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# Linked Summer Programs for Youth: Opportunities, Challenges and Innovations

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## Introduction

What a difference summers make, is the conclusion of Johns Hopkins University researchers in a recent study published in the *American Sociological Review*.[1] From first to ninth grade, achievement differences between children from low- and high-income families grow wide. The growth in this gap, though, cannot be completely explained by what happens when children are in school; during the summer months, low-income students fall farther behind their more advantaged peers. These study findings confirm what past studies have shown[2] and what many teachers already know: "summer learning loss" is a major challenge to helping all children succeed in school. This study's findings also make clear that the loss is greater for some students than others: these losses often lead to schools assigning low-income students to lower tracks, to lower graduation rates, and to lower rates of college matriculation than their peers.

This issue brief summarizes findings from a review of programs intended to identify challenges and innovations of 26 *linked summer* programs across the United States. By linked summer programs we mean sites that connect what happens in school, after school, and summer settings. The review focused on well-established programs that researchers, funders, and peers identified as innovative and successful in reaching low-income students. Providers of programs included school districts, community-based organizations, and a county education agency. Researchers at John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) conducted both telephone and in-person interviews with staff. We also conducted observations of selected programs during the summer of 2009. The David and Lucile Packard Foundation funded the study to inform policymaking and clarify potential funding priorities regarding summer learning programs.

This issue brief contains four sections. First, we discuss opportunities programs pursue, summarizing the range of goals and breadth or scope of programming at the sites reviewed. Second, we discuss three areas of challenge identified by a range of programs. Third, we present sites' innovations in response to these challenges. Finally, we consider what is needed to build further the field of linked summer learning programs.

## Opportunities: Goals and Scope of Linked Summer Learning Programs

Our review focused on programs that provided a set of organized activities during the summer that were linked in purposes to the goals of a specific school (or schools). The linkages were forged through people, materials, and organizations united in purpose toward improving learning opportunities for low-income youth. Student participation in the programs was most often voluntary; however, once enrolled students were expected to attend programming over multiple weeks. Programs targeted to one or more of the following goals:

- Provide young people with a safe, engaging place to learn in the summer.
- Connect young people more strongly to schools so that they are more academically prepared to enter school in the fall.
- Help adults who work with youth identify strengths and challenges for them across settings, year-round.

These goals are broader than those of the traditional summer school, where students may be required to participate and where students receive remedial instruction in subjects they failed during the school year. The goals include learning and academics, but more often than not, their intent is to promote growth by implementing strategies that provide expanded learning opportunities to students and *complement* the strategies that teachers use during the regular school year.[3] At Grass Valley School District's Hennessy Elementary School, for example, the students in the summer program help maintain a garden, and staff organize hands-on experiences to help them learn about growing plants from seeds and about insects that live in the garden. These activities address key science standards but do so in a way that is distinct from how teachers address these standards during the regular school year.

Programs that aim to provide a safe, engaging place for students to learn employ multiple strategies. Most offer not just one type of learning opportunity, but many different activities. These include enrichment classes, field trips, recreational activities and games typical of summer camps, and project-based learning opportunities. Safety is an explicit concern of some programs; at selected schools in New York, a uniformed security guard welcomes students to the site each day as they do during the school year. The guard not only serves to keep the grounds safe but is also a source of information for families and other visitors. In being a safe place for young people to go in the summer, linked summer programs achieve a key goal for many parents in the summer: providing them with a reliable source of quality day care for their children.

Some programs also employ strategies to strengthen young people's connection to school so that they are better prepared to enter school in the fall. The Providence After School Alliance site coordinator says that her summer program introduces rising 6th graders who will be new to the school the following year to school and afterschool staff, in an effort to make the fall transition easier. Teachers in Chicago's Keep Kids Learning program implement a standards-aligned curriculum as part of their program, which is adapted to the particular needs of students in the program to enhance their bonding to school.

Many programs explicitly aim to learn about students' strengths and needs, though they have different approaches to achieving this goal. For example, the Heart House in Dallas emphasizes staff getting to know students throughout the school year and writing regular notes to teachers to find out what teachers believe are areas where students need extra help. Other programs use standardized test scores from the district to help plan their curriculum. Some programs also seek to provide information to school staff about the strengths they see in students, particularly strengths that may not be visible to teachers who are focused intently on covering required state standards. The long duration of program days enhance opportunities to achieve this goal; staff see young people in linked summer programs for up to 10 hours per day.

One consequence of programs having different goals and strategies is that their linkages to schools and school districts differ. Programs with academic goals often seek to link their activities to state standards in core subject areas; by contrast, where safety and enrichment are central goals, staff designing programs may not view such linkages as essential. Rather, what is important to such programs is having activities that develop curiosity and a disposition to pursue a subject that interests them and that could be useful when applied in school. For programs seeking to help adults more readily see students' capabilities and difficulties, programs try to ensure that the people who work in programs have opportunities to observe children in multiple settings. These occasions could involve teachers who work with students during the regular school year or trusted colleagues of students' teachers who communicate regularly about how to help students served in the summer program.

In designing and implementing programs to meet their goals for students, administrators of linked summer programs inevitably face challenges. Some of those challenges are similar to those faced by expanded learning programs offered during the regular school year, such as finding and retaining qualified staff. Others are particular to the requirements of offering programming in the summer, when school buildings may be closed and the schedule of activities often varies from week to week. In the next section, we describe both kinds of challenges and some of the innovations that linked summer programs have made to address them.

## Challenges

The sites in the study had in common challenges in three major areas:

- Attracting and retaining qualified staff for multiple program offerings.
- Mobilizing resources and supports needed to implement programs.
- Creating a coherent, aligned and complementary curriculum.

Below, we detail the challenges sites reported facing in their efforts to plan and implement linked summer learning programs.

### Attracting and Retaining Qualified Staff for Multiple Program Offerings

Program leaders have difficulty attracting and retaining qualified staff for summer learning programs, just as they do for afterschool programs during the regular school year. The pool from which programs draw for staff is comprised of people with varied backgrounds, including college students, volunteers to afterschool, youth development specialists and certified teachers. The staff may or may not have personal knowledge of the student participants and their specific learning needs, even though developing such knowledge is an important goal of many programs. Turnover may be high and staff may be different from the regular school year, making it even more difficult for individual students to bond with staff who will be able to see them successfully through the transition back to school in the fall.

The reasons that many programs have difficulties staffing programs are similar across programs. First, providing multiple activities to keep students engaged creates challenges in identifying and coordinating staff and their schedules. According to the director of the John Muir Beacon summer program in San Francisco, the availability of their volunteers often conflicts with the program structure they have set up. Programs may need to run both in the morning and afternoons, but leaders find that volunteers with particular skills may only be available in the mornings. Similarly, college students change classes each semester and may want to change schedules each semester or at time inconvenient for summer programming. A second reason why staffing is hard involves compensation--programs often cannot pay benefits or a living wage during the summer months. These financial constraints make it hard to recruit good staff and contribute to turnover. This issue may be less salient in tough economic times, but during more typical labor markets, benefits are key to attracting qualified staff. Third, the diversity of offerings typical of summer programs means that each site needs staff with many different skills, which they must either locate or develop. For example, a Baltimore site reports that their staff offer over a dozen different enrichment activities, requiring more than 100 staff to lead those activities each year. Having staff with a diverse skill set is an important resource for programs, but program coordinators say it also takes a lot of time to organize and manage.

### Mobilizing Resources and Supports Needed to Implement Programs

It is not easy for summer programs to access the funds they need because they compete with other district priorities and are often funded through public streams that pay not only for summer school but also for general education and afterschool services. When districts administer federal and state dollars for expanded learning programs, they tend to prioritize regular school year programs when considering how to use these dollars. In addition, accessing money for summer programs can be a challenge because summer program staff are not always at the table when funding decisions are made. Two sites in California support a year-round coordinator position for afterschool and summer programs that is funded by dollars that could go into the general fund, and the district makes decisions about how much to spend on the program. In the Grass Valley School District, the business department develops the budgets for each program funding stream in collaboration with the Child Development Director and Principal. To find additional funding to support school and afterschool activities each site must do individual fundraising, which must be approved by the local school board.

In California, as in some other states, additional state funds are available to summer programs; however, in that state, as in other states, these funding streams also pay for afterschool programming during the year. In California, Afterschool Education and Safety (ASES) grants are available to districts, schools, and community-based organizations that provide afterschool and summer programming. Although these funds can support both afterschool and summer programming, sites must make tough programmatic decisions based on budget limits. While strong relationships with principals and other stakeholders allow organizations to do more with less during the summer, the current structure of the ASES funding

streams make it difficult for most programs to use this funding to support both afterschool and summer programming.

Programs in many communities are in the position of having to compete with partners who provide elements of summer programming for what limited funds are available. For instance, the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) has communicated to partners that PASA avoids competing for grants from local funding agencies and focuses on leveraging new funds, so that the alliance does not compete with their partners for limited funds. At the Children's Aid Society, the program director says that territoriality within the school district means that there is competition for funds at the site level. A lot of Children's Aid Society staff time is dedicated to developing the relationships and the communications tools necessary to compete for funding.

The limited amount of funding (both public and private) available to operate linked summer programs constrains the designs and opportunities these programs can provide and limits the number of youth they can serve. In Providence and Chicago, mayors have been strong advocates for summer programming to combat summer learning loss, but the city governments are only able to provide partial funding to fulfill mayoral visions for providing a rich array of summer offerings to children who most need it. The remaining funding has been raised from other sources. Limited funding has also meant that existing programs have been unable to serve many students who could have benefited. In Chicago, the Manager of Enrichment Programs at the district says the Keep Kids Learning program there could expand if they had more funding, because there is staff capacity at the district level and partnerships in place to add sites or expand existing ones. Program leaders at Heart House, 21st Century Redhound Enrichment in Kentucky, and Children's Aid Society all say their programs always have waiting lists. In instances such as these, demand from youth outstrips supply.

The schools that afterschool programs rely on for facilities and transportation for students during the regular school year often are not available to programs during the summer, or their use requires additional fees. It costs districts extra to keep buildings open in the summer, a cost that programs sometimes incur. Summer is also a time when schools undergo deep cleaning and schedule maintenance projects, so janitorial staff at the school and district level can be unsupportive of keeping schools open year round. In some districts, strict rules about who can open and close a school add to the cost of running a program. In Baltimore, for example, it is city policy that a Baltimore city employee must open and close the school. If not for a principal's commitment to the program, the community-based organization that operates a program for students at one Baltimore school would be unable to use that school's building in the summer.

### Creating a Coherent, Aligned but Complementary Curriculum

Coherence in programming refers to the idea that the diverse activities offered fit together into a whole that offers multiple pathways for students to develop particular knowledge and skills. To benefit students academically, that whole has to focus on knowledge and skills that are aligned to state standards. Curriculum has to cover those standards in ways that complement, rather than repeat, the ways students encounter these standards in regular school-day instruction.

For some sites, creating a coherent and aligned, but complementary curriculum presented a challenge. Most programs strive to give students diverse opportunities to learn, but doing so creates the potential for a curriculum that is broad but does not allow for deep exploration of topics or activities students find interesting. Programs can align their offerings to state academic standards, but the standards do not specify materials that programs can use. Finding such materials was a problem for two programs, staff said, since their staff did not have the skills to create or assemble materials that could engage students and at the same time help them build academic skills. Sites that do use curriculum materials often have limited resources to pay for them. This constraint adds to the challenge of creating an array of offerings that complement instruction during the regular school year.

## Innovations

### Use Flexibility of the Summer Schedule to Offer Something Different

Summer learning program schedules allow for field trips, extended project-based learning opportunities, and other learning experiences that need a large block of time and that are sometimes difficult for schools to support during the school year. Many summer programs incorporate multiple fieldtrips each week, including activities like swimming, visits to parks, and museums. The Children's Aid Society summer programs include

a theme that structures how fieldtrips and enrichment classes work together. This summer's theme was 'My New York' and students enrolled in the program learned about the history, architecture, and cultures of their own neighborhood and of other parts of New York. Because the summer schedule can accommodate larger blocks of time for structured learning activities outside of the school campus, many summer programs provide similar kinds of opportunities for youth to explore their neighborhood, nearby parks, and help them to see the world as their classroom.

### Plan Early and Make the Process Inclusive

Many programs start planning for summer programs in early fall, and involve people who will contribute resources or who will be involved in program coordination or operation. A site in Baltimore, for example, starts planning in November and engages multiple individuals in the school district who will have roles in the program in the process. At Children's Aid Society, staff from different school sites come together to select a theme for the summer program. The theme is shared with local sites in March, in time to help identify resources and activities that support the theme. A consultant selects content related to the theme that is printed in a detailed program guide that is then disseminated to each site in April and May. Sites can use the resources in the program guide to customize a curriculum that is appropriate and engaging for the youth they serve at that site. The summer programs in one school district in California have an advisory committee that meets to plan the program. The committee consists of subcontractors who will provide services, so that they can coordinate efforts with district staff also involved in the program. Steering committee meetings involve executive level staff and engage participants in both setting strategies and deciding on particular activities. At Wheatland School District in California, each year the district organizes an annual retreat where summer program staff meet with other special programs to make sure that the programs' goals and strategies are aligned to the school day. Administrators hold meetings with district staff on coordinating programs and setting direction for the summer/afterschool program.

Programs like to start planning early for several reasons. It helps them identify staff needs in time to develop job descriptions or identify providers that align to program goals. In addition, planning early can help improve coordination between the summer program and the school year. Early planning also helps programs to better anticipate the inevitable need to find the resources necessary to implement their plans. Finally, to the extent that staff who provide services are involved in setting schedules, the design can accommodate vacations and needs for periodic breaks.

### Hire Year-Round Staff

A number of summer learning programs hire staff who work year-round with students. One advantage of this approach is that staff can get needed training throughout the year and, consequently, more of it. For example, staff in the summer program in Grass Valley are the same as the afterschool staff. They get early education units through training throughout the year related to observing students' progress in mastering standards. The Children's Aid Society also provides training to its year-round staff in youth development practices throughout the school year, not just at the beginning of the summer, as many sites without year-round staff must do.

Hiring staff to be year-round also provides them with more opportunities to get to know students better. The staff may be the school day teachers of children, teachers' aides, or afterschool staff who see a child both at school and in the summer program. In most of these situations, continuity of staffing provides a significant advantage in learning about students' strengths and needs, as well as about how they express themselves and act in different contexts. As problems arise for students, the staff can easily coordinate with others to come up with solutions. In Arcata, in California, for example, staff who have ongoing, consistent communication with one another help ensure students get the support they need to overcome serious obstacles to educational success. One student who had gotten into trouble for behavior early in the year benefited from the conversations among staff; he went from being a student at risk of dropping out to passing all of his classes and staying out of trouble in school.

When programs do hire staff to work year-round, they often must devise strategies to help prevent staff burnout. Some programs schedule breaks for year-round staff, and program leaders make an extra effort to honor vacation requests of these staff. The 21st Century Redhound Enrichment program in Kentucky, for example, always closes for the Fourth of July week to give staff a break after the first five weeks of summer programming. The Expanded Learning/Child Development Director at Grass Valley School District says she honors all vacation time requests by staff who work in the summer program, because she knows her staff need regular breaks.

### Hire Older Students as Staff

To meet their staffing needs, a number of programs employ high school youth. For example, the Providence After School Alliance programs use a combination of national and local job development funds to train and employ high school youth in its summer programming. This summer, the John Muir Beacon in San Francisco hired 6 high school youth who served as staff-in-training; they worked full time in the summer as camp counselors. Two came from the mayor's youth employment program. Other sites also employed high school students.

Hiring older youth provides several benefits, say program directors. The older youth are often able to form strong bonds with younger children, providing a positive social environment for youth. Second, for the older youth themselves, working in programs provides valuable job training and experience. In this way, the programs serve as a kind of "ladder of opportunity" to help them find jobs and see their way into successful futures. The LA's BEST program offers youth leadership opportunities within the summer programming. It is not uncommon for youth in their program to continue to work for the afterschool and summer programs while they pursue education degrees or teaching credentials. These same individuals often maintain connections to the programs as teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District. In addition, hiring these youth is a way to provide young people with direct experiences in contributing to their communities, a major goal for many summer learning programs.

### Cultivating Relationships with School and District Staff

Linking summer programs to the school year depends on relationships that programs develop with staff in schools and districts. For many of the sites in this study, these relationships were essential to helping summer learning programs access the resources and expertise needed to implement programs.

School leaders are especially important people for summer learning programs because they control needed resources and are influential in the broader school community. School leaders often manage use of space needed for programs; their willingness to open the doors for community-based organizations to run programs has been critical in some communities. Principals can help market programs to students and families. For example, in some schools the principal is the 'face' of the summer program to outside visitors and fields questions from families about summer activities. In one program, for example, the principal used her computerized phone system to send out calls to families of students announcing the summer programs. In other schools, the principal was instrumental in helping teachers overcome concerns about how their classrooms would be used and cared for by summer learning programs.

Good relationships with school administrators and teachers help afterschool programs gain knowledge that enables them to target youth that could benefit the most from summer learning opportunities. Sharing information about students among staff who observe children in different settings can help staff develop programming that will engage youth and help them grow.[4] At the same time, schools are required to protect confidential information about students, including individual achievement data. School staff with the authority to access that information must be willing use their authority to advise summer learning program staff on students, if summer staff are to match programs to student needs and interests more accurately. This is what happens in the Grass Valley School District, where the Superintendent's office plays an important role in facilitating communication between school and summer learning program staff regarding special education students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The BELL program works with district leaders and principals to identify youth at risk for not being promoted to the next grade level and focus on academic subjects in which they are at risk for failure. At the end of the summer BELL often provides principals a report on individual student progress and is sometimes involved in the decisions about student promotions.

Relationships with other school and district staff can also facilitate efforts to plan and implement summer learning programs. For example, in some communities, relationships between summer learning program staff and custodial staff have been critical to helping programs access and maintain space. In Grass Valley School District, the strong positive relationship between the district that administers the summer learning program and a private bus company has led the bus company to continue transportation contracts through the summer months. If not for this relationship, the program would be unable to bus students home from the summer program, a critical service to families in this rural district.

Afterschool and summer programs have devised a wide range of strategies to cultivate relationships with school staff. This year, leaders at most Children's Aid

Society sites offered a variety of teacher appreciation events, starting with kickoff events at the start of the school year. To attract teachers to the events they provided inexpensive incentives, like chalk and bagels. In addition, joint professional development with Children's Aid staff and school year teachers aimed to help staff get to know one another better. In programs in Baltimore and Providence, summer program staff send out a newsletter to school year staff about their programming. In Arcata, California teachers who are around during out of school time develop an appreciation for the summer program's cooking activities when they receive muffins and other treats. Teachers in the Chicago Public Schools can share personal passions and showcase their talents to youth, like sewing, karate, or music, during after school hours by starting a club as part of the After-school All-stars program and bring this excitement into their summer classrooms. Whether through formal communications or through strategies such as sharing the bounty that the youth produce, these deliberate efforts have made a difference to forge critical relationships.

## Developing and Maintaining Partnerships in the Community

Partnerships with community organizations are an integral to sustaining strong links between summer programming and schools because partner organizations often provide services to youth across school, afterschool and summer settings. Program linkages to schools help programs coordinate services so that they are designed to meet the learning needs of students, but coordination across settings is also critical. Community partners at the sites we visited were involved in all aspects of programming, from planning, to helping identify resources, to providing specific programming.

Many of the summer sites included in this review have year-round efforts to integrate planning efforts and share resources across institutional barriers (e.g., school districts, county health, parks and recreation departments) to benefit their youth and communities. Some sites are community schools that stay open throughout the school year and that offer multiple programs and services, not just summer learning programming, on site. The Children's Aid Society is one of the most established efforts of this kind and has operated summer programming that is connected to the school and afterschool settings, offers access to a health clinic, and connects with family outreach and support for over 17 years.

A number of programs use partnerships to help coordinate planning. The Grass Valley School District consults a community partnership board in its planning process. The board includes a number of social service agencies, youth-serving organizations, and local government agencies. The meetings of the partnership are an important source of ideas for what new programs are needed, says the director of the summer learning program there. A similar collaborative exists in Wheatland School District, where agency representatives meet to plan the program each year and divide responsibilities for implementing components that align to the mission and capacity of the partnering organizations.

Community partners are an important source of potential staff. Several programs that we observed hired college students, AmeriCorps volunteers, and youth who were available at either no or little cost to programs. Programs can develop relationships with staff at local universities that can help recruit well qualified college students (who may be studying a related field) who have schedules that align with the needs of school, afterschool, and summer programs. Students can often work year round and may even become permanent staff. The director of the Pine Hill Elementary School's summer program was able to identify Americorps members who did not yet have summer placements through her participation on an Americorps grant committee in her community; this connection provided her with additional summer staffing at no additional cost. Through that partnership, she was able to engage volunteers for her program. At Keep Kids Learning, Teach for America helps staff summer programs. In both communities, these organizations provide training to staff, which ranges from teaching staff how to plan and administer educational programs for youth to observing teaching and reviewing lesson plans.

Partners are also critical in mobilizing support for programs in the community and identifying potential sources of funding. For example, in some communities, individuals who sat on boards of multiple organizations and who were connected to local summer learning programs made sure that program leaders knew about available funding sources for their activities.

## Future Directions: Building the Field of Summer Learning

Overviews of the goals, challenges, and innovations of linked summer programs such as the ones featured in this JGC Issue Brief contribute to building a field of

summer learning. By "field," we mean a community of practitioners, intermediary organizations, policy makers, and researchers all dedicated to the goal of improving access to quality linked summer learning programs. Such a field is emerging, supported by the funding from government agencies, private foundations, and businesses and by advocacy and technical assistance from key intermediary organizations. This study in particular was supported by two organizations that are advancing this work, the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) and the Bay Area Partnership, and our findings are consistent with recommendations made in a recent report by the NSLA.[5]

In the area of policy-relevant research, however, there is a need for development, if the field is to continue to build. Although there do exist some experimental and quasi-experimental impact studies of particular programs that find positive impacts on achievement, including two of the programs included in this Issue Brief, the measured impacts fall short of closing the achievement gaps between low-income and more advantaged students.[6] More studies are needed to measure impacts on achievement and that compare different models for using summer learning programs to close achievement gaps.

Beyond experimental impact studies, needed is research on supports needed to scale summer learning programs can help spread effective program models. Such research needs to focus on the processes by which programs grow and adapt in response to the changing circumstances of their local communities, not just on their current features. In addition, researchers conducting experimental studies of impact should include measures of program processes and settings into their studies, in order to identify the "active ingredients" of successful programs. At present, the research base provides little conclusive evidence of what those active ingredients are.[7] To do so, the field will need to incorporate common measures of program settings, such as the Youth Program Quality Assessment or the Assessing Afterschool Program Practices Tool. Additional measures may also need to be developed to match the particular goals of programs and to assess the coherence of sites' program offerings.[8]

Ideally, these measures will be ones that programs can use to plan and evaluate their programs. Capacity for program planning and evaluation is a challenge identified in the field of summer learning, so technical assistance focused on use of data will be needed. Initiatives such as the JGC's Youth Data Archive may be of use to collaboratives seeking to target programming to address the particular needs of youth in their communities. The Youth Data Archive is a systems-based initiative that allows school districts, city and county agencies and youth-serving organizations to ask critical questions about youth and how their organizations collectively work to achieve positive outcomes for youth and community, using datasets drawn from multiple sources about individuals, settings, and institutions. When datasets from initiatives such as the Youth Data Archive include specific data on program practices and settings, they may be of great value to programs in self-identifying what kinds of activities are associated with improvements in outcomes for students. In addition, these analyses would help the field better understand the key ingredients of successful summer learning programs.

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