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Summer programs needed to boost student achievement

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The proposal by Maryland Comptroller Peter Franchot, which is supported by Gov. Martin O'Malley, to delay school opening past Labor Day argues that summer vacation strengthens families and the state economy ("Franchot gains O'Malley's support on school start," Aug. 21).

While critics have questioned this argument, the underlying challenge is not just about the last week of August. Solid research, including a major study of Baltimore City students by Johns Hopkins University researchers, demonstrates that young people who lack stimulating experiences during the summer suffer significant losses of what they learned during the previous school year.

More affluent students usually have opportunities for meaningful learning activities during the summer, while less affluent students tend not to have them. The summer break therefore sets back student achievement as a whole and significantly aggravates the achievement gap. The Hopkins research demonstrates that as much as two-thirds of the ninth-grade achievement gap in reading in Baltimore City is attributable to differences in summer experiences in the elementary years.

The real issue is not the date that school starts at the end of summer, but whether all students have access to high-quality summer learning opportunities. Families will be stronger if their young people have safe places to be during the summer with engaging and stimulating learning activities, physical exercise and nutritious meals while their parents and other caregivers are at work.

Our state policymakers should examine the relevant research and address the need for strong summer programming to reduce the achievement gap, reduce the dropout rate and thus strengthen our workforce, families and communities. Research and experience show that such programs can be effective and still allow plenty of time to let families schedule vacations.

Matthew Boulay, Baltimore

The writer is board chairman of the National Summer Learning Association.

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