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Editorial | Island Voices

Student success is greatest when we all help out

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With the start of the new school year, parents and students have turned their attention from summer fun to the classroom day, with a renewed focus on academic achievement.

Yet the value of school learning, coupled with character and youth development and enrichment programs, can have year-long implications.

For many youth, summertime means enrichment — travel, field trips and summer camps. But for some youth, especially those from low-income areas, summer is a time of learning loss.

Despite progressing at the same rates during the school year, academic achievement gaps widen each summer, and students fall further behind their peers.

The gap culminates in low high school graduation and college attainment rates, limited job prospects and negative economic impact on communities.

A Stanford University study found that the gap in standardized test scores between affluent and low-income students had grown by about 40 percent since the 1960s.

Researchers from the University of Michigan found that the imbalance between rich and poor children in college completion has grown by about 50 percent since the late 1980s. Early education, after-school and summer programs are increasingly viewed as a key strategy in tackling achievement gaps and boosting in-school success.

Nonprofit organizations, along with dedicated professionals from dozens of youth agencies, provide education, coaching and guidance on a daily basis, but none of us can do it alone.

The youth development approach works best when entire communities are involved in creating a continuum of services and opportunities that youth need to grow into happy and healthy adults.

This summer, the YMCA of Honolulu piloted a six-week, full-day Academic Power Academy with our Nuuanu branch and Central Middle School, where the majority of students are challenged financially and academically.

Twenty-five incoming sixth-graders attended academic sessions with certified teachers in the mornings, then enrichment, health, fitness and community service activities in the afternoons.

Power Scholars Academy is a collaborative effort between Building Educated Leaders for Life, a national nonprofit organization that was started in the early 1990s by students at Harvard Law School, and the YMCA.

As part of this initiative, Harris United Methodist Church and Saint Peter's Episcopal Church provided free breakfasts, the Walmart-YMCA Food Program provided lunches prepared by Kapiolani Community College, and the Nuuanu Y's Service Club provided snacks.

Preliminary reports have indicated that on average, scholars met or even exceeded the goal of one month gains in both literacy and math, helping to close the summer achievement gap.

Principal Anne Murphy described the program as empowering, as it provided scholars with social development to believe in themselves, but also academic progress to close the gap well beyond their time at Central Middle School.

Vice Principal Katchia Gethers noted that the program renewed and ignited her passion for education and teaching, enabling her to focus on building relationships with these students who have so much promise and potential, when given the opportunity to believe in themselves.

Scholar success is greatest when schools, nonprofits and communities work together. Addressing the whole child — social, emotional and academic learning — can bring lifelong success.