

Rhode Island Governor Lincoln Chafee visited one of the state's summer learning programs in the summer of 2013. Fifth graders were observing animals and other sea life found in local rivers and in Narragansett Bay, and they were busily documenting their experiences. A certified teacher and a community educator from Save the Bay, a local nonprofit, were leading the lesson. The governor asked one of the students what she was working on. The student, mollusk in hand, replied, "Excuse me, sir, I can't talk to you right now because I need to figure out what this is."

High-quality summer learning fosters this deep engagement and is key for closing opportunity gaps and improving educational outcomes. Increasingly, research is demonstrating the importance of using this strategy—one that expands learning into the summer months by creating an extended school year that looks and feels very different from the rest of the year.¹

Deep engagement during summer programs existed in Rhode Island before 2008, but over the last six years, the state developed systems to make programs like this one in Woonsocket more readily available to children throughout the state. It required a strong programming model, financial backing, supportive policies from state and local authori-

ties, and a great deal of collaboration and coordination.

Summer learning loss has been documented in the United States since early in the 20th century.² These early studies measured differences in test scores at the beginning of the summer and at the end, and discovered that students did not retain information during the summer. Studies conducted throughout the 20th century confirmed this.³ Later studies also discovered evidence of summer learning loss in reading ability and reading comprehension.⁴ A meta-analysis of summer learning studies found that, on average, students lose up to two months of grade-level equivalency in math during the summer when not engaged in learning. For low-income students, that two-month loss also occurs in reading.⁵ A longitudinal study of a Baltimore, Maryland, summer program found that up to two-thirds of the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers could be attributed to unequal access to quality summer programming.⁶ More recently, efforts have been made across the country to address this gap in learning during the summer months, especially for low-income children. The National Summer Learning Association has led efforts to boost the quality of summer programs and to encourage programs to meet the social,

emotional, academic, and health needs of children. All of these areas were considered as Rhode Island sought to build a statewide system for summer learning.

In 2008, Rhode Island formed a statewide work group that brought together policymakers, school superintendents, program providers such as the Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCAs, foundation partners, and representatives from state agencies, including the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). This group conducted a national scan of best practices in out-of-school time programming. Additionally, they brainstormed the types of policy changes that could support the growth and development of summer learning in Rhode Island.

These efforts led the Nellie Mae Education Foundation to provide an initial investment supporting five demonstration programs that met specific requirements based on the research conducted by the statewide work group. These included hands-on, experiential programming with academics embedded into the activities, strong student engagement efforts, and a curriculum that was fun and looked different from the traditional school year. Most important was a requirement that classes be co-created and co-delivered by a certified teacher and a community educator, bringing the best instruc-

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tion of the school day together with the best of out-of-school time. The selected programs implemented summer learning using a variety of curricula delivered to a variety of age groups. Independent evaluation of the programs was conducted each year to learn how various practices were implemented and how these could be improved in future years. For instance, evaluations found that some programs struggled with the move toward more hands-on programming and often reverted to more traditional methods of instruction. This evaluation helped guide the professional development and technical assistance used to aid programs and improve delivery.

Private Investment

As the summer of 2011 came to a close, work group members sought to further develop their model of summer learning, which had served close to 1,200 students over four years. The group wanted to provide more children the same opportunity. But expansion would require additional investment in both programming and systems to support the development of high-quality programming such as technical assistance and evaluation. United Way of Rhode Island, one of the members of the work group, brought a potential partnership to the table. Working with Hasbro Inc. and a private family foundation, United Way announced the creation of the Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative, which included an investment of \$400,000 in summer learning programming and infrastructure for the summer of 2012. This new funding partnership also introduced several more best

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practices, including a standardized program length of six weeks, full-day programming, and the introduction of service learning as an additional curriculum component. Through this investment, the number of programs and collaborations between schools and community partners grew from the original 5 to 11, which served more than 1,000 children during the summer of 2012 alone. Evaluations of the program were also promising, demonstrating average pre-test to post-test student gains of close to 30 percent. This success, and the investment from major partners, began to draw additional attention from the public sector.

Public-Private Partnership

From the beginning, the summer learning work group concluded that they needed to educate state legislators and other policymakers about the importance of summer learning and ways these leaders could address summer learning loss. Several legislative staff members on the work group suggested legislation to develop a legislative task force on summer learning, which would provide a report and detailed recommenda-

tions. That legislation was enacted in late 2009. The Joint Legislative Taskforce on Summer Learning was formed in January 2010, co-chaired by a member of each chamber of the Rhode Island General Assembly. Members of the task force included representatives from the teachers unions, superintendents association, principals association, state agencies (including RIDE), the governor's office, program providers, and others. Throughout the winter and spring of 2010, the task force heard testimony from national education experts, practitioners of summer programs, and other education stakeholders. The report, including nine recommendations for best practice programming and ways to fund programming with public dollars, was released on June 21, 2010, the first day of summer. The report became a key driver for policy decisions in the coming years.

The report detailed how districts could use existing federal funding to support summer learning, including Title I and 21st Century Community Learning Center funding. As the Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative grew, school districts supplemented private funding with

this public funding to increase the number of participants. The success of the initiative, coupled with the report from the legislative task force, led the legislature to develop a state grant specifically for summer learning. This grant increased the number of programs from 11 to 17 by the summer of 2014, and the number of students increased by nearly 50 percent from 2012 to 2014. It also shifted the initiative from one that was primarily funded through private dollars to one that is truly a public-private partnership.

While there are now many examples of high-quality summer programming throughout Rhode Island, two programs exemplify the type of summer learning that has become routine across the state: the BLAST Program in Deering Middle School, in West Warwick, Rhode Island, and the Providence After School Alliance Summer Scholars Program.

BLAST Program

The BLAST program at Deering Middle School in West Warwick, serving middle school students in the city for six weeks during the summer, is a partnership between the West Warwick School Department and

the Kent County YMCA. Part of the Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative, the program's curriculum is developed collaboratively by certified teachers and community educators. However, much of the curriculum is a skeleton, as student choice plays a major role in the programming. Instruction is based on hands-on and experiential activities, and all the programming links to the core theme of service learning. Additionally, students have opportunities for recreation in the afternoon.

In the summer of 2012, the curriculum focused on improving the town of West Warwick. Students selected a problem in their community they wanted to solve, and the curriculum was designed to help them get to a solution by the end of the summer program. Students observed that the playgrounds in the wealthier areas of town were better kept than the playground in the lower income area. Students researched playground safety and found a checklist from the National Playground Association. They used the safety checklist to determine areas that needed improvement, researched the cost of improving the playground, developed budgets to demonstrate the costs, and wrote letters and developed presen-

tations to make their case. Students presented their findings to the town council in September and received \$5,000 for the improvements.

In this hands-on and experiential program, students led. Also, math was embedded in it, through the development of budgets, measurement of playground equipment, and other calculations. It included reading and literacy, as students researched, wrote persuasive letters, developed presentations, and presented them in a public forum. The program was engaging and relevant to the students, and it taught important academic skills, civic engagement, and other key skills such as collaboration, communication, and critical thinking.

Providence After School Alliance Summer Scholars Program

The Providence After School Alliance (PASA) Summer Scholars Program is a collaboration between PASA, the Providence School Department, and various youth-serving community organizations in Providence. The program was one of the original demonstration programs funded by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and has since developed into the main option for Providence middle school students. The school department has allocated significant resources to the summer program and is the primary funder of this work. The program focuses on science, technology, engineering, arts, and math and provides students with several curricular options. Like the BLAST program, PASA's programming is created

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and delivered through a partnership between a community educator and a certified Providence school teacher. It is hands-on and experiential, and academics are embedded in those activities.

One example of Summer Scholars programming is the partnership with the Community Boating Center. Students learn to sail, and within that instruction they are also taught critical math and science skills. They use geometry to calculate their routes, and they learn meteorology and its impact on sailing. Rhode Island is nicknamed the Ocean State, yet many participants in the program have never experienced the state's vast waterways.

Both BLAST and Summer Scholars demonstrate the keys to summer learning success: hands-on, experiential programming, youth voice and choice, embedded academics, and partnership between schools and community educators. Each program has a diverse funding plan of public and private sources, and each puts students at the center of learning.

Scaling Up: Recommendations for Policymakers

The tremendous growth in summer programming in Rhode Island over the last six years is a result of several factors, including a convergence of interests at the right time. Initial private investment was critical, as was an interest from the public sector in summer learning and its effect on education more broadly. As Rhode Island looks to scale this work and expand it to thousands more, it is clear that additional resources will

be necessary. Are summer funding resources used for remedial programs that have little demonstrated effect on student performance? Is other funding available for initiatives taking place during the school year that have not been effective? School districts are usually resistant to taking risks with public tax dollars. However, as Rhode Island has seen, the risk is not that great, and the returns are quite promising.

State policymakers, including state boards of education, can take several steps to promote summer learning. First, state boards can set policies and regulations mandating specific elements in summer programming. They can also offer guidance on effective collaborations and guidance on state and federal funding that can be used to better address summer learning. Finally, policymakers can alter funding formulas to specifically allocate resources so all students have access to quality summer programming.

Conclusion

The summer months are an ideal time to engage students in deep learning while also letting them have fun. The research on summer learning loss makes clear that too often schools and communities miss this opportunity—and the consequences are great not only for individual students, but also for communities and the future work force. Since 2008, Rhode Island has worked to take advantage of the opportunity that summer provides to educate children, to keep them sharp academically, and to provide them with engaging new experiences. While there is still more work to do

locally to reach scale, Rhode Island has positioned itself for growth through strong public-private partnerships and through strong collaborations between schools and community educators.

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⁶Alexander et al., "Schools, Achievement, and Inequality."

⁷Rhode Island General Assembly, Findings of the joint-legislative taskforce on summer learning programs (2010).