



## National Summer Learning Association Policy Position Statements

NSLA believes that the federal government has an important role to play in supporting policies that foster safe, enriching, and high-quality summer programs for all children. The summer gap remains one of the most significant drivers of educational and economic inequity in the United States. While some students spend their summers in enriched environments that build social capital and academic achievement, millions of others face a season of diminished opportunity, characterized by food insecurity, social isolation, and a loss of academic momentum. This disparity is not an inevitability; it is the result of policy choices and federal disinvestments in our communities.

As we look toward the future of the American workforce and the well-being of our children and families, federal investments in summer learning must transition from temporary, emergency responses to meaningful, reliable, and predictable investments in our communities. The policy positions outlined in this document represent a comprehensive policy framework that advances our vision for Summer for All.

### 1. Support youth academic enrichment, engaging activities, and an opportunity to build life skills.

NSLA believes that summer is a premier window for whole-child development. Every child deserves access to summer environments that pair rigorous, engaging academic enrichment with the intentional cultivation of resilience, self-regulation, and collaboration. By integrating these domains, we move beyond simple remediation and toward a model of summer learning that empowers students to return to school more confident, connected, and academically prepared.

- **Opportunity gaps:** While 67% of upper-income children participated in organized summer opportunities in 2023, [only 38% of low-income students](#) (10 million out of 25 million) accessed similar programs, leaving a significant portion of the population without structured enrichment.
- **Academic acceleration:** A 2024-2025 national study found that over 50% of middle and high school students reported feeling more prepared and confident for the upcoming semester after participating in summer enrichment that included field trips, STEM, and outdoor exploration (Afterschool Alliance, 2025).

- **High engagement:** Research from the RAND Corporation highlights that students with "high attendance" (20+ days) in holistic summer programs outperform their peers not only in math and reading but also in social-emotional outcomes, suggesting that consistent engagement in a supportive environment is a primary catalyst for growth (RAND, 2025).
- **Well-being:** With youth anxiety and depression rising, 2025 surveys show that 91% of school superintendents now view summer learning programs as "essential" for achieving district goals—specifically citing their role in fostering belonging and providing a "non-clinical" mental health intervention through peer and mentor relationships (NSLA/AASA Survey, 2025).
- **Return on investment:** Analysis of evidence-based social-emotional programs demonstrates that [for every \\$1 invested, there is an \\$11 return](#) to the community through [improved](#) lifetime earnings, better health outcomes, and reduced juvenile crime.

#### NSLA Supports Policies That:

- **Fund Enriching Summer Programs:** Support federal and state grant programs, such as the *Summer for All Act*, that provide dedicated funding for summer programs integrating academic instruction and soft skills curricula.
- **Modernize Accountability Metrics:** Encourage the adoption of assessment tools that measure social-emotional growth (e.g., self-efficacy, social awareness) alongside traditional academic benchmarks to provide a more complete picture of program impact.
- **Expand Professional Development:** Invest in training for the summer workforce to ensure educators and community providers can effectively implement trauma-informed practices and active learning strategies that foster student agency.
- **Incentivize Cross-Sector Partnerships:** Promote policies that encourage school districts to partner with community-based organizations (CBOs), libraries, and museums to bring academic enrichment into non-traditional, highly engaging settings.
- **Prioritize High-Quality Standards:** High-quality summer learning programs are achieved by integrating targeted academic enrichment with social-emotional support led by trained staff. Key standards include 5-6 week durations, small class sizes, safe environments, and nutritious food, with a focus on active, collaborative learning and clear, measurable goals.

## 2. Foster safe, healthy, supportive, and drug-free environments.

NSLA believes that cultivating a secure and healthy environment is essential for the well-being of children and that their success is inextricably linked to the quality of their surroundings. For a child to thrive academically and socially, they must first feel secure in their environment. We believe that summer programs serve as a vital protective factor, providing a supervised sanctuary that shields youth from neighborhood violence, substance misuse, and environmental hazards. A safe, healthy, and drug-free summer is not a luxury; it is a fundamental right that ensures every student returns to school ready to succeed.

- **The Safety Gap:** During the summer months, youth experience a significant decrease in adult supervision; [research](#) indicates that the risk of social-emotional distress and engagement in risky behaviors, including substance use, increases when school-based supports are absent.
- **Substance Use Prevention:** High-quality summer programming acts as a deterrent to early-onset drug and alcohol use; students who are engaged in prosocial, supervised summer activities are significantly [less likely](#) to experiment with illicit substances compared to their unsupervised peers.
- **Physical Health and Safety:** [Exposure to community violence often rises](#) when children are out of school; structured programs provide a controlled, climate-resilient environment that [reduces](#) these physical risks.
- **The Impact of Trauma:** Students living in high-poverty areas are [more likely](#) to encounter adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) during the summer break; trauma-informed summer environments are proven to mitigate the long-term academic and health impacts of these experiences.

#### **NSLA Supports Policies That:**

- **Invest in Safe Passage and Security:** Provide funding for facility enhancements and community partnerships that ensure students can travel to and from summer sites safely and learn in modernized, secure buildings.
- **Embed Substance Misuse Prevention:** Support the integration of evidence-based drug and alcohol prevention curricula within summer enrichment programs, focusing on peer-refusal skills and healthy decision-making.
- **Promote Trauma-Informed Care:** Increase federal and state support for professional development that trains summer staff to recognize signs of trauma and provide supportive, healing-centered environments for at-risk youth.
- **Enhance Mental Health Integration:** Incentivize collaborations between summer providers and local health departments to offer on-site mental health screenings and drug-free lifestyle workshops.
- **Expand Resource Access in Deserts:** Prioritize grant funding for summer programs located in safety deserts neighborhoods with high rates of crime or limited access to public parks and recreation centers.

### **3. Support a healthy, active lifestyle, including nutritional education and regular, structured physical education activities and programs, that help maintain the mental and physical well-being of youth.**

NSLA believes that a child’s potential for achievement is inseparable from their physical and mental health. We advocate for summer programs that treat regular physical activity and nutritional education not as extras, but as fundamental pillars of a child’s overall development. When children are active and

well-nourished, they are better equipped to learn, manage stress, and build the resilience needed for a productive school year. Summer should be a season of movement and health, ensuring that the progress made during the school year is not undermined by sedentary behavior or poor nutrition.

- **The Health Gap:** [Research](#) shows that children, particularly those from low-income families, gain weight at a faster rate during the summer break than during the school year, largely due to a lack of structured physical activity and increased access to energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods.
- **Decline in Fitness:** During the long summer holidays, many children experience a [significant decline](#) in cardiovascular fitness and an increase in sedentary behaviors, such as excessive screen time, which [can lead to social isolation and emotional instability](#).
- **Mental Health Connection:** [Regular physical activity](#) is a proven mood enhancer; it releases endorphins and reduces cortisol levels, helping adolescents manage the stress, anxiety, and boredom that can peak during unstructured summer months.
- **Academic Synergy:** Physical health and academic performance are deeply linked. Evidence-based studies show that [even 90 minutes](#) of weekly physical activity is associated with improved concentration, memory, and problem-solving skills.

#### **NSLA Supports Policies That:**

- **Encourage Physical Activity Standards:** Prioritize funding for summer learning programs that include at least some daily structured physical activity that is inclusive and developmentally appropriate.
- **Integrate Nutritional Education:** Support the inclusion of hands-on nutritional literacy—such as gardening, healthy cooking classes, and food source education—as a core component of summer enrichment curricula.
- **Incentivize Shared Use Agreements:** Promote policies that allow summer programs to utilize under-used school and community facilities, such as gyms, tracks, and kitchens, to ensure all children have safe spaces to be active.
- **Fund Holistic Wellness Staffing:** Provide grants for summer programs to hire or partner with fitness instructors, nutritionists, and mental health professionals to create a comprehensive support network for participating youth.
- **Scale Evidence-Based Health Models:** Invest in the expansion of programs that have proven success integrating academic programming with physical activities, team sports, outdoor education, or wellness coaching.

#### **4. Promote volunteerism, community involvement, or service-learning, in which students use academic and civic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs;**

NSLA believes that summer is a vital time for young people to transition from being students of the world to active contributors within it. We believe that service-learning—the intentional integration of

academic skills with community service—is one of the most effective ways to foster civic responsibility, empathy, and agency. By addressing genuine community needs during the summer months, students see the real-world application of their learning, transforming summer break into a season of purpose, leadership, and community connection.

- **Academic Application:** [Research](#) indicates that students who participate in high-quality service-learning programs demonstrate increased academic engagement and a deeper understanding of complex social issues compared to peers in traditional classroom settings.
- **The Civic Gap:** While civic engagement is a [predictor](#) of future professional success and adult voting behavior, access to structured volunteer opportunities is [often limited](#) for youth in low-income communities, creating a civic opportunity gap during the summer months (Hart & Atkins, 2002; CIRCLE, 2022).
- **Social-Emotional Growth:** Service-learning is a [proven catalyst](#) for social-emotional development; participants show significant gains in self-efficacy, social sensitivity, and the ability to work collaboratively across diverse backgrounds.
- **Community Impact:** Summer service-learning programs provide thousands of hours of essential labor to local non-profits, environmental initiatives, and social services, creating a [symbiotic relationship](#) where the community gains support and the student gains invaluable experience.

#### **NSLA Supports Policies That:**

- **Incentivize Service-Learning Models:** Provide federal and state grants for summer programs that adopt a Service-Learning Framework, requiring students to research, plan, and execute projects that address specific local needs.
- **Award Academic Credit for Service:** Support policies that allow middle and high school students to earn elective or "work-based learning" credits toward graduation through documented summer service and reflection.
- **Fund Service-to-Career Pathways:** Increase investment in programs that link volunteerism with career exploration, specifically those that provide stipends for low-income youth to participate in community-based internships.
- **Lower Barriers to Participation:** Support funding for transportation and insurance coverage for community-based organizations, ensuring that all youth—regardless of socioeconomic status—can safely access volunteer sites.
- **Expand National Service Partnerships:** Encourage formal partnerships between local summer learning providers and national service organizations (such as AmeriCorps) to provide mentorship and structure for youth-led community projects.

## **5. Develop life skills, relationship-building skills, communication, and conflict management skills;**

NSLA believes that summer learning programs are uniquely positioned to foster the whole child by developing the life skills, relationship-building capabilities, and communication tools necessary for

success in school, career, and citizenship. The mastery of these skills is a primary prerequisite for 21st-century success. Summer is the ideal laboratory for youth to practice these interpersonal dynamics in a low-stakes, high-engagement environment that traditional classrooms often lack.

- **Workforce Readiness:** Modern employers prioritize human skills, ranking communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution as the [most critical competencies](#) for the next decade; however, many report [significant gaps](#) in these areas among new graduates.
- **Collaboration as a Core Competency:** Research indicates that project-based summer learning, which mimics professional team structures, significantly increases a student's ability to navigate complex workplace interpersonal dynamics and conflict.

#### **NSLA Supports Policies That:**

- **Integrate Holistic Development:** Prioritize funding for summer programs that treat social-emotional learning, communication, and life-skills development as core components of the curriculum alongside traditional academics.
- **Foster Cross-Sector Partnerships:** Promote policies that link summer learning providers with local businesses and youth development professionals to create real-world environments where youth can practice professional communication and emotional regulation in a supportive setting.
- **Expand Work-Based Learning Models:** Support the expansion of federal youth employment grants that include structured "pre-professional" training, ensuring summer jobs are paired with intentional skill-building and mentorship.
- **Modernize Staff Training for Career Coaching:** Invest in professional development that equips summer educators and youth workers to act as "career coaches," capable of modeling and evaluating the soft skills essential for workplace retention.
- **Validate Non-Traditional Credentialing:** Support the development of digital badging or "soft skill" certifications within summer programs to help youth translate their summer experiences into tangible assets for college and job applications.

## **6. Provide mentoring and counseling to participating youth, including youth who are at risk of academic failure; dropping out of school.**

NSLA believes that every young person deserves a consistent support system that extends beyond the classroom and into the summer months. For students at risk of academic failure or dropping out, summer should not be a period of isolation but a season of intensive connection. We believe that high-quality mentoring and professional counseling are essential social scaffolds that provide the emotional stability and guidance necessary for students to stay on track toward graduation and long-term success.

- **The Power of Mentorship:** Summer programs offer a unique window for intensive relationship-building; high-quality mentorship and supportive social relationships with adults

during the summer are [linked to improved self-esteem, prosocial behaviors, and overall psychological health](#).

- **The Persistence of Risk:** Students facing structural risks—such as poverty or housing instability—[often lose access](#) to school-based counselors and mentors during the summer, which can lead to social isolation and a lack of daily structure that [amplifies existing mental health struggles](#).
- **Impact on Graduation:** Mentoring is a [proven driver of educational attainment](#); young people with mentors are [55% more likely](#) to enroll in college and [81% more likely](#) to participate regularly in extracurricular activities.
- **Mental Health and Retention:** Early intervention and proactive outreach are [linked to higher graduation rates](#); when institutions weave in mental health resources, students are more likely to remain enrolled and graduate on time.

#### **NSLA Supports Policies That:**

- **Fund Integrated Support Models:** Provide dedicated federal and state funding for summer programs that explicitly include 1-to-1 mentoring and licensed counseling services as part of their core academic recovery strategy.
- **Bridge the Summer Counselor Gap:** Support initiatives that allow school-based counselors and social workers to extend their contracts into the summer, ensuring continuity of care for students with high emotional or academic needs.
- **Strengthen Mentor Training:** Invest in evidence-based training for summer staff and volunteers to help them effectively support youth dealing with trauma, academic frustration, and the social pressures that lead to dropping out.
- **Prioritize High-Risk Populations:** Expand eligibility for specialized summer grants to programs specifically serving youth in the foster care system, justice-involved youth, and those identified as chronically absent during the academic year.
- **Promote Peer-to-Peer Mentoring:** Support policies that incentivize the creation of near-peer mentoring programs, where older students or recent graduates are trained to guide younger at-risk peers through the summer transition.

## **7. Promote career or workforce readiness or participation.**

NSLA believes that summer is a critical season for economic opportunity and career exploration. We believe that every young person, regardless of their zip code, should have access to high-quality summer work experiences that provide more than just a paycheck. For NSLA, summer workforce programs are essential classrooms for skills, such as self-efficacy; communication; and professional reliability, that bridge the gap between classroom learning and long-term economic mobility.

- **Economic Mobility:** Studies show that early exposure to professional environments and workplace norms during the summer is a [primary driver of long-term earnings](#), particularly for youth from underserved communities who may lack existing professional networks.

- **Safety and Opportunity:** Participation in structured summer work programs has been proven to significantly reduce involvement in the criminal justice system; one landmark study found a [43% reduction in violent crime arrests](#) among participating youth.
- **Economic Equity:** SYEPs disproportionately serve youth from low-income households and communities of color—groups that [historically face the highest barriers](#) to entering the labor market and building professional networks.
- **Academic Synergy:** Summer jobs do not distract from school; rather, they improve school engagement. Students in summer work programs [often show](#) improved attendance and a higher likelihood of staying in school compared to their non-working peers.

#### **NSLA Supports Policies That:**

- **Scale Summer Youth Employment:** Increase federal and state investments in Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEPs) to ensure that every eligible teen who wants a summer job can find one.
- **Integrate Skill-Building with Work:** Fund models that braid traditional employment with intentional career-readiness curricula, including financial literacy, digital citizenship, and technical skills training.
- **Expand Registered Apprenticeships:** Support the creation of youth apprenticeship pathways that allow high school students to earn wages and industry-recognized credentials during the summer months.
- **Incentivize Private Sector Partnerships:** Provide tax credits or grants to businesses that partner with community-based organizations to offer paid internships and first job experiences for underserved youth.
- **Modernize Workforce Data:** Invest in data systems that track the long-term impact of summer work experiences on college enrollment and career earnings to better inform evidence-based policy.