

# SummerMatters

Advocating for Summer Learning That Can Weather Political Seasons

Research has shown that an idle summer isn't just boring; it can cost a student as much as two to three months of educational progress.<sup>1</sup> Yet children with access to camps, leagues, lessons, cultural events, and vacations not only don't lose ground, they jump ahead by a month or more.<sup>2</sup> By the late 1990s, researchers had begun releasing startling longitudinal evidence showing that the summer opportunity gap during the elementary school years can account for as much as two-thirds of the gap in educational success between low-income children and their better-resourced peers.<sup>3</sup> No matter how diligently educators seek to reform school and after school, it is clear they could never bridge this gap without a change in what happens during the summer.

*by Aaron McQuade*



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At the same time, student success is not just about academics. Children and youth, especially those in low-income communities, face nutritional challenges during the summer as well. Experts cite long summers spent in front of the television while snacking on junk food as one of the leading causes of childhood obesity.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, many other low-income children find themselves missing meals entirely when they are away from school.<sup>5</sup>

Summer is thus critical to each child's development, both mind and body. Any meaningful attempts to get at America's equity divide and the consequent gap in opportunities for kids must include summer education as a key part of the solution.

For more than 10 years, the Partnership for Children and Youth (PCY) has been working to raise awareness about the value of afterschool and summer programs, known collectively as "expanded learning time"

(ELT). Children spend much more time out of school than in it. PCY is committed to ensuring that children—particularly those from under-resourced communities—have the support and opportunities they need to reach their full potential. PCY, along with key partners,<sup>6</sup> created the Summer Matters campaign: a collaborative statewide effort in California to raise awareness about this challenge and to build capacity across the state to address it. This work is being accomplished with training, coaching, and facilitation to build the capacity of schools and their community partners and through communications and advocacy to partners in education, policy, philanthropy, and direct service.

The Summer Matters campaign was designed around two core strategies. First, PCY wanted to pilot high-quality summer learning programs in diverse communities across California. The goal was to create

tools, processes, and infrastructure to improve quality in existing programs and build quality into new ones. Pilot communities have been paired with local technical assistance providers who have tools and strategies for assessing and supporting quality improvement. PCY sought to build model summer programs as transferable examples for the rest of the field. Over the past five years, 12 pilot communities have dramatically improved the quality and quantity of their programming, becoming examples for others.

By intentionally building a continuous quality improvement process into the model, these programs—and the new ones they inspire—are stronger and more sustainable than they would be otherwise.

On a parallel track, a communications and advocacy campaign was launched across the state with multiple partners, including K-12 and afterschool advocacy organizations, school districts and county offices of education, the California Department of Education (CDE), policymakers, large-scale youth-serving organizations, philanthropy, and the media.

The campaign's goal has always been to take the stories and data from the field and bring them to a much wider audience. Decision makers need to know what high-quality, engaging summer learning looks like, as well as why it is critical.

Initial communications efforts cast a wide net, aimed at generating awareness among stakeholders (including parents) that experts were rethinking the role of summer in a child's development. PCY wanted the audience

to look at summer as an opportunity rather than as rest.

PCY collaborated on large events in the state capital and other major cities, bringing thousands of kids out to participate in fun activities to which they might otherwise not have access. PCY placed dozens of stories and op-eds in influential media, both local and statewide, highlighting the work of the pilot communities. PCY staff spoke at state and national conferences about its work and cultivated champions to carry the message through their networks.

Data collected through the pilot communities portion of the Summer Matters campaign led to the development of six elements of a quality summer program, a guide outlining what each summer program should look like.

As conditions have changed, so too has the campaign's communications focus. California's new Local Control Funding Formula law, enacted in 2013, puts more decision-making power in the hands of district leaders. Consequently, recent communications efforts are targeted more at the local level and focus on communicating specific success stories so local leaders can learn from their neighbors and peers.

This approach requires a strong, responsive group of partners and collaborators. The Summer Matters campaign has reached key education leaders across the state through a coalition that includes the California School Boards Association, the California PTA, the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association and its Curriculum and Instruction

Steering Committee, and the Association of California School Administrators. More than 50 superintendents across the state have signed on to support summer learning, and a PCY roundtable with more than 80 key stakeholders is convened several times a year.

For the past several years, the California Department of Education (CDE) has been a summer learning champion. State Superintendent Tom Torlakson co-chairs the Summer Matters campaign and speaks frequently about the essential role of summer learning with local education leaders across the state. The CDE's After School Division has been thinking strategically about how to strengthen its support for summer learning through afterschool funding and related statewide technical assistance. Other statewide partners include the California Library Association and the state's Parks and Recreation department.

Awareness is only part of the equation. California's current per-student spending is lower than all but two states' spending. However, the state also spends more on ELT programs than all other states combined.

California began funding afterschool initiatives in 1999 with the After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program (ASLSNPP). The effectiveness of ASLSNPP paved the way for Prop 49, the After School Education and Safety grant program (ASES), which was passed in November 2002 and more than tripled the state allocation for afterschool programs. (The actual funding allocation was tied to a minimum state expenditure level, which wasn't reached until the 2006–2007 fiscal year.)

In 2006 Partnership for Children and Youth sponsored Senate Bill 638, which substantially improved access to the implementation of Proposition 49 funds but did not address the



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## California's Partnership for Children and Youth

Founded in 1997, the Partnership for Children and Youth's mission is to promote systems of continuous learning, foster collaboration, and build leadership among school districts, government agencies, and community-based organizations serving low-income children and youth. PCY has accomplished the following:

raised over \$90 million in public and private dollars for youth programs in California's lowest-income communities;



facilitated dozens of new partnerships between schools, local governments, and community agencies;



trained thousands of afterschool and summer program staff in program and youth development; and



spearheaded three successful California legislative measures in support of summer learning.

fact that Prop 49 grant money was not designated for summer.

In 2008, when the Summer Matters campaign began, school funding had just been decimated by the recession and California's resulting budget crisis. In response, state leaders gave districts greater control over how funding was used by eliminating "categorical" funding. This essentially meant districts could spend what little they had left however they wanted. Almost every district in the state chose to eliminate their existing summer programs.

This turn of events can be seen as a blessing in disguise, as many summer programs in place before the funding crisis were based on the traditional model. Such programs, which focused on remediation, felt more like punishment to the students who needed the most help. Now that many districts are bringing summer programs back, California schools are more interested in developing fun, experiential, and relevant summer learning programming that mixes academics and enrichment.

In 2010, two years into the Summer Matters campaign, the legislature passed Senate Bill 798, which revised the amount of funds directed toward after-school and summer learning programs by setting aside 15 percent of future revenue increases for funding summer programs. In 2011 PCY co-sponsored Senate Bill 429, giving leaders even greater flexibility in the use of funds, an important step in helping struggling summer educators continue to provide quality services to the largest possible number of students.

PCY's latest effort is Senate Bill 1221, which gives funding priority to programs that offer year-round programming, including summer, in their applications for federal 21st Century Community

Learning Center grants. It also seeks to update accountability and quality improvement requirements to leverage recent research and developments in the ELT field.

Though PCY's advocacy and legislative efforts are making some progress in the flexibility of existing funding, the challenge remains of identifying funding to meet the large-scale need. Today, California funds about 4,500 afterschool programs, serving some 450,000 children. Including federal funding, investment in California's ELT comes to around \$700 million annually.<sup>7</sup> But there is still serious ground to cover. More than one-third of California's 6,800 designated low-income schools have no expanded learning programs, and the demand for afterschool funding exceeds the supply by almost \$200 million, leaving more than 100,000 students without access to ELT programs.<sup>8</sup>

Now that school district funding is slowly beginning to flow again and state lawmakers have decided to keep control over how to use that funding at the local level, districts have a renewed opportunity to invest in year-round learning experiences. More school officials are coming around to the idea that quality summer learning can significantly boost academic achievement and social-emotional learning for the state's disadvantaged youth.

Teachers and staff gain almost as much from summer learning as students. In many ways, summer creates a learning environment that is risk-free. Neither students nor teachers are burdened by the stress of grades or tests. This allows everyone to try, without the fear of failure.

At many summer sites, especially those that emphasize a STEM curriculum, students are even encouraged to make mistakes as part of the scientific process. When they make mistakes, they learn why things went wrong and work to make necessary improvements. Teachers are free to experiment as well. They do not have to answer to exams or pacing guides, which restrict when and how lessons can be taught. Program facilitators are free to focus on the experiences of the children while experimenting with new lesson plans and teaching styles that deviate from traditional methods. This flexibility can vastly improve student-teacher relationships. In many cases, these summer practices are now making their way into the school year and actually changing the way educators think about teaching.

Educators are seeing firsthand what happens when a child is exposed to new adventures, skills, and ideas through a mix of activities including reading, writing, math, science, and the arts in ways that are fun and engaging. Magic happens when students are given opportunities to move, play, and discover. Many programs absorb children in kinetic learning, where education can mean more than memorization.

Five years in, PCY's Summer Matters campaign is bringing enriching summer opportunities to more than 12,000 students in 110 communities across California.

Navigating California's unique infrastructure presented PCY with significant challenges. The campaign has had to be flexible in order to coordinate both state and local education

and policy structures. Policymakers and the public are gradually waking to the realization that summer can mean the difference between a student getting ahead or falling behind. Summer learning programs should all be extraordinary, but PCY's hope is that someday soon their presence becomes ordinary.

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<sup>1</sup>National Summer Learning Association, "More Than a Hunch: Kids Lose Learning Skills over the Summer Months," *Research in Brief* (no date), [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/summerlearning.site-ym.com/resource/collection/CB94AEC5-9C97-496F-B230-1BECDFC2DF8B/Research\\_Brief\\_04\\_-\\_Cooper.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/summerlearning.site-ym.com/resource/collection/CB94AEC5-9C97-496F-B230-1BECDFC2DF8B/Research_Brief_04_-_Cooper.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>National Summer Learning Association, "Summertime and Weight Gain," *Research in Brief* (no date), [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.summerlearning.org/resource/collection/CB94AEC5-9C97-496F-B230-1BECDFC2DF8B/Research\\_Brief\\_01\\_-\\_von\\_Hippel.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.summerlearning.org/resource/collection/CB94AEC5-9C97-496F-B230-1BECDFC2DF8B/Research_Brief_01_-_von_Hippel.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>National Summer Learning Association, "Summer Can Set Kids on the Right—or Wrong—Course: Study Links a Lack of Academic Achievement, High Dropout Rate to Summertime Learning Loss," *Research in Brief* (no date), [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.summerlearning.org/resource/collection/CB94AEC5-9C97-496F-B230-1BECDFC2DF8B/Research\\_Brief\\_02\\_-\\_Alexander.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.summerlearning.org/resource/collection/CB94AEC5-9C97-496F-B230-1BECDFC2DF8B/Research_Brief_02_-_Alexander.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>National Summer Learning Association, "Summertime and Weight Gain."

<sup>5</sup>Matthew Sharp and Tia Shimada, *School's Out... Who Ate? A Report on Summer Nutrition in California* (Los Angeles and Oakland, CA: California Food Policy Advocates, 2014), <http://cfpa.net/ChildNutrition/Summer/CFPApublications/SOWA-FullReport-2014.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup>Summer Matters campaign Steering Committee members include ASAPconnect, Children Now, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Fowler-Hoffman, the National Summer Learning Association, and the Partnership for Children and Youth.

<sup>7</sup>See California AfterSchool Network, "The Development of Afterschool Policy," at <http://www.afterschoolnetwork.org/background-policy-development>.

<sup>8</sup>Jeff Davis, *State of the State of Expanded Learning in California, 2012–2013* (Davis, CA: California AfterSchool Network, 2013), [http://www.afterschoolnetwork.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/state\\_of\\_the\\_state\\_web.pdf](http://www.afterschoolnetwork.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/state_of_the_state_web.pdf).