

NYSAN Policy Brief

The Need for Expanded and Enhanced Summer Learning Opportunities in New York State

In New York State, there is a well-documented need for a statewide, coordinated system of youth programs that operate outside of school hours, including before and after school, and during weekends and other school breaks, to provide high-quality, enriching experiences that contribute to the learning and healthy development of youth. Given their sizable impact on young people, summer learning opportunities must be a critical component of this system. However, many children have little or no exposure to the safe, supervised learning and enrichment activities during the summer that their schools and afterschool programs provide during the school year.

Summer experiences help meet the needs of all children; this is especially true for children from traditionally underserved communities, including children of color, those from low-income families, and children living in rural areas. This policy brief brings attention to the importance of high-quality summer learning opportunities; broadens the notion of what summer learning can and should mean; highlights local exemplars; and suggests policy recommendations to expand access to - and increase the quality of - this essential aspect of the youth development system.

What do we know about summer learning?

Research on summer learning indicates that youth who lack access to enriching summer experiences, particularly those from traditionally underserved communities, experience slowed development over the summer months. The research on summer learning is largely confirmation of what we already know - children's experiences outside of school are crucially important to their social and academic growth. High-quality summer learning opportunities support a young person's social, academic, physical, and emotional development.

Students who do not participate in summer learning opportunities experience a slight decline in their literacy skills over the summer, while their peers in enriching summer programs show a small increase in these skills. Students also tend to lose math skills over the summer months, and research shows that teachers typically spend 4 to 6 weeks re-teaching material that students have forgotten over the summer.¹

The result of this phenomenon over time, often called "summer learning loss," is a growing achievement gap. In fact, these cumulative differences in summer learning opportunities during the elementary school years account for up to two-thirds of the gap in student achievement. Summer learning opportunities, or the lack thereof, contribute to long-term differences in achievement on measures such as high school graduation and college-going rates, often differentiated by socioeconomic status, race, and/or ethnicity. As stated in a 2007 Congressional Act proposed by then-Senator Obama, "Summer learning programs are proven to remedy, reinforce, and accelerate learning, and can serve to close the achievement gap in education."²

"Summer offers unique opportunities to take field trips, invite guest speakers, and engage in hands-on experiential learning in a way that schools and afterschool programs cannot because of time constraints."

- Lura Lunkenheimer, President, Peaceful Schools, Syracuse, NY

In addition to academic benefits, summer programs and learning opportunities provide a safe, enriching environment for children, which is of particular importance to working families. Moreover, summer programs also help fill a need for nutritious meals for participants, which tend to be less accessible during the summer months than they are during the school year. Combined with the propensity of children to gain weight more rapidly during the summer break and the growing problem of childhood obesity, summer programs are essential to the healthy development of young people.³

Summer learning opportunities are offered in a variety of settings, including schools and community-based facilities such as community centers, libraries, houses of worship, and parks and outdoor camps. These are often the places where students spend their time outside of school during the school year. However, the summer offers the luxury of time. Children are able to spend large blocks of hours and days engaged in experiential and project-based learning and recreational activities. Especially for middle school youth, who are at a developmental stage in which they want to explore the world around them, the summer offers time for meaningful opportunities that include field trips, cultural experiences, exploring the natural world, and in-depth sports training and coaching.

The Need for Expanded Summer Learning Opportunities

The well-documented need for summer learning opportunities has thus far not elicited a large-scale, systemic policy response, and existing efforts alone are not sufficient. Summer camps traditionally focus on recreation and socialization, and summer schools almost exclusively emphasize remediation for students who fail classes during the regular school year. Policymakers must be mindful that enrichment is not a privilege reserved for the middle class who can pay for it, but instead must be afforded to all children to ensure their learning and development during the summer months. This is particularly true of recreational opportunities that can build self-confidence, support healthy habits, and prevent childhood obesity, all of which contribute to children's readiness to learn in school.

The Facts About Summer Learning Loss

The academic achievement gap which exists largely along income and race and ethnicity lines increases at a faster rate during the summer than during the school year.

Low- and middle-income students within the same school system learn at approximately the same rate during the school year. The academic achievement gap that exists between the two groups is due primarily to differences in the availability of summer opportunities during the elementary school years.⁵

Low-income students tend to experience a decrease in reading skills during the summer, while middle-income students continue to improve their reading skills over the summer.

A synthesis of 13 summer learning studies found that the summer learning gap in literacy between low- and middle-income students is equivalent to three months of schooling each year.⁶

Children of all socio-economic backgrounds tend to experience a reduction in math skills during the summer months, equivalent to about 2.6 months of school learning.

As just one example, a study of the Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL) summer program, including sites in Boston, New York City, and Washington, DC, found that children assigned to participate in the 6-week program that combined literacy and math instruction with community and recreational activities learned about one month of reading skills more than those in a control group.⁴

Summer Learning in New York State

Many organizations throughout New York are pursuing innovative ways to address the need for quality summer learning programs, and they serve as models from which to draw policy recommendations. A few examples are listed below.

- ◆ Project Morry of White Plains is a youth development organization that provides children with a year round, multi-year commitment anchored by a high-quality residential summer camp experience, and was a 2007 Excellence in Summer Learning Award Winner.
- ◆ Oasis Children's Services (which operates in New York City, Long Island, and Westchester) is widely recognized for its camps, summer enrichment programs, and afterschool programs, which incorporate a community-oriented, holistic approach to youth development.

◆ The City of Peekskill was recently selected by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation as one of ten New Day for Learning communities across the country, and will receive technical assistance as it re-imagines how, when, and where young people learn. Policies that promote summertime learning will be an important component of this initiative.

◆ In New York City, The After-School Corporation (TASC) has brought together leaders from youth-serving non-profit and government agencies to form a "summer task force." As part of these efforts, TASC conducted an inventory to understand of the profile of summer programs, children served, financing concerns, and approaches to integrating academics with recreation and enrichment.

◆ Also in New York City, the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) has made it mandatory for its elementary Out-of-School Time programs to operate year round.

◆ New York City-based Partnership for After School Education (PASE) has offered comprehensive professional development to NYC summer programs since 2001 in order to strengthen the educational components and overall quality of programs, and has put together a "Guide to Summer Learning."

◆ A number of nationally-recognized organizations, such as 2006 Excellence in Summer Learning Award Winner Harlem RBI, are emerging as exemplars for new summer programs.

Recommendations to Expand Summer Learning Opportunities in New York

Leaders from the afterschool, youth development, and education communities in New York State must work together to ensure that summer opportunities are accessible to all youth. This will require strong public leadership and support, and partnerships at all levels, including state and local groups as well as public and private organizations. In order to promote high-quality programs that provide a continuum of support for all youth, we must develop, implement, and support the following set of policies and practices.

(1) Promote summer learning programs as a critical factor in youth development.

◆ Ensure that policymakers, program providers, and families have access to information about how crucial the summertime is for children's academic, physical, social, and emotional development.

◆ Highlight the complementary missions and shared values across youth programs, schools, families, and communities.

◆ Better utilize the existing youth development community, particularly afterschool providers, to provide summer learning opportunities.

"Schools tend to run remedial summer school programs; parks departments run recreation programs; other agencies run or finance school-aged child care programs. Summer learning programs should leverage all those resources and combine youth development, academic enrichment, and recreation into one single, purposeful experience."

- Adam Weiss, Founder, Oasis Children's Services, Brooklyn, NY

(2) Develop partnerships among existing institutions to provide programs during the summer months.

- ◆ Explore multi-dimensional relationships and build strategic partnerships between schools, community organizations, and agencies that provide summer programming, such as parks, libraries, universities, etc.⁷
- ◆ Take a proactive approach to summer programming that builds on existing school day and afterschool programming, and explore possible links between school year and summer programs.
- ◆ Facilitate coordinated programming throughout the year along the dimensions of time, facilities, staffing and professional development, access to meals, and transportation.

(3) Ensure adequate funding is available to expand free or low-cost summer learning opportunities.

- ◆ Create a sustained and dependable public funding source specifically for high-quality summer programs that decrease summer learning loss.
- ◆ Eliminate barriers to blending and/or creative use of funding sources and expand the current uses of education and youth services funding to include summer programming.
- ◆ Include summer programs in health, nutrition, and

food program funding streams, such as Governor Paterson's Healthy Kids, Healthy New York initiative.

(4) Support program quality in summer learning opportunities.

- ◆ Include summer programs in research and data collection efforts to determine outcomes and strengthen programs.
- ◆ Provide opportunities for staff development as part of a commitment to continuous program quality improvement.
- ◆ Support existing programs in expanding their offerings, in part by broadening access to literacy and math curricula, to increase the focus on accelerating learning.
- ◆ Address the unmet needs of middle school students; while numerous programs exist for elementary students and several summer jobs programs are in place for high school students, middle school students have fewer summer learning opportunities.

Conclusion

Summer is a crucial time for children's development and learning. By expanding the existing youth program infrastructure and maximizing collaborations with schools, communities can support working families and students' academic, social, and emotional development, year-round.



The New York State Afterschool Network (NYSAN) is a public-private partnership dedicated to promoting young people's safety, learning, and healthy development by increasing the quality and availability of programs available outside the traditional classroom. The positions taken and statements set forth in this document do not necessarily represent the views of all NYSAN members. For a copy of this and other NYSAN publications, visit www.nysan.org.

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Endnotes

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² STEP UP Act of 2007, sponsored by Senators Obama and Mikulski.

³ von Hippel, P.T., Powell, B., Downey, D.B., Rowland, N.J. (2007). The effect of school on overweight in childhood: Gain in body mass index during the school year and during summer vacation. *American Journal of Public Health*, 97(4): 696-702.

⁴ Chaplin, D., Capizzano, J. (2006). Impacts of a Summer Learning Program: A Random Assignment Study of Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL). The Urban Institute.

⁵ Alexander, K., Olson, L., Entwisle, D. (2007). Lasting Consequences of the summer learning gap. *American Sociological Review* 72, 167-180.

⁶ Cooper, H. (1996). The effects of summer vacation on achievement test scores. *Review of Educational Research*, 66: 227-268.

⁷ Miller, B. (2007). The Learning Season: The Untapped Power of Summer to Advance Student Achievement. The Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

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