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**What They Did on Vacation: It's Not Schools That Are Falling  
Poor Kids**

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Op-ed writers, politicians and reporters are fond of the phrase "failing schools." They sometimes illustrate the failure with test scores. They observe that poor or minority kids' test scores fall farther and farther behind those of middle-class students the longer they stay in school.

"No Child Left Behind," President Bush's education program, is supposed to eliminate these schools.

But what if those schools are not "failing"? What if their actual progress is just obscured by the way test scores are usually reported, and undercut by events not under the control of the schools?

Evidence from a number of studies suggests that even city schools serving disadvantaged youth are preventing failure, not causing it. The most recent of these studies, though by no means the only one, looked at five years of test scores for elementary students of low, middle and high socioeconomic status.

To no one's surprise, the low-status kids started school well behind their middle- and upper-status peers on tests of reading and math, something the schools cannot be held accountable for.

To no one's surprise, they fell farther and farther behind over the next five years. We can hold these failing schools accountable for that, right? Maybe not. During the school year, the students in all three status categories gained the same amount on the tests. The difference between the three groups is what happened during summer vacation. When the kids came back in the fall, the tests showed that over the summer months the poor kids lost ground in reading the first two summers, then held their own, but sank in

math. The middle-class kids gained in reading and held their own in math. The rich kids gained in both reading and math, but a lot more in reading.

The results should not surprise us. Many commentators have observed that between birth and age 18, American children spend 9 percent of their time in school, 91 percent out of it. (So why not hold families accountable?) And while the study shows that students learn more and learn more efficiently in school than out, 9 percent is not a lot of time.

The reading-math differences over summer also make sense. Few children, rich or poor, practice their multiplication tables during the summer. Many do read books and go to the library. An earlier study found that any of three activities independently predicted summer gains in reading: the number of books read, the amount of time spent reading or the regularity of library visits.

The researchers, Karl Alexander, Doris Entwisle and Linda Olson of the Johns Hopkins University, are quick to point out that what poor kids need is not necessarily more school: "We found that better off children in the [study] more often went to city and state parks, fairs, or carnivals and took day or overnight trips. They also took swimming, dance, and music lessons; visited local parks, museums, science centers and zoos; and more often went to the library in summer." They also were more likely to participate in organized sports and in more types of sports.

Computation drills and work sheets in August are probably not the answer.

No doubt, the "savage inequalities" between what children receive in affluent schools and poor schools affect achievement, but those differences may not show up on test score differences in the early grades -- and test scores are all that count in Bush's program. Affluent students have much deeper early literacy experiences than poor children. Kids in low-income schools with science books predicting that man might one day walk on the moon can't learn science, nor can kids learn chemistry in labs that have no chemicals. One student in a poor California school said recently, "We sit around in computer class and talk about what we would do if we had computers."

But the social class differences in what kids do in the summer months cannot be ignored, either. The notion of "adequate yearly progress," already a difficult, some would say nutty, concept, just got a bit more complicated.