

## Summer Programs Shine

### Award Winners Rise to the Top Among a Record Number of Applicants

Each summer, when many schools close their doors, other programs come alive, offering engaging summer learning opportunities for youth. Among those programs, some excel, accelerating academic achievement and promoting positive youth development for young people between kindergarten and 12th grade. Each year, in a competitive process that draws applications from across the country, the National Center for Summer Learning organizes the Excellence in Summer Learning Award competition.

The award is based on an application and interview process that elicits information on a program's history, mission, goals, operation, management, staff development,



Students at Hasbro engage in hands-on learning.

partnerships, results, and sustainability. A selection committee, consisting of Center board and staff members, past winners, and other experts in the field, reviews applications based on a framework that focuses on nine characteristics of effective summer learning programs, as outlined in this bulletin.

This year, the selection committee chose three awardees from a total of 80 applicants. The recipients of this year's Excellence Award are: Bridges to a Brighter Future at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina; Energy Express, West Virginia University Extension Service; and Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative in western Massachusetts.

The award winners demonstrate overall excellence, and each brings special strengths, but all have demonstrated excellence in developing partnerships with outside organizations to maximize impact and outreach.

- Bridges to a Brighter Future partners with Furman University and the Greenville County School District, as well as a variety of nonprofits, businesses, and volunteers.
- Energy Express builds upon the support of AmeriCorps, a federal program that provides members to meet critical community needs in education, and partners with numerous state and local organizations and agencies.
- Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative partners with the Western Massachusetts Out-of-School-Time Network (WestMOST), public schools, private colleges and local arts organizations to hire professional educators and artists as literacy and curriculum specialists to provide technical assistance to programs.

"Choosing Excellence Award winners has become very challenging and that's a good challenge to have," said Ron Fairchild, executive director of the National Center for Summer Learning. "We can hold these programs up as models of what summer programs can accomplish, show real-world illustrations of how they help young people,

and offer them as tangible examples that can inspire and motivate others."

This year's Excellence in Summer Learning Awards are generously sponsored by Scholastic After School Learning.

#### Characteristics of Effective Summer Learning Programs

##### Approach to Learning

1. Intentional focus on accelerating learning
2. Firm commitment to youth development
3. Proactive approach to summer learning

##### Program Infrastructure

4. Strong, empowering leadership
5. Advanced, collaborative planning
6. Extensive opportunities for staff development
7. Strategic partnerships
8. Rigorous approach to evaluation and commitment to program improvement
9. Clear focus on sustainability and cost-effectiveness

From the Center's publication *Making the Most of Summer*, a handbook on effective summer programming and thematic learning.

# Program Bridges the Gap, Offers Life-Changing Opportunities

## Bridges to a Brighter Future

Location: Furman University,  
Greenville, South Carolina

Youth Served Annually: 77

Participant to Staff Ratio: 8:1

Participant Age: 10th through 12th grade

Each summer, about 75 low income, academically promising teenagers come to Furman University for four-weeks of learning, life-changing experiences, and fun.

The students are part of Bridges to a Brighter Future, an engaging academic enrichment program that has helped 100 percent of participants graduate from high school and 93 percent of them enroll in college—an impressive accomplishment given that South Carolina has one of the nation's lowest graduation rates.

The students live in Furman dorms and take classes in math, English, social studies, science, and art and electives, such as music and video production, pottery, watercolor and improv theatre. Students take classes from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. four days a week, taught by Greenville County master teachers; almost all of the teachers have been selected as Teacher of the Year.

On Wednesdays, first-year students take field trips to area locations that most have never visited before, such as the Greenville County Museum of Art. In addition, rising juniors and seniors get the opportunity to tour about five to seven colleges every summer. Weekends are a mix of fun and community service with movies on Friday nights, community service on Saturdays, and outings to the roller rink, bowling alley, or teen center on Saturday nights. Parents visit on Sundays and students enjoy pool parties on Sunday afternoons.

Bridges began in 1997 after a Greenville woman read a news magazine article about a program that bridged the gap between dreams and reality for economically or culturally challenged students. Her gift formed an endowment for Bridges. Students come from families that earn less than \$35,000 a year, and 78 percent of their parents have a high school education or less. Students spend three summers at Bridges, starting as rising sophomores and staying until they are seniors. The program doesn't end when school begins again in the fall. Support continues with Saturday College, in which students return to Furman once a month for tutoring, college planning, workshops, and activities.

"We are extremely proud to be recognized by the National Center for Summer Learning with this award," said Tobi Swartz, who has been the director of Bridges for five years. "Bridges is a holistic program. Our foundational core is academic enrichment, but we do a lot outside the classroom to address personal and emotional development. Living on campus is transformational. Many of our students do not have stable home environments; coming to a place with structure, three meals a day and people who care about them is life-changing."

### Programs Get Results with Methods That Work

Research shows that students fall an average of almost 2.6 months behind in math skills, and low-income children fall behind an average of two months in reading while their middle-income peers tend to make slight gains. In fact, 65 percent of the achievement gap between poor and more advantaged ninth-graders can be explained by unequal summer learning experiences during the elementary school years. Those losses accumulate, widening the academic achievement gap between richer and poorer.

"These programs are all excellent examples of educational innovation that closes the achievement gap," said Ron Fairchild, executive director of the National Center for Summer Learning. "They all build academic success, as well as self-confidence, leadership, resiliency and life skills within a culture of high expectations. These programs can serve as models for other communities seeking to improve educational outcomes, particularly for low-income children."



*Bridges to a Brighter Future propels students on to graduation and academic success.*

# Popular Program Energizes Minds and Bodies

## Energy Express, West Virginia University Extension Service

Location: 83 sites this summer

Youth Served Annually: 2,731

Participant to Staff Ratio: 8:1

Participant Age: Entering first through 6th grade

Energy Express began in 1994 as a way to address the reading loss and nutritional decline experienced by low-income children during the summer. Since then, it has grown from two sites serving 85 children to 83 sites that will serve some 3,000 children when the program begins its 16th year this June, said Energy Express Director Ruthellen Phillips.

“We’re thrilled with the increase and we know it’s because people are starting to understand the significance of summer learning,” Phillips said. “This is a partnership. This program could not exist without the cooperation of many partners at the state and local level.” Those partners include community action groups, faith- and community-based organizations, libraries, family resource networks, national service programs, and parent-teacher organizations, as well as more than 3,400 volunteers.

Energy Express is designed to prevent learning loss during the long summer break, particularly among low-income students. The program is located in communities where the need is great: at all schools, at least 50 percent of enrolled children are eligible for free and reduced-cost meals, with many sites having eligibility rates that range from 80 to 95 percent. Preference goes to children who are eligible for these meals, are struggling with reading, or need a safe summer environment.

A typical day at Energy Express begins with a family-style breakfast and ends with lunch—and AmeriCorps members involved in the program help make the meals a learning experience designed to encourage responsibility, cooperation, and communication. In between those meals, the AmeriCorps members and community volunteers work with groups of eight children to create an environment that makes reading meaningful in their lives.



*Energy Express incorporates art and reading across a diverse curriculum.*

The curriculum consists of six weekly themes: myself, family, friends, homeplace, community, and making my world a better place. Each day, the children complete a variety of activities related to the theme that includes creating books, reading aloud and silently, reading one-on-one with others, writing and performing plays, and writing in journals. Every child also receives a weekly take-home book based on the theme and art is integrated into many activities.

During the fifth and sixth weeks, the children work on a community service project. In the past, they have read stories and performed plays for senior citizens, written and illustrated books donated to public schools or hospital libraries, and written and recorded radio public service announcements about the importance of reading.

Research shows the program is working. For example:

- The average child gains three to five months in broad reading achievement.
- In 2008, 21 percent of the children enrolled in the program had an Individual Education Plan and the average child with an IEP gained 1.5 months in broad reading achievement.
- Participants received 58 percent of their daily nutritional requirements.

During the summer months, children risk falling behind when it comes to literacy skills if they don’t continue to read and learn,” said Phillips. “Energy Express has a measurable impact on preventing the summer learning slide.”

# Initiative Reaches Out to Boost Skills and Program Quality

## Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative

Location: 40 programs in western Massachusetts this summer

Youth Served Annually: 2,500

Participant to Staff Ratio: 10:1

Participant Age: Kindergarten through 12th grade

If you were to walk into a HSLI program site this summer, this is what you would see: Children crafting original poems into theater performance, youth testing water quality at a local pond, and children putting their poetry to hip-hop drum rhythms and recording their artistic expressions onto CDs. This summer, the Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative (HSLI), working in partnership with the Western Massachusetts Out-of-School-Time Network (WestMOST), will enhance summer experiences for more than 3,000 children in the Pioneer Valley region of western Massachusetts. A majority of the children come from low-income households and live in urban or rural communities or where quality after-school and summer programs are often under-funded.

The Initiative, administered by the United Way of Pioneer Valley, supports a network of about 40 after-school and summer programs, by providing engaging, thematic curriculum, literacy supports, and technical assistance from curriculum and literacy specialists in a focused effort to improve the programs' overall quality. HSLI particularly strives to stem summer reading loss. In 2009, the Initiative will hire teachers from local public schools with expertise in literacy and reading recovery as literacy specialists and train students from the Smith College Department of Education as full-time interns to support this expanded focus on literacy in at least 15 program sites.

The Initiative offers eight experiential curricula from which programs can choose, each providing at least six weeks of activities that meet state educational standards. In January, programs select the curricula that best fit their populations and missions, giving staff members six months to train and plan for implementation. Programs that have used HSLI's curricula have reported that children



*Hasbro provides about 40 programs with the resources they need to run quality programs, including training and engaging curricula.*

and youth are more engaged, attendance has improved, and families and program staff are more satisfied.

Some of the programs that are enhanced by HSLI's curricula, training, and technical support are traditional youth-serving organizations such as YMCAs and Boys & Girls Clubs, community-based organizations such as the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center, school-based programs such as Citizen Schools and 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and day and residential camps such as Girl Scouts. Each serves a diverse population of children ages 5 to 18, largely from low-income families.

HSLI is generously supported by the Hasbro Corporation, Nellie Mae Education Foundation, United Way of Pioneer Valley, the Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation, Mass Mutual Group, and United Bank. HSLI leverages support in the community to increase the quality of summer programs and increase access to these learning opportunities. Last year, HSLI raised \$95,000 in its Summer Fund for camp scholarships for children and apprenticeships for teens. In HSLI's Teen Apprenticeship Program, high school youth work in HSLI sites for 10 weeks during the summer. The teens receive intensive training from HSLI and work in a supported work environment. For their work, they receive a \$1,600 stipend.

"The apprenticeship allows these youth to get exposed to potential careers in youth development, and to learn important work skills," said Sheila Petigny, HSLI project coordinator. "And the stipend is very helpful, not just to the youth but also to their families."

As part of the HSLI curriculum, participating programs are encouraged to hold a culminating performance for families and friends. Last summer's events included theater and hip-hop performances, family fitness nights, and Outdoor Adventure overnight camping expeditions where parents joined in the final campfire activity.

"We are honored to receive this award from the National Center for Summer Learning," Petigny said. "The Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative approach to learning works because it is research-based and also a lot of fun."



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