

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, far too many children have little or no exposure to the safe, supervised learning and enrichment activities that summer programs can provide.

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 highlights 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?

The research on summer learning is largely confirmation of what we intuitively know – children’s experiences outside of school are crucially important to their social and academic growth. High-quality summer learning opportunities can support and improve a young person’s social, academic, physical, and emotional development. Research on summer learning indicates that youth who lack access to enriching summer experiences, particularly those from traditionally underserved communities, experience not just slowed development, but an actual decline in skills over the summer months.

By the time they return to school in the fall, students who do not participate in high-quality summer learning opportunities perform, on average, one month behind where they performed in the spring, whereas their peers in enriching summer programs show a small increase in these skills.¹ Research shows that teachers typically spend 4 to 6 weeks re-teaching material that students have forgotten

over the summer, but even then these losses are not completely made up.²

The result of this phenomenon, often called “summer learning loss” or the “summer brain drain,” are cumulative and, over time, contribute to the achievement gap between low- and high-income students. The decline in academic performance over the summer months is disproportionately high for low-income students, those least likely to have access to summer learning opportunities.

A Ready Nation report found that while New York spends an average of \$19,550 per student delivering ten months of education, only eight months of skills are gained by low-income children due to summer learning loss. This results in a loss of \$3,910 per student annually. The report estimates the total loss at \$2.3 billion annually in New York State alone.³ High-quality summer learning programs reverse that effect.

As just one example, a study of the Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL) summer program, including sites in New York City,

“We’re going to work to make sure that every young person in America can have a great summer learning experience, no matter where they come from or how much money their parents have.”

-Michelle Obama,
Former First Lady of
the
United States

found that underperforming students participating in a 5-7 week program that combined literacy and math instruction with community and recreational activities gained an average of 3.5 months of math skills and 2.4 months of literacy skills. The average gains across all students in the same study were 1.8 months in math and 1.2 months in literacy.⁴ Another recent report showed that children participating in summer learning programs gained 17-21 % of an average year's learning in math.⁵

In addition to academic benefits, summer programs and learning opportunities provide a safe, supervised environment for children, which is of particular importance for working families. Summer programs can offer parents free or affordable childcare that enables them to continue working during the summer. Further, youth who participate in summer programs are less likely to engage in the kind of risky behaviors, such as substance abuse and sexual activity, that they may participate in if left unsupervised.

Summer programs are essential to the healthy development of young people, especially in the context of the growing problem of childhood obesity. Studies show that children's weight

increases and fluctuates at higher rates during the summer than during the school year, because of the lack of access to both nutritious meal and snack options and opportunities to participate in physical activities.⁶ Summer programs fill both of these needs, providing participants with the healthy food and recreational activities that they may not receive elsewhere during the summer.

The Need for Expanded Summer Learning Opportunities

One report suggests that 1,080 hours of the 6,000 hour opportunity gap between low- and middle-income 6th grade students come from differences in opportunities to attend summer enrichment programs.⁷ Not all families have sufficient resources to provide their children with the activities that will close that gap. In fact, high-income families spend about seven times more money than low-income families do on enrichment activities for their children.⁸

Enrichment should not be a privilege reserved for those who can pay for it, but instead must be available to all children to ensure their learning

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.⁹
- Low- and middle-income students within the same school system learn at approximately the same rate during the school year.¹⁰
- 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.¹¹
- 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.¹²
- Math skills decline at a greater rate than reading skills during the summer. Children of *all* socioeconomic status tend to experience a reduction in *math* skills during the summer months, equivalent to about *2.6 months* of school learning.¹³



and development during the summer months. We need programs whose content and structure suit the diverse family populations they serve. Unfortunately, the well-documented need for summer learning opportunities has not yet elicited a large-scale, systemic policy response, and existing efforts alone are not sufficient.

We need high-quality summer programs that prepare students for their return to the school by offering both enrichment and academic activities that further learning, build self-confidence, and support healthy habits, all of which contribute to children's readiness to learn, and therefore teachers' ability to teach. By allowing students to continue to learn in the summer, we are giving them the tools to learn more efficiently year-round.

The long days of summer also offer opportunities for children to explore their local communi-

ties and cultural institutions and to participate in activities outside of the classroom that excite them. By introducing children to the resources in their communities, summer programs have the power to ignite long-term relationships and passions for those institutions and to keep students engaged with them long after the summer has ended. A visit to an art museum may spark an interest in painting, a day at an animal shelter could lead to the decision to volunteer.

Students must have chances to explore passions and skills of that they may not be able to experience during school hours, by performing musicals, using 3D printers, building houses, writing poems, gazing at stars, staring through microscopes, or engaging in any other activity that a young person dreams about.

These are the experiences that colleges will look for in applicants, that students will keep in mind when seeking fulfilling careers and find joy in as adults. By introducing students to a variety of fields and interests today, we are preparing them to fill the roles in our country—in the arts, sciences, political sphere and beyond—that must be filled by competent leaders in the future.

Summer Learning in New York

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 is a 2007 Excellence in Summer Learning Award Winner. 97% of the young people who have completed the Project Morry program have graduated high school on time.

- **Horizons at Harley**, a six-week summer program in Rochester since 1995, revolves around a project-based curriculum that incorporates field trips, swimming, gardening, community service projects and social and emotional literacy learning for students in K through 8th grade. The average Horizons student attends the program for 6 years and 90% of students who attend that long graduate from high school.
- **Chess in the Schools** offers a four-week, free summer camp at several schools throughout New York City, giving students the opportunity to master the game of chess while improving academics and participating in recreation opportunities. Each week culminates in a chess tournament open to all participants and other interested players.
- **Fiver Children's Foundation** makes a 10-year commitment to students from underserved neighborhoods through a residential summer camp, in addition to year-round out-of-school time opportunities. The program includes character education, college prep, ethical decision-making, and environmental education. Since 2000, 96% of program graduates have graduated from high school, and 90% of those graduates have gone on to college or entered the military.
- **The 4-H Career Explorations Conference** introduces middle and high school 4-H members from across the state to a variety of academic fields and potential careers in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) through three days spent on the Cornell campus. Approximately 400 youth participated in the program in early July 2014 and had the chance to engage with Cornell faculty, experience life on a college campus, and gain hands-on experience in a variety of programs; including *Crafting the Human Body* in the Department of Biomedical Engineering, *Engineering Waste to Energy* in the Department of Biological and Environmental Engineering, and

Fashion Chop Shop in the Department of Fiber Science and Apparel Design.

- A collaboration between local museums, community centers, and agencies is providing students attending youth centers in Steuben County an integrated arts and science program entitled **Garden of Fire**—combining gardening, ceramics, and drumming circles. The program culminates in a community celebration of the students' work. The Rockwell Museum was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Challenge America grant in 2014 to continue the partnership.
- **NYC Summer Quest** is a five-week, full-day summer learning program aimed at improving and sustaining summer learning opportunities for students in NYC public schools by providing fun, hands-on enrichment experiences while strengthening academic skills. Developed and implemented through collaboration between the NYC Department of Education (DOE), the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), and The Fund for Public Schools (FPS), DOE teachers collaborate with community-based organizations to offer approximately 2,500 students Common-Core aligned instruction, enrich-



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ment activities, sports and recreation, and field trips. NYC Summer Quest has improved literacy skills among rising 1st and 2nd graders, increased student confidence in mastering difficult academic work and reading skills, and garnered incredibly high rates of parent satisfaction.

- In Buffalo, local high schools collaborate with the Summer Youth Employment Program to allow students to take for-credit classes in the mornings and participate in workshops on job skills, financial literacy, socio-emotional wellness, and college and career readiness. Students receive support from mentors while gaining valuable experience through program based workshops and/or job placements at local organizations.

- In the first two summers of Albany Girls Inc.'s year-round **Eureka! Program**, in partnership with the SUNY College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering (CSNE), girls engage in a STEM learning and team building curriculum. This is followed by two summers of an internship that gives them the opportunity to apply the skills they've learned. During the fifth and final year of the program, girls work with a coordinator to plan an experience specifically tailored toward the student's professional goals and academic interests.

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.

Federal

- Increase funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC). Summer programming is an allowable use for 21st CCLC funds, and many 21st CCLC programs in New York offer summer programs.

State

- Increase funding for the Youth Development Program, which, through the county youth bureaus, supports summer programming.
- Increase funding for Extended School Day/School Violence Prevention (ESD/SVP), which includes summer programming as an allowable use.
- Increase funding for the Empire State After-

School Program, for which summer programming is an allowable expense.

- Increase funding for Advantage After School and make summer programming an allowable activity. The Wallace Foundation estimates that a high-quality five-week summer program costs between \$1,100 and \$2,800 per student, so permissible per pupil expenditures (currently \$1,375 per student per year) would need to be increased in addition to increasing funding to make more programs available.
- Clarify to the field that Title I, SIG, Migrant Education, and Title II funds can be used for summer programming, and encourage schools to use these funds for summer.
- Increase investments in community schools that include summer learning opportunities.

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- Increase funding for the Summer Youth Employment Program. The most common placement for SYEP employees is in summer programs, and SYEP participants who are 16 years old or older count toward program staffing ratios, allowing more young students to participate as well.

Local Governments

- Continue investments in New York City, baseline the summer funding for SONYC and ensure that all afterschool programs include summer.
- Invest in local youth bureaus, which not only provide opportunities directly, but also coordinate community-based organizations in order to increase program quality and accessibility.

School Districts

- Explore models, such as NYC Summer Quest, that combine traditional summer school programming for struggling students with summer enrichment programs in order to increase student engagement.
- Develop strategic partnerships between schools and community organizations and agencies that provide summer programming,

such as community centers, youth serving organizations, parks, libraries, universities, etc. to foster programs that build on existing school day and afterschool programming and create links between school year and summer programs.

- Include summer programs in research and data collection efforts to determine outcomes and strengthen programs.
- Incorporate strategies learned from summer programs, including project-based and experiential learning approaches, into school year teaching strategies.¹⁴

Organizations Providing Summer Programs

- Ensure programs are meeting quality standards and incorporating academic learning, enrichment, social-emotional development, healthy food, and physical activity into each day.
- Assess your program for quality, using a quality self-assessment tool (<http://networkforyouthsuccess.org/qsqa>) or an assessment process through organizations such as the National Summer Learning Association or the American Camp Association, and commit to a continuous program quality improvement process.

FOOTNOTES

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² Peters, R.A., *Stanch your kid's summer learning loss*. MSNBC report, 2005; www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8146912

³ Ready Nation, *Not Getting Our Money's Worth*, 2014; <https://readynation.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/ReadyNation-NY-More-and-Better-Learning.pdf>

⁴ Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL), *Summer Impact Report*, 2014; http://issuu.com/experiencebell/docs/bell_summer_impact_report_2014/1?e=4625325/9785981

⁵ RAND Corporation, *Ready for Fall? Near-Term Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Students' Learning Opportunities and Outcomes*, 2014; www.wallacefoundation.org/readyforfall

⁶ von Hippel, P.T., Powell, B., Downey, D.B., Rowland, N.J., *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) (2007). 696-702.

⁷ ExpandedED Schools, *The 6,000 Hour Learning Gap*, 2014; www.expandedschools.org/sites/default/files/tasc_6000-hours-infographic.pdf.

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¹⁰ Alexander, K., Olson, L., Entwisle, D., *Lasting Consequences of the summer learning gap*. American Sociological Review 72 (2007). 167-180.

¹¹ Cooper, H., 1996.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Halpern, R., *Supporting vocationally-oriented learning in the high school years: Rationale, tasks, challenges*. New Directions for Youth Development, 134, 85-106, 2012.



The mission of The New York State Network for Youth Success is to strengthen the capacity and commitment of communities, programs, and professionals to increase access to high-quality programs and services beyond the traditional classroom.