

Communities Can Work Together to Strengthen Summer Learning for Youth



By Katie Willse

To make the most of limited resources and reach the greatest numbers of youth, communities must coordinate across sectors, track and share data, and strengthen partnerships.

One difficulty urban communities encounter as they seek to improve summer learning programs is a lack of basic data identifying where existing programs are and what age groups they support, as well as more complex measures of quality. For example, a recent survey identified 229 summer learning programs in Baltimore City, but distinguishing them from summer meal programs, mapping their locations, and identifying the age groups each serves required a concerted effort.

High-quality summer learning programs in a given city are often only able to address a fraction of the need. Lack of access to program data and absence of stakeholder coordination compounds the problem. Working together to systematically increase program quality and provide more high-quality summer learning opportunities where families need them can lead to improved outcomes for youth.

More cities are beginning to coordinate strategies and resources to expand and improve services for young people who need them most.¹ Ranging from collective impact initiatives that build a pipeline of services to support a young person cradle to career, to system-building efforts in the extended learning field, stakeholders are joining forces to address education issues at scale.

The National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) aids communities that want to build summer learning systems to serve families and youth and has provided extensive support to cities such as Baltimore, Birmingham, Newark, and New York City. NSLA's Community Indicators of Effective Summer Learning Systems, developed in collaboration with community leaders, serve as a road map to building high-quality summer learning systems.² Based on systems research, best practices in afterschool and summer system building, and a survey of community intermediaries and program providers, these indicators measure progress in achieving system-building milestones in six key areas including development of a shared vision, engaged leaders, data management, continuous improvement, sustainable resources, and effective communications.

Newark, New Jersey

These indicators have helped many communities better understand their summer learning needs and strengthen their offerings. With NSLA's support, for example, Newark, New Jersey, leaders convened more than 100 stakeholders, assessed the city's summer learning landscape, identified gaps, and built a common vision for coordinating, expanding, and strengthening high-quality summer learning opportunities for more youth.

Many of Newark's children and youth are at risk of summer learning loss. In 2012, a report by Advocates for Children of New Jersey found that about 43 percent of Newark's children lived in poverty. More than 80 percent of Newark's children qualified for free or reduced-price lunch

during the school year. Despite this need, leaders could identify only about 14,000 slots in summer programs available to youth in 2010 and 2011, which would serve just 30 percent of a school-age population of approximately 46,000 youth.

Newark community leaders used NSLA's community indicators to develop a summer learning action plan, which was presented at a forum and is included in the report, *Investments and Opportunities in Summer Learning: A Community Assessment of Newark, New Jersey*.³

Shared Vision and Citywide Coordination

- set short-term and long-term summer learning priorities for improving youth outcomes
- connect the Summer Learning Work Group's vision to other related initiatives in Newark

Engaged Leadership

- develop plans to ensure summer learning work continues through significant community changes
- engage community leaders as summer champions
- develop a system of mutual accountability for summer learning work

Data Management System

- determine a process for effective data sharing across the summer system
- align data collection processes for participation, enrollment, and demographic information across summer learning opportunities
- compare outcomes related to summer learning loss to under-

stand the effectiveness of a variety of summer learning opportunities

- develop and implement an evaluation plan for summer learning opportunities that includes both academic and social-emotional learning outcomes

Continuous Quality Improvement

- establish quality standards for summer learning opportunities
- educate key stakeholders on quality standards

Sustainable Resources

- develop a clear sense of the scale of the summer learning system in Newark
- identify an intermediary or lead organization to manage resources, reporting requirements, and compliance for system-building work
- identify resources to support program grants, program capacity building, system coordination, and the activities of the summer learning plan
- support the expansion of the Summer Food Service Program in Newark

Marketing and Communications

- articulate a shared vision for summer learning in Newark
- leverage marketing partnerships to support full enrollment at all key providers
- articulate a call to action targeted to key stakeholders on what they can do to support summer

Newark's leaders have embraced the call to action and the strategies included in their summer learning action plan. In the summer of 2014, Newark Public Schools launched a revamped summer program called Summer Plus that connected academic instruction by district teachers with enrichment and academic activities by community-based partners in a single program model for 4,000 youth.

In addition, leaders, including the Victoria Foundation and the United Way of Essex and West-Hudson, are spearheading efforts to build an out-of-schooltime network that would coordinate funding and technical assistance to programs during the summer and the school year. With the collaboration of diverse community partners and a shared passion to offer a bright future for all youth, Newark has taken critical first steps to provide quality summer learning opportunities to all students who need them—and it can serve as a model for other communities that want to enhance summer educational programs.

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¹National Summer Learning Association, *Summer Learning Helps Grand Rapids Youth to Succeed in School and Life* (Baltimore: NSLA, 2013), http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.summerlearning.org/resource/resmgr/Publications/GR_Profile_Final_lowres.pdf.

²National Summer Learning Association, "Community Indicators of Effective Summer Learning Systems," (Baltimore: NSLA, 2009), <http://www.summerlearning.org/?page=communityindicators>.

³National Summer Learning Association, *Investments and Opportunities in Summer Learning: A Community Assessment of Newark, New Jersey* (Baltimore: NSLA, 2013), http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.summerlearning.org/resource/resmgr/Publications/Newark_Report.pdf.