around them.

Antoine Joyce is the vice president and city leader of All Stars Project of Dallas. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.