

NATIONAL SUMMER LEARNING ASSOCIATION

# spark!

No.2

Highlighting Best Practices in Summer Learning

*In this issue:*

## CREATING A SUMMER OPPORTUNITY PORTFOLIO

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## Summer learning programs have a unique and powerful impact on students that is different from any other educational experience.

At its best, summer learning is an artful blend of core academic exploration, hands-on activities, skill-building, arts, sports, and meaningful relationships. Compared to the school day when academic themes and pathways are often determined by adults, summer is a time when students can explore topics of interest to them with deep

intensity, from robotics and coding to arts and cooking. Students who have fallen behind academically can focus on developing or refining the critical skills needed to advance toward graduating on-time, college and career ready. Participation in summer even has a positive impact on student attendance in the following school year. Students go back to school more engaged and ready to learn.

Yet far too many communities struggle to provide the right mix of summer opportunities that keep young people of all ages safe, healthy and engaged in learning across a variety of community settings. With limited resources, many communities place a heavy emphasis on one signature program model instead of a portfolio of opportunities. Here, we discuss the wide range of summer opportunities that systems can support, from early literacy to health to summer jobs. In the companion brief, *Building Community Systems for Summer Learning*, we offer suggestions for building a coordinated, cross-sector system for summer opportunities at the community level.

### WHY TAKE A PORTFOLIO APPROACH TO SUMMER?

Summer happens each and every year of a child's and young adult's life, and each summer is critical for a different reason. In the early grades, research shows that a focus on reading proficiency is critical to long term academic and career success. The summers that transition young people into and out of middle school have strong social-emotional implications as they learn to navigate new settings and expectations. In middle and high school, it is more important than ever to expose young people to their futures through experiences that inspire college and career interests and pursuits. And for many older youth, the need and desire to gain work experience and earn a wage is paramount. The reality, though, is that every child, family and community is different. When and where learning takes place in the summer varies widely, as do resources, facilities and local infrastructure for learning, meals and jobs. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach to summer, communities can benefit from creating a portfolio of summer opportunities, at a variety of price points, intensities and settings, that together offer choice and flexibility to parents, young people and educators. Then, they can use data to match young people with the best summer opportunity for their needs and interests.

**A community can offer a wide portfolio of summer opportunities for youth and families to choose from each year. Over multiple summers, a student will have collected a rich range of summer activities that vary as her needs and interests change and evolve.**



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## KEY SUMMER OPPORTUNITIES

Across the country, communities are making summer commitments to youth and investing in summer programs across five assurances to keep kids learning.



### 1 KEEP KIDS LEARNING TO GET LOST IN A BOOK

Grounded in research on summer learning loss and the power of supported reading activities, community-wide literacy initiatives have an immediate impact on academic achievement every summer. A community's portfolio of literacy resources may include summer school, school and public library programs, book distribution programs, family literacy workshops, e-learning platforms and one-on-one tutoring.

### 2 KEEP KIDS LEARNING TO FUEL THEIR MINDS AND BODIES

Access to subsidized meals and physical activity ensure that youth maintain healthy practices that are standardized during the school year. Communities can build a portfolio that includes open and closed summer meals sites, Food Bank weekend backpack programs, Police Athletic Leagues, school partnerships with parks and recreation centers and local hospitals, and "feeding and reading" programs like Lunch at the Library.

### 3 KEEP KIDS LEARNING THAT HARD WORK PAYS

Through formal summer youth employment and college preparation programs, young people invest in their own productive futures. Communities may include in-person and virtual STEM (and STEAM) mentoring programs, partnerships with community colleges to offer credit recovery and accelerated coursework, skill-based summer jobs programs linked to CTE or career pathway programs and college campus visits.

### 4 KEEP KIDS LEARNING ABOUT THE POWER OF TEAMS

Through community service and service learning, students invest themselves into the health of their own communities and learn powerful lessons about their own ability to make a difference. To facilitate mentoring relationships, communities can find "teammates" in traditional AmeriCorps or VISTA programs, from local businesses or in their retiree or 50+ communities through organizations like Encore.

### 5 KEEP KIDS LEARNING ANYTIME, ANYWHERE

Through a wide range of at-home and community-based technology resources, youth have access to learning opportunities wherever they spend their summer hours.

> **FOR EACH ASSURANCE, WE OFFER A CASE STUDY** of an exemplary summer program that reflects high quality practices and is achieving results for youth. These programs stand out for their incorporation of best practices and the results they are achieving for youth, but they are just a small selection of the kinds of programs and opportunities that make up a Summer Opportunity Portfolio for a child and for the community.

## 1

### KEEP KIDS LEARNING TO GET LOST IN A BOOK

#### > CHILLIN' & SKILLIN'

*Connecting for Children & Families, Woonsocket, Rhode Island*

Connecting for Children & Families (CCF) operates both a summer and afterschool program at the Kevin K. Coleman Elementary School (grades K through 5) in Woonsocket, RI. The program uses a collaborative model that engages CCF staff, the school principal, teachers and community partners. CCF provides a six-week summer program called Chillin' & Skillin', in addition to afterschool and school vacation activities.

Connecting for Children & Families and the Woonsocket Education Department (WED) have had a successful partnership for the last 15 years. The overall goal is to help students meet state and local student proficiency levels in core academic subjects, such as literacy, by offering students enrichment activities that can complement their regular academic programs.

CCF teaches six different core programs in the summer which include Oceanography, Environmental Science, Financial Literacy, Theater, Cooking and Art. Each of these sessions has components of literacy included in the curriculum. Literacy standards from the Common Core are integrated into each of these subject areas.

In the Theater session, students read scripts of plays and participate in writing their own scripts. In addition, they read, write and act out various forms of poetry. Theater games incorporate the use of language, expressing individual beliefs, and learning to work with others collaboratively.

Through ongoing partnership with the Woonsocket Harris Library, the children's librarian provides a tour of the library which includes all the resources the library has to offer to the students in Woonsocket. This includes information about research, the use of computers (a majority of students do not have home computers), requesting books from other libraries, etc. In addition, all the students are able to attend a library-sponsored summer showcase, and even a performance. During their visit to the library, each student is allowed to pick out a free book to take home. In addition, students are encouraged to come back to the library with their parents to sign up for library cards for their family.

To keep students engaged in literacy activity at home, the organization also partners with Books are Wings, a locally based non-profit whose mission is to put free books in the hands of children. They provide a book party for all the students with various literacy activities in which students may participate. After the party all 110 students are able to select one to two books for their personal home library.

Several of the core programs incorporate journal writing during their program time. In this way students are able to individualize the significance of what they are learning and how it affects them. They are also keeping an ongoing record of projects they are working on that they are able to take home at the end of the summer.

#### RESULTS

This robust and well-rounded range of literacy activities all contribute to Chillin' and Skillin's stellar results.

In 2015, as part of the Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative (HSLI) managed by United Way of Rhode Island, Chillin' & Skillin' students made excellent gains in literacy, based on the percent changes in pre-test to post-test scores administered to all HSLI participants.

In fact, 50 percent of children enrolled in the summer program made progress in literacy, well above the 15 percent statewide average of all summer programs in HSLI.

Of the students served last year, 100 percent were promoted to the next grade.



# 2

## KEEP KIDS LEARNING TO FUEL THEIR MINDS AND BODIES

### > ENERGY EXPRESS

West Virginia University Extension Service

In 1994, West Virginia University Extension Service's 4-H Youth Development program launched Energy Express as an effort to address reading loss and nutritional decline experienced during the summer months by children living in rural and low-income communities. Without school breakfast and lunch, many children lose nutritional well-being during the summer, while also experiencing a dearth of structured learning opportunities.

In 2015, Energy Express operated 71 sites in 34 West Virginia counties, reaching nearly 3000 children. Local school systems and non-profit agencies serve as Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sponsors with contracts through the West Virginia Department of Education's Office of Child Nutrition. Funding for the SFSP comes from the United States Department of Agriculture.

Partners such as community-based and faith-based organizations, libraries, family resource networks, service programs, and parent-teacher organizations extend the reach of the program to even the most rural corners of the state, where low-income youth and families have the hardest time accessing service, especially during the summer months when school is out of session.

A typical day at Energy Express starts with a family-style shared breakfast and ends with lunch. These nutritious meals become important learning experiences as children learn to make choices, assume responsibility, cooperate, and participate in group discussions.

For the rest of the day, AmeriCorps members and community volunteers work with small groups of students (8 or fewer) on meaningful literacy activities. The thematic curriculum includes creating books, reading aloud silently, reading one-on-one and with others, writing and performing plays, and writing in journals. Each child also receives a weekly take-home book based on the theme.



### RESULTS

The program is closing significant gaps in both nutrition and literacy for students across the state. In 2015:

92,928 meals were served to children participating in the program, with an additional 17,976 meals served to other community youth.

17,976 books were distributed to take home.

Students made significant increases in letter-word identification, reading fluency, passage comprehension and broad reading.

74 percent of children maintained or increased reading achievement in broad reading achievement.

The average child increased 2.8 months in broad reading achievement.

### > DC SCORES

Washington, DC

DC SCORES builds teams for 1,450 low-income DC youth by instilling self-expression, physical fitness, and a sense of community. DC SCORES provides an innovative, year-round model combining poetry and spoken word, soccer, and service-learning.

In 1999, DC SCORES developed the six-week Summer Arts & Soccer Camps for 3rd – 8th grade youth to align with the school-year program. These camps provide participants with engaging opportunities to combat the summer fitness and learning loss so prevalent in at-risk youth. According to recent data, 1 in every 3 children in DC is overweight or obese. Yet few DC youth are active for the 60 minutes per day that is recommended in multiple federal and local guidelines and policies. Physical education classes have been increasingly reduced or eliminated in public schools. These challenges are exacerbated during the summer. Physical education classes assist in maintaining some level of activity during the nine-month school year, and the absence of these classes can result in a 'summer slide' that echoes the summer learning loss so prevalent among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. According to recent research, the gap between the Body Mass Index (BMI) increases of African-American and Hispanic children and the BMI increases of white children largely occurs in the summer. Conversely, youth who are involved in organized summer activities are significantly less likely to be at risk for obesity in the following school year irrespective of age.

Camp provides students with daily soccer exercise, high-quality arts instruction, and the opportunity to explore the city of Washington and its many cultural institutions and organizations.

Each week, a different artist implements a series of workshops around one arts discipline. Content ranges from acting to puppet-making, and step-dancing to poetry. At 3:30 pm, after a nutritious snack, the students transition to the soccer portion of the camp where they maintain and improve their physical fitness, sharpen their soccer skills, and gain familiarity with concepts like teamwork, leadership, commitment and integrity. On the soccer field, students are given more responsibility and leadership opportunities, as they become camp veterans, leading team-building activities, soccer drills, and goal setting sessions for younger campers. Students are picked up at 6:30 pm, so in total each day they receive three hours in the classroom, three hours of physical activity, and two meals. Three additional weeks of soccer-only camps focus on teamwork, leadership, and commitment, DC SCORES' core values.

As a SCORES alum noted after starting at Duke: "SCORES isn't just some program. It's a family, a community that never leaves you... The skills and tools you take away from SCORES help you in the future in ways you can't even imagine..."

### RESULTS

In summer 2013, DC SCORES served 200 youth ages 8-15 from all Wards of the District, and representing a mix of students from 42 participating elementary and middle schools. Forty-percent of summer program participants were girls.

The program conducts cardiovascular assessments using the FitnessGram, and conducts a pre- and post-format from campers in a survey that assesses participants' sense of self-worth and sense of belonging.

DC SCORES has a demonstrable impact on preparedness, self-esteem, and student behavior. The majority of 2012 summer camp participants agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- In the program this summer, I had fun (89%)
- I learned something new (68%)
- I feel comfortable making and reaching goals for myself (82%)
- I felt safe (75%)
- The coaches made me feel welcome and respected (89%)
- The counselors made me feel welcome and respected (86%)
- I made new friends (82%)
- I would like to come back again next summer (86%)

**> MONTGOMERY COUNTY TEENWORKS***Montgomery County, Maryland*

TeenWorks is a year-round employment program for Montgomery County students who are at least 15 years old and still in high school. Teens are employed by Montgomery County Recreation and placed in public sector and non-profit jobs throughout the county. The program was founded as part of an initiative to use Positive Youth Development practices to address issues of gang activity and youth violence in specific locations in Montgomery County, Maryland. Youth employment was recognized as a critical strategy to head off gang violence, juvenile crime, and truancy issues. Surveys of youth revealed that those who wanted to work found few opportunities, and jobs required workplace skills that youth had not developed.



Summer participants are placed on one of several Teams: KID Museum, Special Events, Conservation Jobs Corps, Food Fun and Fitness sites, or Apprenticeship. The different programs represent different levels of opportunity. The highly structured and supervised Maryland Park Service conservation corps features a small staff to participant ratio – 5 to 7 youth on a crew with a crew leader and direct supervision for the entire day, working on a County parks project. Other youth are placed in more independent or traditional job roles, such as camp counselors, museum program leaders, and county agency office staff.

The variety of job placements offer youth a chance to learn a wide variety of skills, tailored to their own interests. Camp and museum staffers learn to be role models for younger students. Agency and business jobs teach universal administrative office skills. Other jobs provide a chance for meaningful practice and certifications, such as CPR, environmental science, and water quality testing. Students who complete a lifeguarding certification are placed at the county aquatics program in high-demand jobs that youth often are able to maintain for several years. To prepare for their future beyond the program, all participants receive instruction in resume writing, office etiquette, customer service, professionalism, safety on the job, teamwork, and excellence in the workplace.

One of the most important skills participants learn is money management. Youth are set up with direct deposit of their wages into savings accounts, gaining real-world practice in money management and savings.

Because students are low-income, they are provided meals through the Summer Food Service Program and are able to save more money they would otherwise spend on food.

These placements in meaningful work roles allow youth to develop critical, marketable skills and establish a strong initial work history that better positions them to take charge of their own employment pathway going forward. After successfully completing 300 hours of service, TeenWorks Graduates receive a certificate of completion and a positive letter of reference.

**RESULTS**

**Each year since its initial launch in July 2012, the program has served approximately 100 students with 240 – 300 hours of work experience.**

**In addition to their summer hours, students can work up to 4 hours each weekday or 8 hours on weekend days during the school year. Participants earn minimum wage in meaningful work roles, which allow them to develop critical, marketable skills for future employment.**

**Each year the program “graduates” the current class and takes on a new class of 100 students, ensuring that participants take responsibility for their own future after an intensive year of training, support, resume-building, and meaningful work experience.**

**> FORWARD AND ONWARD TO COLLEGE. UPWARD TO SUCCESS (FOCUS) SUMMER SLAM***Lyford Cay Foundation, The Bahamas*

Lyford Cay Foundation, Inc. targets students who will be the first generation in their family to achieve a post-secondary education. FOCUS was launched in 2011 as an out-of-school-time program aimed at college readiness and access. It is professionally managed and facilitated, with additional support from volunteers.

The core of the FOCUS summer, afterschool, and Saturday programming is its long-view concentration on postsecondary education access and success for students who will be first-generation college attendees. The fact that it is an eight-year program with year-round components demonstrates in practice to students and their families that it is committed to staying engaged over the long haul to attain these goals. This begins with the application process. A variety of family communications strategies sustain that engagement and support participant retention. Other practices, including free tuition, transportation and meals, as well as project-based learning, complement the communications strategy.

FOCUS recruits enthusiastic Grade 4 students from the Northwest Public School District in New Providence who will be the first in their family to go to college and supports them on an eight-year-long journey to attaining a post-secondary education.

The program partners with parents, teachers and schools to assist its students in achieving their goals of college preparation and completion. FOCUS currently serves 175 students. It is expected to expand to almost 300 students in Grades 5 through 12 by year 2018. FOCUS uses a project-based learning curriculum and emphasizes character development in learning and teaching.

The FOCUS “Summer SLAM” (Summer Learning and Achievement Mania) program is a 30-day, tuition-free, project-based learning program that complements the FOCUS school-year program. During the school year, FOCUS provides afterschool support for 10 to 20 percent of students who need extra help or remedial support in literacy and numeracy. All FOCUS students also attend SLAM Saturdays. Programming is scheduled for 15 Saturdays each school year. Students are on campus from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on FOCUS SLAM Saturdays and are provided with lunch and a snack. The day is divided into learning time and enrichment activity time. Learning time is divided between lessons in Language Arts and Mathematics. The enrichment activities vary by grade level and include field trips, learning activities, enrichment activities, and guest speakers.

FOCUS recruits a new cohort of students in fourth grade each year. After an intensive screening process, 18 boys and 18 girls are selected for the final decision on new cohort admission. Once admitted, students must maintain an 85 percent attendance rate of 45 program days per year. Students are provided with transportation, meals, and all supplies necessary to participate in FOCUS, so that none of those factors compromise their attendance. FOCUS makes learning as fun and engaging as possible to keep the students’ interest in coming back. The long-term, year-round engagement also means that program staff get to know students and their families intimately over a long period of time. The program becomes an integral part of students’ and families’ lives in a way that school-year or summer programs by themselves might do well, but cannot match.

Family engagement plays a crucial role in student recruitment and retention. Parents and other family members are invited to at least five events per year: New/Annual Parent Orientation, Family Breakfast, Open House, Showcase, and the Christmas Party. FOCUS also offers more targeted programming for junior high students’ parents on college readiness, transition to high school, and other issues.

**RESULTS**

**During the 30 program days of the 2015 Summer SLAM, daily attendance averaged 96 percent.**

**Overall retention of students in FOCUS from summer 2011 through summer 2015 has been 91 percent and has progressively improved:**

- 87% Retention of Class of 2019
- 80% Retention of Class of 2020
- 90% Retention of Class of 2021
- 100% Retention of Class of 2022
- 100% Retention of Class of 2023



## 4

## KEEP KIDS LEARNING ABOUT THE POWER OF TEAMS

## &gt; PROJECT TRANSFORMATION

Greater Dallas

Project Transformation, founded in 1998, provides educational programs for low-income children and youth, develops future young adult leaders, and revitalizes urban churches. The organization's educational programs focus on the holistic development of each participant, partnering children and youth with college students who help them realize their unique potential. The program is largely set apart by the 100 young adult Project Transformation (PT) Corps Members who implement the work through one-year and summer periods of service. These young adults invest in the lives of at-risk students while learning about urban poverty and the challenges facing the population they serve.

Project Transformation's summer day camp programs for elementary students focus on enriching the mind, body, and spirit, with a special emphasis on literacy. Each child is paired with a reading volunteer to read one-on-one every morning.

To further develop reading skills, youth participate in an online, interactive reading instruction tutorial that specifically targets each child's reading deficiencies. Other activities include arts and crafts, fitness, and nutrition education. The middle school program is comprised of an eight-week day camp and a one-week overnight skills development camp, called Urban Camp. The summer program is designed thematically, for a holistic learning experience to include book club discussions, athletic skills development, service projects, career exposure, and T.A.G. (Talk About God). High school students stay engaged through Project Transformation's summer LITE (Leaders in Training Experience) program. High school students can apply to serve as LITEs each summer, volunteering to read with younger children and assisting with other day camp activities.

The use of AmeriCorps Members as program staff for both the Summer and Afterschool Programs has significant benefits for managing costs. The AmeriCorps Members are generally college-age. Project Transformation hires eight full-time members who work in both the Summer and Afterschool Programs, eight to ten part-time members who work in both programs, five to ten additional quarter-time and minimum time members in the Afterschool Program, and approximately 90 more quarter-time members for the Summer Program. As with all AmeriCorps programs, the volunteer members do not replace paid positions, but they do significantly expand the capacity of the organization to serve young people.

## RESULTS

Annually, Project Transformation serves approximately 1,000 children and youth, grades 1–12, at ten summer sites.

In its 18-year history, the organization has equipped over 1,000 college students for future leadership and has served more than 8,000 children and youth.

The vision for the Summer Program is to serve a continuum of participants, starting with 1st grade students, on their journey to graduate high school twelve years later and return as young adult PT Corps Members enrolled in college.

During the 2015 Summer Program, 96 percent of children maintained or improved their grade level reading, with 75 percent increasing at least one grade level.

In addition, 80 percent of high school students indicated they were very likely to apply for college or university.

## 5

## KEEP KIDS LEARNING ANYTIME, ANYWHERE

## &gt; DALLAS CITY OF LEARNING – BIG THOUGHT

Dallas, TX

In partnership with Dallas Independent School District and the City of Dallas Mayor's Office, Dallas City of Learning (DCOL) provides parents and kids a tool to explore the city's resources and find summer learning programs that appeal to their interests. DCOL is part of a groundbreaking national movement that began in Chicago in 2013 and is now joined by Dallas, Pittsburgh, and Washington D.C. Together, these cities are leading the push to make learning relevant, accessible, and hands-on by bringing together a city's organizations and businesses to prepare young people for success. DCOL includes a digital catalog of in-person summer learning opportunities as well as online experiences that kids can complete right in their own backyard.

Through DCOL, students collect digital badges: visual, digital representations of skills that the student has attained, issued by an individual or organization who can validate and assess that skill. Badging systems are merit-based and can motivate goal-setting and persistence. Students collect and save their badges in digital backpacks, creating useful digital portfolios of their accomplishments.

Students most typically access the digital resources in connection with summer camps and school-based or neighborhood summer programs, but can extend their own learning wherever their interests lead them.

Families participate in neighborhood outreach events, which occur throughout the year to engage children and their families in hands-on activities and connect them to DCOL through portable technology resources. Parents also receive e-blasts, newsletters, and text messages. Demonstrations are held at school campuses through PTA events to educate families on the DCOL system.



## RESULTS

In 2016, DCOL is projected to engage 60,000 students who will participate in 490,000 hours of learning by working with 210 community partners. Students use their student IDs to log in to Dallas City of Learning. Through this partnership with Dallas Independent School District, DCOL can track activities including program searches and badging data, and analyze the relationship between participation in DCOL with school data such as grades, attendance, and social-emotional outcomes.

In partnership with Dallas ISD, Big Thought has participated in a national study on summer learning conducted by the RAND Corporation and funded by The Wallace Foundation. Based on near-term findings, students who participated in Big Thought's summer camps through DCOL in 2014 returned to school with gains in math equal to about 20 percent of a typical student's growth during one year. The report also found that students in the program entered the fall with a meaningful advantage in reading if they attended at least 22 days and received at least 39 hours of reading instruction.

Over 50 percent of students participating in Big Thought summer camps in 2014 experienced positive gains in social skills, based on the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment tool (DESSA).



## CONCLUSION

**When done with high quality, summer programs in a variety of domains demonstrate impact on students' academic skills, student engagement, social-emotional development, and even their health.**

The case studies explored here demonstrate how best practices for programs can support students across five assurances for keeping kids safe, healthy, and learning over the summer months. As they grow, students access different kinds of programs that meet their varying needs and interests. Their own summer opportunity portfolio enriches their education experience and contributes meaningfully to their readiness for college and career.

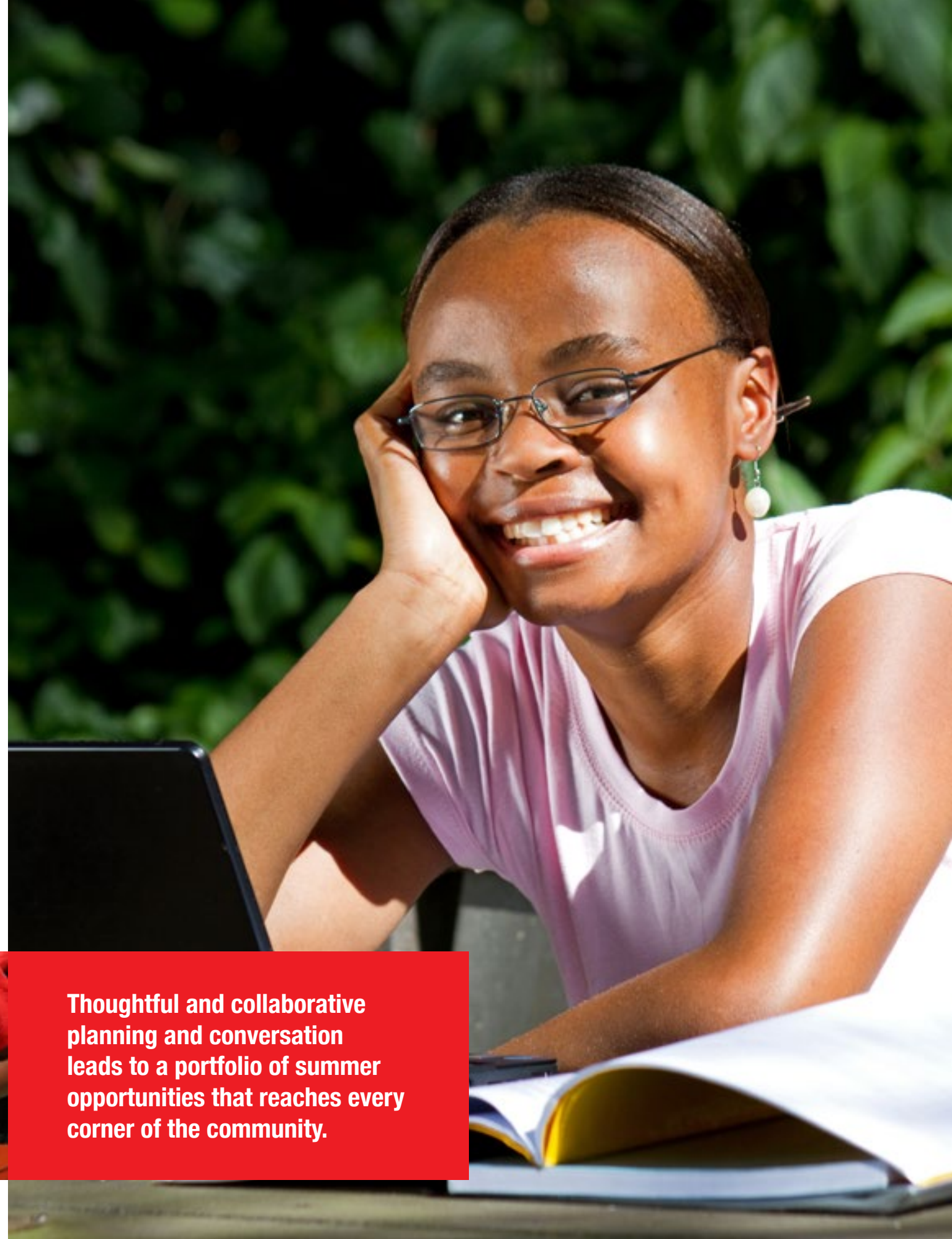
### HOW DOES A COMMUNITY START TO BUILD A PORTFOLIO?

Having committed leadership that brings a wide variety of summer stakeholders to the table is critical to developing a robust system of summer opportunities. It is most important to remember that "summer starts in September." Summer programs are even more powerful when integrated into a year-round system of learning opportunities during and afterschool, and with supports at home. All of the programs featured here have components that keep kids learning all year long, but allow the unique summer space to be a time when students can direct and create their own learning pathways while building valuable skills for the future. Thoughtful and collaborative planning and conversation leads to a portfolio of summer opportunities that reaches every corner of the community.

**In the companion paper Building Community Systems for Summer Learning, we describe the six domains through which communities are creating collective and coordinated systems for summer opportunities.**

- A shared vision
- Engaged leadership
- Continuous quality improvement
- Data management
- Sustainable resources
- Marketing and communications

**Thoughtful and collaborative planning and conversation leads to a portfolio of summer opportunities that reaches every corner of the community.**



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