



URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL

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Leadership Brief: Libraries Expanding Summer Opportunities

Overview

All school-aged children need opportunities during the summer to continue thinking and learning, to develop new skills, and build their confidence so that they return to school ready to succeed. The need is particularly acute for children from lower-income families who have fewer opportunities for summer learning and are more likely to lose academic ground when they are out of school.

Public libraries are emerging as key leaders in closing the summer opportunity gap by moving beyond traditional summer *reading* to more integrated, intentional summer *learning* programs that focus on a variety of academic and developmental areas. Libraries bring significant assets to summer learning, such as:

- A trusted, inclusive atmosphere with safe and flexible opportunities to read, create, discover, and explore
- Experience delivering summer reading programs
- Access to and experience using diverse learning resources and approaches
- Deep community connections to support summer learning inside the library, at schools, and other accessible places
- Special rapport with parents and families to encourage engagement in their children's summer learning

This Leadership Brief focuses on the progressive work of public libraries in providing summer learning programs that develop students' skills while maintaining the flexibility of active learning that is unique to the library experience. It provides models of summer learning that emerged from the *Accelerate Summer* research, examples of successful programs, and five action strategies to help libraries become even stronger summer learning leaders.

About this Leadership Brief

This Leadership Brief highlights the growing role of public libraries as leaders in summer learning. It builds on the findings of the *Accelerate Summer* strategic partnership between the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) and the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.



national summer
learning association

The Need for Summer Learning Opportunities

"Can you imagine cellist Yo-Yo Ma or basketball star LeBron James going for three months without practicing their craft?," asked Dr. Kevin Maxwell, Chief Executive Officer of the Prince George's County Public Schools, as he joined other county leaders to launch *Summer @*

Your Library, a collaboration of **Prince George's County Memorial Library System** and the school system. "Kids can't put their books down for three months and expect to keep up."¹

Without meaningful learning opportunities, summer becomes a time of risk for students, particularly those from lower-income households.

“In almost every community or neighborhood, the public library is a bedrock institution that plays a critical role in keeping kids of all ages safe and productively engaged during the summer months.”

—Sarah Pitcock, CEO
National Summer Learning Association

Research has shown that:

- Unequal access to summer learning during elementary school accounts for up to two-thirds of the achievement gap between ninth-grade students from lower- and higher-income households.²
- Children in lower-income homes who don’t regularly participate in summer learning programs may be at least two years behind their peers by the time they reach fifth grade.³
- Summer learning programs with high-quality instructors and parental involvement can mitigate summer learning loss and even produce learning gains.⁴

Public libraries are addressing these issues by working closely with schools and other partners to reach and engage students most in need of learning opportunities to help them make the most of their summers.

Library Summer Learning Models that Expand Opportunities

ULC and NSLA’s *Accelerate Summer* research identified several existing models for library summer learning programs that are making a difference.

- **Summer Reading PLUS.** Incentive-based summer reading programs are enhanced by also awarding credits and prizes for participation in STEM; connected learning; and other inquiry-based, active learning activities. These programs allow participants to engage in activities at the library or at home and link these experiences with reading material. Activities could include visiting a museum, cooking a meal at home, writing a letter, or working in a library maker space.
- **Skill-based, drop-in learning activities.** These programs emphasize flexible opportunities for learning on a time-available basis rather than

requiring enrollment in a full-time, five- or six-week camp. Libraries are particularly experienced at offering productive drop-in and self-directed summer learning experiences with learning goals so that participants gain knowledge and skills while having fun.

- **Focused enrollment programs.** Libraries are also offering enrollment-based programs that address specific learning outcomes (early literacy, grade-level reading, STEM learning, etc.) and are targeted for youth and families who do not have access to other educational support.

To support their summer learning approaches, libraries are creating partnerships with key community resources including:

- **Museums, zoos, aquariums, and national parks** to draw on subject-matter expertise, organize group trips, and get family-pack tickets as incentive prizes for summer learning participants
- **Schools and school districts** to identify student participants, promote summer learning programs, align programming, and share data to demonstrate learning gains
- **City and county government** to align programming with education networks and departments (e.g., parks and recreation), share data, and increase awareness of the library’s education role
- **Local businesses** to recruit professional volunteers and mentors and to provide funding and incentive prizes for summer reading and learning achievement
- **Nonprofits and community-based organizations** to leverage expertise and community connections and maximize program offerings

NSLA’s High-Quality Practices Embodied by Library Summer Learning Programs:⁵

- Inquiry-based learning
- Program spirit
- Collaboration and leadership
- Skill-building and encouragement
- Belonging
- Displaying youth work

Library Summer Learning in Action

Summer Reading PLUS

Saint Paul Public Library's *Summer Spark!* invites participants to “have fun, stay active, and keep learning all summer long.” Participants earn points toward prizes for reading and completing learning activities such as following a recipe to help make dinner, making a collage, going to an event at the library, and other activities that can be completed at the library, at home, and in the community.

Broward County Library sets summer learning goals for four age groups—preschool, children, teens, and adults—and encourages participants to use an online program to track their progress. Participants earn points toward medals for completing challenges such as attending events, downloading learning resources, engaging in family-reading sessions, accessing databases, and completing required back-to-school activities.

Ottawa Public Library aims to inspire a sense of adventure and wonder, nurture children’s imaginations, and celebrate their accomplishments through their *TD Summer Reading Club*, a Canadian national program supported by TD Bank Group. Youth have the opportunity to “Go Wild” and participate in programming featuring arts and crafts, dance, games, illusions, performing, science, sports, stories, technology, and much more.

Skill-based drop-in programs

Chicago Public Library's *Rahm's Readers Summer Learning Challenge* designs its activities around the Framework for 21st Century Learning Skills⁶ and incorporates three STEM/STEAM learning tracks—read, discover, create—through a partnership with the Museum of Science and Industry. Chicago Public Library was awarded the first-ever Founder’s Award for Excellence in Summer Learning in 2015 for its efforts to accelerate academic achievement and promote healthy development for low-income children and youth.

“Libraries are uniquely positioned to OWN summer learning and to do so in a way that is community appropriate and assures equity.”

—Steven V. Potter, Library Director and CEO
Mid-Continent Public Library

Fort Worth Library's *Worth Reading* is a community-wide program aimed at getting children, youth, and adults engaged in reading and learning all year long. During the summer, the program uses activity templates that are aligned with the state curriculum standards in English language arts, reading, and science to build related skills for young participants.

Focused enrollment programs

New Haven Free Public Library works with schools in their branch neighborhoods to identify struggling kindergarten through third-grade readers to enroll in their *READY for the Grade* summer learning program. With support from the New Alliance Foundation, the library provides twice-a-week group tutoring sessions and once-a-week family nights with dinner and individual tutoring during a seven-week program designed to improved reading proficiency.

District of Columbia Public Library offers *Science in the Summer*, a four-day, one-hour-per-day STEM course taught in the library by certified teachers. The program is designed for elementary school students who enroll at no charge and follow a curriculum developed by its funder, Glaxo Smith Kline, in partnership with the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Students are assigned books in connection with the class work, which involves experiments, and a workbook for use at home.

New York Public Library's *Literacy Leaders* program trains high-school students to be literacy tutors through a credit-earning course and then employs them to work with struggling first- and second-grade readers during a seven-week summer session.

The Free Library of Philadelphia initiated *Back-to-School Jumpstart Camps* as a component of the library-convened citywide *Read! By 4th* program. The library provides the Jumpstart Camps during the last three weeks in August to bolster kids’ enthusiasm for school while building literacy skills.

Five Strategies for Adopting a Summer Learning Approach

- 1. Engage team members across the library.** Transitioning from a long-time summer reading program to summer learning requires a cultural shift in how the library designs and delivers educational programming. Involving both library leaders and branch staff in planning and implementing summer learning programs

can bring in new perspectives and approaches while communicating the value, impact, and expectations of the library's summer learning approach.

2. Connect summer reading and other library services.

A summer learning approach can be built around activities that the library already does well, such as offering family reading programs, opening maker spaces, hosting special events and speakers, and creating opportunities for older youth to volunteer or work as program leaders to gain job skills. Libraries are also summer hubs for services that students might not receive when schools are closed, such as free meals.

3. Start planning in September. As soon as students head back to school, start planning for the following summer while information, feedback, and new ideas for strengthening the program are fresh. Moving from a reading to a learning focus, building new partnerships, or implementing new software programs to track participation takes time. Early planning and promoting allows staff members to try out new ideas and gives families time to get ready for summer learning.

4. Initiate and cultivate partnerships with schools, museums, and other partners. Connecting with organizations in the community that are also providing learning and enrichment opportunities can help reach more students, provide expertise in new content areas, and offer a cost-effective way to expand learning opportunities. Establishing

shared learning goals strengthens partnerships and provides incentives to exchange achievement data to demonstrate program effectiveness.

Partnership agreements help to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clearly spelled out.

5. Plan programming with clear learning goals. To ensure that students are not losing ground during the summer, programs that reinforce content knowledge, build skills, and link to academic standards will have the greatest impact. Strong partnerships with educators and school districts are needed to ensure that summer learning programs support academic standards. Programs can also be designed to help students acquire important 21st-century skills, such as problem solving, leadership, digital literacy, and teamwork.

Libraries Owning Summer Learning

Now is the time for library leaders to drive the transition from traditional, transactional summer reading to more integrated and intentional library summer learning programs. This is an exciting time for libraries, as they continue to take a more central role in the education landscape and forge partnerships with educational institutions and community organizations to ensure that no students fall behind. Libraries are owning summer learning in their communities by serving as transformative leaders, drawing on their resources, technology, and relationship platforms to ensure summer learning programs that help close achievement gaps.

¹ Maxwell, Kevin. Remarks at an event launching *Summer @ Your Library*, Largo-Kettering Branch, Prince George's County Memorial Library System, June 8, 2016.

² Alexander, Karl L., Doris R. Entwisle, and Linda Steffel Olson. "Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap." *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 2 (2007): 167-180. doi:10.1177/000312240707200202.

³ McCombs, Jennifer S., Catherine H. Augustine, Heather L. Schwartz, Susan J. Bodilly, Brian McInnis, Dahlia S. Lichter, and Amanda B. Cross, *Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ David P. Weikart Center and National Summer Learning Association, *Summer Learning Program Quality Intervention*, accessed at <http://cypq.org/summerlearningpqi>.

⁶ P21 Partnership for 21st Century Learning, *Framework for 21st Century Learning*, accessed at <http://www.p21.org/our-work/p21-framework>.

⁷ National Summer Learning Association, *2015 New York Life Excellence in Summer Learning Awards* (Baltimore, MD: National Summer Learning Association, 2015).

The Accelerate Summer strategic partnership between the Urban Libraries Council and the National Summer Learning Association, funded in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (Grant Number: LG-07-14-0154-14), involved a scan of library summer learning programs, including a survey completed by 90 ULC members, observation site visits with eight member libraries, and interviews with additional libraries. Findings from this initiative can be found on the ULC website at <http://www.urbanlibraries.org/summer-learning-pages-309.php>

The Urban Libraries Council (ULC) is the premier membership organization for North America's leading public library systems. For more information, please visit www.urbanlibraries.org.

The National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) is the leading authority on summer learning and is the only national nonprofit exclusively focused on closing the achievement gap through high-quality summer learning for all children and youth. For more information, please visit www.summerlearning.org.