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Highlighting Best Practices in Summer Learning

In this issue

BUILDING COMMUNITY SYSTEMS FOR SUMMER LEARNING: SNAPSHOTS OF STATE AND LOCAL EFFORTS

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Over the summer many young people and their families lose access to critical supports that keep them safe, healthy and engaged in learning and meaningful work experiences.

Studies show that providing a portfolio of summer opportunities, including jobs, learning, and meals, prevents academic regression and weight gain, and diverts youth from criminal involvement. We know from research and from many examples what high-quality programs look like and the outcomes they are able to achieve.

Still, the challenges of providing summer opportunities at scale are many. With little to no dedicated public funding for summer learning and jobs programs, there is often little infrastructure within a state, community or school district dedicated to coordinating such programs. Instead, summer efforts are often

planned and delivered in siloes across lead agencies. Even within a single school district, there are typically several standalone programs available in the summer that may target credit recovery, English Language Learners, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math), enrichment, meals, and special education without collaborating to share resources or recruit the right young people for the right programs. Across a community, this lack of coordination leads to a duplication of effort and expense and too often, not very engaging programming. Most communities are only offering summer learning opportunities to 25 to 33 percent of their school-age students, and waiting lists for summer jobs programs are often in the thousands.

THE GOOD NEWS IS, community leaders and Statewide Afterschool Networks from across the country are working to expand summer opportunities by replicating successful, evidence-based practices through cross-sector collective impact approaches. Such practices include:

- Creating a community-wide summer steering committee
- Assessing gaps in services and developing an action plan
- Focusing resources on research-based interventions
- Leveraging funding and capacity community-wide for marketing, data management and quality assurance
- Finding creative and sustainable ways to fund summer opportunities long term

Creating a community system for summer opens the door to collaboration, reduced duplication of efforts, efficient management of the community's resources, shared standards of quality, and greater return on the investments in summer opportunities. The resulting portfolio of summer opportunities reaches into every corner of the community and helps all students stay safe, healthy, and engaged throughout the critical summer months.

In the companion paper *Creating a Summer Opportunity Portfolio*, we highlight examples of successful programs that touch on five ways to keep kids learning throughout the summer:

- **Get lost in a book**
- **Fuel their minds and bodies**
- **Experience that hard work pays**
- **Learn about the power of teams**
- **Learn anytime, anywhere**

A portfolio of summer opportunities must be as diverse and widespread as the community itself. Though many resources and efforts target low-income students, one powerful aspect of summer learning comes from mixing groups of students with shared interests, who may come from different schools or backgrounds. Students frequently report that their “summer friends” are key to their engagement.

The six elements of coordinated community efforts described here are taken from the National Summer Learning Association domains for community system building and reflect many common elements found in similar collective impact or system-building efforts. Policy recommendations reflect key priorities for advancing summer and other out-of-school time (OST) opportunities within communities through systemic policy changes that result from systems-building efforts.

1 | A Shared Vision

A shared vision for summer learning leads to a multi-year, community-wide summer learning action plan with defined goals and strategies, aligned with broader educational and community priorities. The plan includes targets and goals that set the direction, and common objectives and measurements of youth outcomes. Ideally there is a process for assessing and updating the summer learning action plan each year.

Some communities build a summer learning plan from existing initiatives and infrastructure. In Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Georgia, and New Jersey, collaboration between districts and OST providers around Common Core State Standards has provided a shared sense of vision and purpose. Summer learning goals and objectives are closely connected to these standards of learning, and professional development between school-based and OST providers is shared so that all elements of the systems are working toward common learning objectives in a similar way.

Another approach is to connect to and leverage national education, youth, and community development initiatives. In Arkansas, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and the Arkansas Out of School Network's (AOSN) partnership has helped to shape shared priorities across out of school initiatives. Because of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading's explicit focus on summer as a strategy for achieving third grade reading proficiency rates, AOSN has made summer a more explicit priority. AOSN's coordinator, Laveta Wills-Hale, describes the impact of the partnership on her work, "We were really inspired by the Grade-Level Reading Campaign to do more than raise public awareness about the importance of summer learning." While a shared focus on early literacy brought summer to the forefront for AOSN, they have continued to expand their summer priorities to also include a focus on health and STEM education, building on natural intersections.



In some communities, existing local priorities offer a natural starting point for summer systems and plans. In Savannah, Georgia, educational commitments to youth development and engagement also connect explicitly to prevention of juvenile crime. The Mayor's Taskforce for Afterschool Initiative brings together a number of partners to ensure availability and quality of programming. Summer learning and afterschool opportunities are designed to impact not only academic performance, but also work to prevent delinquency and reduce crime and to develop citizenship and good health habits.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan the Believe2Become (B2B) initiative developed out of a vision from local stakeholders to close the educational achievement gap by 2025, and saw out-of-school time, and particularly summer, as a key factor in the equation. While coordination has helped to dramatically improve outcomes in the community, they also strongly believe that innovation and individual strengths from different organizations, rather than rigid adherence to a single model, contributes to a much stronger whole. In this model, ongoing communication among partners becomes critical for successful coordination.



2 | Engaged Leadership

Summer learning work at the community level must be led by a stakeholder group that represents key sectors including city and/or county agencies, schools, funders, program providers, intermediary or coordinating body, and other community members (including parents and youth). There is shared accountability for the development and implementation of the summer learning action plan. Recognized leaders within the community, such as mayors and superintendents, act as summer learning champions and more visible leaders of the shared effort. Intermediaries are a natural hub for sharing of information, data, and resources.

In Kansas City, the Special Assistant for the Office of Civic and Community Engagement is a position in the mayor's office that has a role in coordinating and convening a number of OST agencies on a quarterly basis. In Baltimore, a number of organizations—including the Family League of Baltimore, the Safe and Sound Campaign, and the AfterSchool Institute—worked together to coordinate efforts across the system. The results were several mechanisms to increase access to and quality of summer opportunities in Baltimore, including the development of a steering committee, a process for sharing information, and consolidated roles. Programs are then carried out by a variety of organizations and city agencies, coordinated by these leadership bodies.



3 | Continuous Quality Improvement

A process for quality improvement of both the summer learning system and summer learning opportunities includes standards and tools for quality assessment and program improvement, professional development and training, and opportunities to share resources and best practices.

The Oakland Summer Learning Network (OSLN) was created in 2011 as a collaborative effort of several private schools, community-based organizations, and local agencies, such as the public library system and Oakland Fund for Children and Youth, a program of the city's Human Services Department, working to expand the number of summer learning opportunities for middle-school youth. The program currently serves 5,700 Oakland students annually. The OSLN has made an intentional focus to develop an action plan towards the creation of a coordinated summer learning system across Oakland. A part of this action plan involves all funded summer learning programs participating in a continuous summer learning quality improvement process using the Summer Learning Program Quality Assessment (SLPQA) developed in partnership by the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality and the National Summer Learning Association. The OSLN also facilitates a professional learning community to support summer programs in their continuous improvement.

4 | Data Management

The system includes coordinated management of summer learning data, considering scope, scale, access, quality, and outcomes. The result is better data-driven decision-making across the system and new opportunities to prove return on investment.

In order to answer key questions around program effectiveness and impact across the city and over multiple years in Grand Rapids, a data-sharing work group was formed between the local district, the Believe2Become (B2B) initiatives, and a community research institute to facilitate the safe transfer of records, including test scores, attendance and demographic data and to include a process for parents to provide consent. The parties worked through multiple challenges and forged a Master Data Sharing Agreement (MDSA) that facilitates real-time data analysis for program staff and broader evaluation of the initiative. Results throughout the year were then shared with the B2B summer learning initiative. Learn how they broke through the barriers at <http://cridata.org/B2BMDSA/>.

In summer 2010, Dallas' Big Thought partnered with Dallas Independent School District (DISD) on a new model of summer learning that combined their 21st Century initiative with DISD's summer school to create a full-day program that blended DISD academics with Big Thought's wide range of enrichment activities and partners. Today, the program is a part of the Dallas City of Learning initiative, bringing together the Dallas Independent School District and the myriad resources and offerings of the City, with Big Thought as the lead agency and managing partner. Through the partnership with Dallas City of Learning, 200 local arts, cultural, educational, youth development and social service organizations offer free programs to Dallas youth and their families. Robust shared data agreements with all of the Dallas partners, allowing Big Thought to improve and measure students' academic and social-emotional outcomes, and student engagement in each major activity. They are also able to use crucial formative data across systems to strategically allocate resources throughout the city – including program services, transportation, and nutritional support, ensuring a reduction in summer learning loss and an equipped workforce pipeline.



Under the leadership of Boston Afterschool and Beyond, the Achieve, Connect, Thrive (ACT) framework unites stakeholders from across Boston around the skills young people need to succeed—called “power skills” for student success. Derived from the best of the youth development field, and afterschool program providers themselves, the skills in the framework are those that research from a number of fields, including education and developmental psychology, suggests are important for success in school, college, and 21st Century careers. Four power skills—critical thinking, perseverance, self-regulation, relationships with peers—serve as the foundation of year-round trainings and peer learning between district teachers and community educators. In 2015, 79 summer programs in Boston participated in the ACT framework, using common measurement tools to assess program quality and student skill development from multiple perspectives. Analysis shows a significant increase in skills among more than 5,600 participating Boston children in 2015. To learn more about the ACT Framework, visit http://bostonbeyond.org/initiatives/act_framework/.

5 | Sustainable Resources

It is essential that communities identify funding targets and strategies for scaling the system and improving quality of summer learning opportunities. Communities develop these sustainable resources in a variety of ways.

One of the most lasting strategies is to create sustained funding streams through tax levy, “sin” taxes, a budget line item, or extension of federal or state funding for similar programs. In Seattle, voters passed the Families and Education Levy in 2011, totaling \$235 million over seven years through 2019. This property tax levy, built on previous levies approved in 1990, 1997, and 2004, is administered by the City's Office for Education — distinct from, but in collaboration with, the Seattle School District. Administration of the levy's funds is accountable to a community Levy Oversight Committee and the Seattle City Council. The levy supports a wide range of family and youth health and education initiatives, including school- and community-based supports, early childhood, and summer learning.

In California, the Afterschool Education and Safety (ASES) Program started with a voter-approved initiative, Proposition 49 (passed in 2002). This proposition amended the California Education Code to fund the establishment of local after school and supplemental summer education and enrichment programs. These programs develop through partnerships between schools and communities to provide literacy support, academic enrichment, and safe, constructive alternatives for students in kindergarten through grade nine (K–9). The grants are direct funded as three-year renewable grants, with caps and reimbursement amounts based on the type of program and numbers of youth served.

Collaborations between local public and private funders can also increase the reach and sustainability of summer dollars. In Birmingham, Alabama, the SAIL (Summer Adventures in Learning) funding collaborative was developed in response to a survey of 37 Birmingham, Alabama area summer programs, conducted by the National Summer Learning Association in 2011. Through this important partnership, funders committed to use a joint application process for nonprofit organizations wishing to receive grant support to enhance or add consistent academic components to summer youth programs.

SAIL began in 2012, when three funders informally worked with 12 programs. SAIL organized formally later that year, with six funders awarding 19 grants totaling \$500,000 to summer 2013 programs. For 2016, \$862,000 has been awarded to 38 programs. Building upon the successes of the partnership in the Birmingham area, SAIL expanded into Alabama's Black Belt region in 2016.

By leveraging the funds of 11 private funders, SAIL enables a baseline of quality assurance and capacity-building across all programs it funds. The components are:

- **GROUP EDUCATION:**
SAIL hosts three forums each spring, addressing a variety of topics chosen to strengthen the programs.
- **COMMUNICATION AND INFORMAL EDUCATION:**
SAIL maintains a group e-mail distribution list and communicates regularly with the summer learning community. Peer-to-peer learning is encouraged in several ways: panel discussions at forums, informal communication between meetings and small-group meetings.
- **RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT:**
SAIL works to see that programs have access to resources needed to conduct quality programs, including educational service providers and enrichment providers. SAIL also maintains a staffing webpage and facilitates the enrollment of summer programs in feeding programs which supply meals at no cost.
- **ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION:**
SAIL requires grantees to use Renaissance Learning's STAR Assessment for reading and math. The SAIL funders provide STAR at no cost, train the programs on proper use of STAR to create individualized learning plans, transport the programs to a testing site if needed, and administer the tests. The programs (and the funders) use summary data from STAR to evaluate overall program effectiveness.
- **STANDARDIZED REPORTING:**
Grantees are required to submit program results in a standard format. The elements of the report are chosen to reinforce best practices.
- **CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT:**
All reports are compiled and sent to each grantee, after which all grantees participate in a post-program review in which successes are celebrated and “defects are cherished.”

Direct funding is not the only route to sustainability. Shared resources across systems create greater efficiency and maximize investments that communities have already made in youth services, resources and facilities. In Glendale, California the city purchased materials in a variety of formats that are available year-round, with 24/7 access to books and information through the public library website. This includes electronic resources such as a growing collection of e-books, e-audio, and digital music; databases with magazine and news articles; business information; art and music resources; language learning programs; and other student resources. Partnerships facilitated by the community system contribute key resources, including facilities, evaluation services, fundraising and administrative overhead, curriculum materials, and volunteer or paid staffing.

6 | Marketing and Communications

In this element of the system, outreach to youth and families about availability of opportunities is aligned across all members engaged in the summer plan. This coordination builds awareness about the need for summer learning and the availability of summer opportunities, supports recruitment and enrollment of youth into programs, and helps programs and agencies across the system make referrals to families seeking particular resources. Additionally, community-wide strategies to disseminate results on summer learning impact for a majority of programs across the community help build awareness of the successes and need for continued investment in the system.

Public agencies that serve youth and families are, at minimum, able to direct families to their nearest site for the Summer Food Service Program, utilizing the U.S. Department of Agriculture summer meals finder. Many communities, such as Baltimore, have created a centralized communication hub (2-1-1) and a shared website with information on opportunities throughout the city that can be accessed easily by families.

In 2012, Baltimore's Summer Jump programs were advertised through backpack letters home, summer learning fairs, three direct mailings, advertising at city bus stops, and radio and TV commercials. In addition to these strategies, under the umbrella of Baltimore City Super Summer, Baltimore City Public Schools and its partners developed a shared marketing strategy that included Super Summer branding and messaging.

A centralized Super Summer website and the regional call center, 211 Maryland, acted as community hubs for information on all summer learning academies, food programs, reading programs, and other programs such as camps, recreation programs and sports leagues. Partners launched a comprehensive communications campaign including press conferences, public service announcements, recruitment events, direct mailings and neighborhood canvassing that reached more than 40,000 residents throughout the city. Each participating partner received training on centralized messaging so that they could provide information to families on all Super Summer offerings.

Each year the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) organizes a popular Citywide AfterZone end-of-year celebration with 400 middle school youth in attendance. At this event, PASA staff are able to promote the summer program and speak directly with parents, families and students. The organization also hosts a series of school-based recruitment fairs over the course of the spring and visits students in their classrooms to present to smaller groups. Other recruitment and promotional techniques employed have included bilingual, automated phone calls to families featuring Providence's mayor on behalf of middle school principals; staff interviews on Spanish language radio; and direct student outreach from principals, teachers and counselors at the schools.

Since the program is a joint venture with Providence Public Schools and involves hiring teachers, guidance counselors and social workers from each middle school, they all take an active interest in recruiting their students and promoting the program in their schools.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Meaningful policy changes can support different aspects of community systems for summer learning. These need not always be dedicated funding investments, but can be other policy solutions that support favorable conditions for summer learning and for the community systems that support these efforts.

FIRST, we look to states and communities to incentivize partnerships and improve partner alignment. Partnerships between summer providers serving similar groups of students ensure complete access to a broader range of services and less duplication of efforts. These partners may include summer meals sites and sponsors, schools, community-based and faith-based organizations, libraries, museums, parks and recreation centers, youth employment sponsors, and other agencies, service providers, and organizations that touch the lives of youth during the summer. Private, public, or quasi-public intermediaries are natural leaders of systems that can hold responsibility for coordinating these partnerships, holding partners accountable, and facilitating coordination of shared resources like facilities, transportation, and data. The result: a community-wide network of programs for anywhere, anytime learning throughout the summer months.

SECOND, policymakers can promote sustainability and flexibility of resources. Many existing funding streams are able to support summer learning either as they currently stand or with more explicit expansion into the summer months. Smart use of existing pools of funding and greater collaboration between youth-serving sectors can greatly increase impact during the summer. Communities are looking beyond the education sector for youth-oriented investments in health, juvenile justice, and enrichment programs that can all take place in the summer space. Promoting summer as an allowable use of funds for youth-serving organizations and services extends the impact of dedicated budget investments and assignment of specific revenues to fund summer programs.

THIRD, states and communities must invest in structural supports and systems that drive quality and sustainability over the long term. Structures such as quality standards, common evaluation tools, centralized data systems, shared professional development, and single administrative processes for certifying providers make clear the requirements for participation in the summer system by providers and hold everyone across the system to the same level of quality. Coordination of summer services with each other and with school-year programs that serve the same students, lead to greater efficiency and better outcomes for youth.

The Sacramento "Summer at City Hall" program brings together resources from the school district, regional transportation systems, the summer meals program, community field trip sites, and the city council to give 100 students a rich and memorable internship experience. While serving in meaningful departmental support jobs, these interns are immersed in the inner workings of city leadership and present end-of-summer projects to the city council synthesizing what they have learned and their ideas to make their city even better.

In Utah, the Office of Child Care Department of Workforce Services offers a grant, funded by Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) dollars, for expanding summer programs that serve children of working families. These programs typically also draw dollars from education streams and the private sector.

In Rhode Island, statewide coordination and support of summer and afterschool programs is led by a partnership between the United Way and the Rhode Island Afterschool Plus Alliance (RIASPA). Together with the organizations they serve, RIASPA developed statewide quality standards and an assessment tool to maintain and measure program quality. Part of the United Way's support goes to professional development on quality for its grantees.

CONCLUSION

A systems approach to summer and out-of-school time opportunities creates many advantages.

Foremost, the system promotes equity by coordinating service areas, targeting groups of students most in need of particular kinds of resources and interventions, and reducing barriers to program access. The summer plan

helps direct programs and resources to particular areas of need, and ensuring that changes are strategic not ad hoc. This approach also maximizes and grows available resources, whereby facilities and other shared resources are used efficiently, and multiple streams of funding are pooled together for similar categories of youth. An established system is able to withstand leadership changes over time, while also providing adaptability, through a forum for identifying and continually re-evaluating local context and priorities. Finally, a system approach to summer builds capacity and coordination of professional development and program quality, key drivers of program success.

RECURRING THEMES ACROSS DOMAINS:

- Build relationships and coordinate resource investments across organizations, agencies, and initiatives that already have relationships with children beyond the school day and year (for example, libraries, housing authorities, etc.)
- Develop meaningful relationships and coordinate closely with schools: from teachers to superintendent. This engagement with schools often flows from demonstrable results by OST programs, which in turn have a real impact on school-based outcomes.
- Plan how to involve families from the outset. System coordination of family engagement will result in better strategies for marketing, enrollment, retention and will reduce overall barriers to participation.
- Think broadly about including the right stakeholders. Certain stakeholders may already have relationships, a history of working across initiatives, or have developed systems for collecting data from grantees in a way that positions them well to encourage collaboration across community initiatives. Strategic direction may come from a funding collaborative, mayoral office, or other intermediary or leading organization.

The process for building an effective community system around summer learning requires three steps:

- **Community Assessment**
- **Community Coordination and Strategic Planning**
- **Capacity Building**

Examples of how this work has been carried out in several communities and an overview of NSLA services to support summer learning community system building can be found at www.summerlearning.org.

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