



national summer
learning association

Summer For All

Lessons from NSLA's 2026 Summer Solutions Leadership Forum



Greetings from the CEO and Chairman

Dear Summer Learning Community:

On behalf of the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA), we are pleased to share the Summer For All playbook, a resource developed from the insights, experiences, and collective wisdom of leaders who gathered at our 2026 Summer Solutions Leadership Forum in Fairhope, Alabama.

Over several days, education leaders, youth-serving organizations, policymakers, researchers, funders, business leaders, and advocates engaged in thoughtful conversations about one important question: How can summer become a practical solution for more young people, families, and communities?

What emerged was both encouraging and clear. Across sectors and across states, leaders identified many of the same goals, opportunities and challenges. They spoke about the importance of helping young people feel safe, connected, and inspired. They highlighted workforce readiness, career exploration, mental health, transportation, family engagement, and access to high-quality programs and to reduce childhood hunger, juvenile crime and youth emergency room visits. No single organization can solve these challenges alone. Lasting impact at scale requires better communication, collaboration, partnerships, and a shared commitment to meeting the needs of all young people.

While this Playbook reflects the current voices and perspectives of leaders in our field, it also affirms what NSLA has learned through more than 30 years of work advancing summer learning nationwide. The needs identified throughout these pages are the same priorities that guide our mission every day: expanding access to high-quality summer opportunities, strengthening program quality, supporting workforce and youth leadership development, building partnerships, advancing research, and creating sustainable policy and funding solutions.

We hope this Playbook serves as both a reflection of what we learned together and a roadmap for what comes next. Providing a great summer to all kids in the US is a solvable challenge. Together we can accomplish this goal and ensure that every child has the support they need to learn, grow, and succeed.

With gratitude and optimism,

Jim Quinn
NSLA Board Chair

Aaron Philip Dworkin
NSLA Chief Executive Officer

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Credits

The Summer for All Playbook was developed from the insights shared by leaders at the 2026 Summer Solutions Forum, held in Fairhope, Alabama, in January 2026 and cohosted with the Alabama State Department of Education and Alabama State Afterschool Network. Through plenary discussions, interviews, breakout sessions, and participant reflections, attendees shared ideas, lessons, and practical strategies that have been synthesized in this report.

NSLA is grateful to the leaders, practitioners, partners, funders, public agencies, youth advocates, and community organizations from across the US whose experiences and research helped shape this playbook. The report reflects their lived experience and is intended to support leaders working to expand, strengthen, and promote more summer learning opportunities in communities across the country.

Special thanks for the partnership and support of:



Executive Summary



Summer learning programs are an essential community infrastructure

The summer months can go from being one of the most dangerous times of year for kids to one of the most impactful. In Alabama and in communities across the country, the strongest examples do not depend on a single standout program. They rely on schools, community-based organizations, cities, funders, health partners, and employers to solve practical challenges together.

“There’s a great deal of inequity over the summer. Kids from low-income families, underserved communities, lose a great deal of learning, both in math and reading, much more so than children from more affluent homes... By the time they get to the third grade, they could have lost six months to a year of learning, and each time they come back to school in September, they’re falling farther and farther behind.”

— Jim Quinn, Board Chair, National Summer Learning Association

The case for investing in summer learning is straightforward. A 2024 report from Gallup found that 91% of superintendents say summer is critical to district goals. The report also found that 72% of US students in summer programs participated in ones taking place outside of school settings. Yet access is sharply unequal: nationally only 38% of low income students (10 million) participated in programs compared with 67% of higher income peers (20 million). When a season carries that much need and that much inequality, patchworking programs together is not a sustainable strategy. Youth need access to summer learning programs that collaborate with their schools, communities, and existing resources.

The State of Alabama offers a clear example of what progress on summer learning can look like. Advocacy helped elevate the issue, and data made the case harder to ignore. Literacy and numeracy policies created clearer expectations, districts and community partners began planning together more intentionally, and state investments followed. Over time, summer learning and afterschool moved from the margins into the state’s broader improvement strategy.

Across the conversations that informed this playbook, four themes emerged:

First, coalitions are most impactful when they design collaboratively with community partners and build systems that are stronger than any one program could build alone.

Second, belonging is essential. Trusted adults, youth voice, and family trust are often the conditions that make participation and learning possible.

Third, more exposure to college and career pathways is needed and must begin with meaningful exposure, supportive adults, skill-building, and paid opportunities that connect young people to real futures.

Fourth, scale depends on connective tissue. Organizations need intermediaries, sample agreements, clear guidance, practical funding, transportation, and data that help partners improve.

“When the [National] Summer Learning Association is able to do this and bring these practitioners together... we’re all moving in the same direction. Great things are going to happen around this topic, and it becomes an opportunity to invest.” — Todd Jacobson, Founder and CEO, TAJ Global



The central argument of this playbook: Closing America’s summer opportunity gap is important, possible and within reach. Summer becomes a credible solution when leaders stop relying on one program and start collaborating across communities to support youth development and engagement throughout the summer. Leaders can use this playbook as a planning and partnership tool to frame summer as part of a larger community strategy, identify where coordination is breaking down, and choose practical next steps before, during, and after the summer cycle.

What communities with strong summer learning infrastructure do consistently

- Make summer part of year-round planning rather than treating it as an afterthought.
- Blend academics with enrichment, and expand access with clear quality expectations.
- Position local governments, districts, community-based organizations, and employers as complementary partners rather than parallel systems.
- Integrate transportation, communication, staffing, and family engagement into the design from the beginning.
- Develop program impact reports that combine participation, learning outcomes, and success stories to make the case for continued investment.
- Align programs serving different age groups so students can move from one to the other

Insights to Action

Why this matters for summer leaders:

The strongest summer efforts are built around a shared understanding that summer touches learning, safety, family stability, youth development, and opportunity at the same time. For summer leaders, the work is to run strong programs while helping partners see how their roles connect to a larger community strategy.

What strong implementation can look like:

- Year-round planning with schools and community partners
- Clear family communication before summer begins
- Transportation and staffing treated as core design issues
- Program data that shows both participation and impact
- Academics, enrichment, belonging, and family needs planned together

Questions for reflection:

Where is our summer work still operating as a stand-alone effort, and where is it connected to a larger community strategy?

Do our partners, families, and decision-makers understand what problems our summer program helps solve?

A practical next move:

Create or update a simple one-page summer strategy map that names the young people you serve, the needs your program addresses, the partners involved, and the outcomes you want to communicate after summer ends.

What We Heard at the Summer Solutions Forum

- More access for young people
- Stronger workforce pathways
- Better program quality
- Stronger partnerships
- Sustainable funding and policy
- More planning time and support for leaders

How NSLA is Advancing the Work

- Discover Summer + Summer for All
- Youth Leadership Institute + Policy Internships
- PLCs + Training + Research
- Annual Convening + National Network 35,000+
- Advocacy + Coalition Building
- Professional Development Trainings and Free Webinars



What Became Visible in Alabama

In January 2026, leaders gathered in Fairhope, Alabama, around a deceptively simple question: How can summer learning become a real solution to support young people and families? The answers were not tidy, and that was part of the value. Again and again, the conversation pushed past buzzwords and toward practical questions about program design. How do you help children catch up in reading without making summer feel punitive? How do you build mental health support without asking every youth worker to become a clinician? How do you create real-world experiences when employers are interested in theory but stretched in practice? How do you communicate summer learning needs clearly and early enough for families to make informed choices and sign up?

What emerged was not a single national model, but a clearer understanding of the problem. Summer is when communities are often asked to address several needs at once: unfinished learning, peaks in juvenile crime, childhood hunger and youth emergency room visits, youth isolation, family logistics, safety, workforce exposure, and access to opportunities that are easier to imagine than to coordinate. During the school year, those needs are distributed across systems. However, many communities still lack coordinated, system-level solutions to meet the needs of young people and families during the summer.

That is part of what makes summer feel so vulnerable. It relies on transportation that is difficult to coordinate, staffing that is hard to secure, family communication that often must happen before plans are fully finalized, and public systems that were not built to share responsibility easily. But summer can also reveal what is possible. When a state or community manages summer well, the results become visible quickly: children and youth participate, families find relief, partners connect, and leaders get a clearer picture of what coordinated effort can achieve. Students and staff are better prepared to succeed in the coming year as well



“We know that challenges exist during breaks and before and after school, and certainly when kids transition into summer, that’s when a lot of challenges really surface.” -- Kristine Stratton, President and CEO, National Recreation and Park Association

This playbook draws on the Leadership Forum as its starting point, but it is written for leaders working beyond the event itself. It asks a practical question: Under what conditions does summer become a

real solution for young people, families, and communities? The sections that follow are intended to be useful to states, districts, cities, intermediaries, providers, and funders working to answer that question for their communities as they navigate real-world constraints.

Insights to Action

Why this matters for summer leaders:

Summer often reveals the needs young people and families experience most directly: transportation, meals, staffing, safety, isolation, academic support, and access to engaging opportunities. Because many of these needs return year after year, summer leaders can plan earlier, name the barriers clearly, and build solutions with the partners best positioned to help.

What strong implementation can look like:

Early meetings and planning conversations with families, youth, staff, and partners

- A clear enrollment and communication timeline
- Transportation planning before program launch
- Partnerships that address student needs beyond academics
- Recurring summer barriers are identified and addressed as a high priority
- Shared metrics and data collection system

Questions for reflection:

1. Which barriers show up for families every summer, and which ones could be addressed earlier with better planning or stronger partnerships?
2. Are we designing around what young people and families actually experience, or around what is easiest for our organization to manage?



PART I: Summer As A Strategy, Alabama As A Proof Point

Alabama matters not only because of what changed, but because of how that change happened. Over time, community advocacy helped raise awareness of the need, and data strengthened the case for action. Literacy became a statewide priority, followed by policy, numeracy, stronger coordination, and more intentional district planning. Taken together, those shifts reflect a larger change in mindset: summer learning and afterschool programs were no longer treated as optional extras but as important parts of the state’s broader strategy to improve outcomes for children and youth.

The headline gains are important: Alabama rose from 49th to 34th in NAEP reading, invested more than \$45 million in summer learning and extended time, and created a statewide study commission on access to out-of-school-time programs. But the deeper story is how that progress was built. Alabama did not get here through one single initiative or budget cycle. It took time, sustained advocacy, state guidance, local problem-solving, and a growing commitment to making summer part of the state’s larger goals for learning, opportunity, and youth success.

“We are going to talk about team, team, team for the next several days, because you can’t do anything alone. You have to have a team. We have great team at our State Department of Education. We have great team in our local education agencies, and we have a great team in our outside partners.” -- Dr. Eric Mackey, Alabama State Superintendent of Education

State policy helped turn that commitment into something more durable. The 2019 Literacy Act required summer reading camps with at least 60 hours of scientifically based reading instruction and intervention for students identified with reading deficiencies. The 2022 Numeracy Act added structured summer math support, embedding math in K–3 reading camps, and requiring 40 to 70 hours of mathematics problem-solving for students in grades 4 and 5, depending on need. These policies did not solve every design challenge, but they changed the expectation. Summer was no longer something extra; it became a more visible and consistent part of how the state supported student success.

Funding helped move the work from promise to permanence. In 2022, Governor Kay Ivey included \$1.5 million in the state budget for a pilot afterschool effort– Alabama's first dedicated state investment in afterschool. In 2023, that grew to \$2.8 million. In 2024, the state established the Office of Extended Learning. In 2025, lawmakers approved a \$17.3 million investment for afterschool and created a Joint Interim Study Commission on Expanding Access to High-Quality Out-of-School Education Programs. These were not performative steps, but evidence of real support. Together, they signaled that expanded learning was becoming part of the state’s public strategy, not just something left to short-term funding or local philanthropy.

Just as important as the policy story is the coalition story behind it. Alabama advocates connected summer learning and afterschool directly to the priorities state leaders were already trying to solve: literacy, math, workforce participation, public safety, and rural access. They brought data, kept showing up, responded to what leaders needed, and used pilots, public stories, and clear language to strengthen the case. The lesson is practical and transferable: when summer is connected to the challenges a state already cares about, it becomes easier for leaders to see it as part of the solution.

That is why Alabama matters as a proof point. It is not a script for every state, and it does not offer a one-size-fits-all model. It is a reminder that when summer is attached to core goals, backed by guidance and monitoring, and reinforced by advocates who can translate between government and the field, it stops looking optional. Summer learning becomes part of a broader strategy for supporting young people and communities.

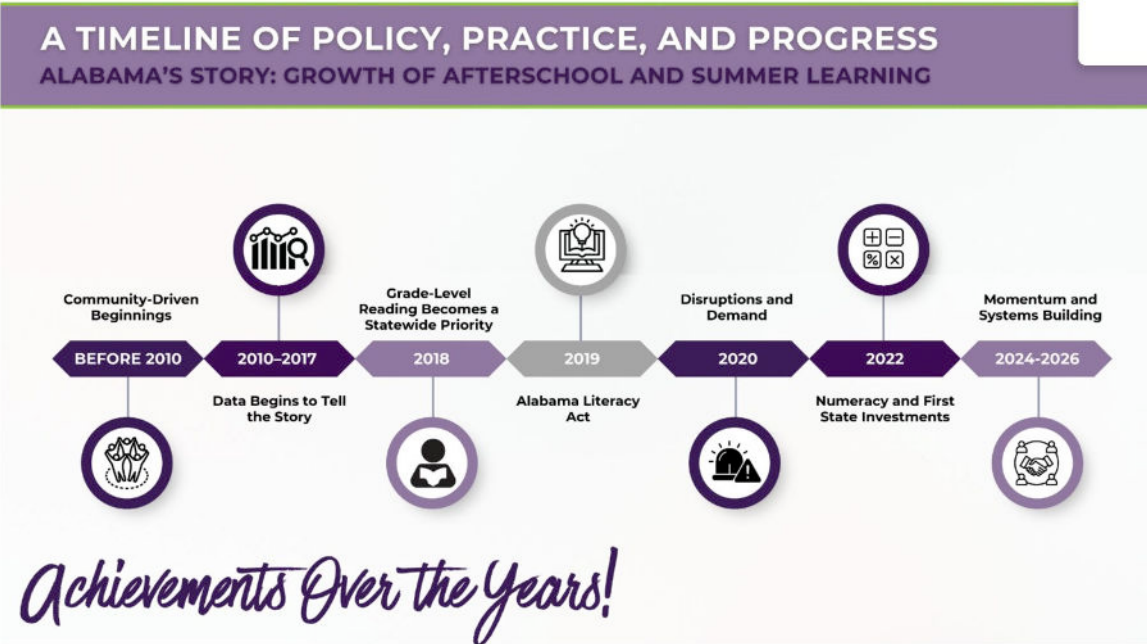


Figure. Alabama's growth story: community beginnings, stronger data, literacy and numeracy policy, post-pandemic demand, first state investments, and systems-building.

What Alabama changed

- Shifted summer from remediation-only to a broader improvement strategy tied to literacy, math, and youth support.
- Built stronger statewide coherence through law, guidance, and the Office of Extended Learning.
- Used pilots and success stories to turn early state investment into larger, more sustainable support.
- Made partnership part of the work rather than an informal add-on to school-led summer planning

Insights to Action

Why this matters for summer leaders:

Alabama’s story shows that summer gains traction when it is connected to priorities community leaders already care about, including literacy and math standards, workforce participation, rural access, public safety, and youth well-being. Summer leaders have the opportunity to show how summer learning helps communities make progress on goals that already matter.

What strong implementation can look like:

- Data and stories are used together to make the case
- Summer learning connected to district, city, or state priorities
- Partnerships built into planning expectations
- Program results translated for different audiences
- Pilots used to demonstrate what works and build public support

Questions for reflection:

1. What larger goals does our summer work already support, and are we clearly naming those connections?
2. Who needs to understand our summer work differently: families, school leaders, public officials, funders, employers, or community partners?

A practical next move:

Choose one priority your community is already focused on, such as reading, math, safety, workforce, or family stability, and write a short explanation of how your summer work contributes to that goal.

How NSLA is Advancing This Work

- NSLA convenes, trains and supports a national network of 35,000 program partners and leaders across all 50 states.
- Summer For All Bill support positions summer as “the highest need and high impact time of the year and urges greater federal investment in summer program partnerships between schools and community groups



PART II: What Coalitions Design Together

1. Health, wellness, & belonging

Belonging surfaced in Fairhope as one of the clearest indicators of program quality. Leaders framed it as a key component that has to be built into the experience from the start: young people need to feel safe, known, and welcome enough to return the next day. That kind of environment does not happen by accident. It grows from adults who know how to listen, peers who help make the space feel social, and program structures youth voice, choice, connection and a sense of community.

Belonging shapes participation, consistency, and trust. When young people feel that a space was built with them in mind, attendance becomes more stable, and learning has a solid foundation. Several leaders also pointed out how labels can unintentionally narrow that invitation. A name like math camp, sports camp, or reading camp may help adults recognize a program, but it can also signal to young people who the space is for and who it is not for. A better plan, they suggested, is to keep the program design youth-centered and showcase what they will get to participate in, rather than just the learning objectives.

The conversations on mental health followed that same line of thinking. Summer staff are often among the adults who see changes in mood, behavior, and engagement first, so their role matters. What they need is not clinical training that asks them to become something they are not, but practical preparation that helps them notice distress, respond with care, and connect a young person to additional support when needed. One leader put it plainly: summer programs can be a promising mental health intervention when staff are prepared to be mentors, supporters, and observant adults rather than expected to act outside their expertise. In that way, summer programs can be part of a broader network of support for children and families, especially when adults are equipped to show up as steady, observant, and trusted guides.

Sports offered a useful example of how these conditions take shape in practice. Leaders described sports as most effective when adults create environments that support autonomy, belonging, competence, supportive peers, and a mastery climate rather than win-at-all-costs pressure. Early learning leaders made a parallel point about school readiness, describing it as a set of conditions that help children thrive: trust, play, curiosity, family stability, and adults who know how to support learning at home. Summer can strengthen those conditions because it offers communities more flexibility to build them with intention and often more room for cross-sector support.

“Every school, no matter where it is, should have a program and experience. And every young person, no matter where you sit, rural, suburban, urban, every school, every kid, should have that experience.”
— Jim Clark, CEO, Boys & Girls Clubs of America

2. Learning, literacy, and academic growth

Summer learning programs are strongest when they are treated as a real opportunity to help young people grow academically without stripping away the parts of summer that make them want to be there. Across the forum, leaders returned to the same basic point: strong summer learning happens when rigor and engagement go hand in hand. Young people can be challenged, supported, and inspired in the same space, and the best programs are designed with that full experience in mind. We do not want summer programs to be seen as a punishment kids are forced to attend. Rather, we want them to be seen as special, hands-on, learning opportunities they will enjoy.

In Alabama, reading and math standards are written into policy, but the strongest examples from the field did not sound like a longer school day dropped into June. They were opportunities that took learning seriously while still making room for enrichment, relationships, and joy. A program built solely around compliance may meet a requirement, but one designed as an experience has a much better chance of holding attention, building confidence, and creating momentum that lasts beyond the summer. Leaders of these programs talked about creating environments where high-quality instruction and enrichment work together.

The literacy conversations were especially practical. Families need clear communication early enough to make decisions, and they need guidance that feels usable in real life. When parents are told their child needs support but are not shown what that means or how they can help at home, the message rarely turns into action. That is why so many of the strategies leaders mentioned were grounded and accessible: book buses, plain-language family videos, model read-alouds, multilingual resources, and partnerships with libraries, churches, apartment communities, and other trusted messengers. Those ideas work because they meet families where they are and make participation more accessible.

Math brought a distinct challenge to the conversation, in part because summer math can carry an immediate stigma for young people and families. Leaders were direct that some students need intensive support, but they were equally clear that design matters. The question is how to offer that support in ways that build confidence, sustain engagement, and help families see summer as an opportunity for growth. Family math nights, hands-on projects, sports-based math, and stronger communication with families all surfaced as practical ways to make learning feel more accessible while keeping expectations high.

“Some students need extra support to unlock their full potential, and sometimes nine months of school just isn’t enough, and it’s crucial that we identify who needs what help and then deliver it effectively. Ensuring that every student has access to the supports they knew need is critical, and I believe summer provides a unique opportunity to deliver the to deliver those supports.” — Kirsten Baesler, Assistant Secretary, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education

Just as important, leaders returned to the need for continuity: summer planning should build from what schools know at the end of the year, and summer learning data should connect back to students’ experience in the fall. That is what helps summer become part of a broader year-round strategy rather than a seasonal response.

3. Enrichment, relationships, and the rest of the year

Enrichment kept coming up as one of the ways summer programs hold young people’s interest and create the conditions for learning to take root. When a program includes movement, the arts, debate, projects, relationships, identity, or outdoor experiences, participation tends to be steadier, and academic learning is more likely to stick. That is part of why leaders kept describing summer as a bridge rather than a break.

Relationships sat at the center of that idea. Tutors, mentors, coaches, counselors, near peers, and summer staff all came up as adults who can shape what summer means to a young person. In the strongest examples, those relationships are built into the design rather than left to chance. Young people return because they feel seen, and that sense of connection can shape how they experience both the program and their own growth within it.

“What if we worked with you and organizations like yours to reframe summer as a key workforce strategy, not just a break from school, but as a bridge, a bridge to skills, competence, workforce participation, and a stronger talent pipeline.”-- Emily Dickens, Chief Administrative Officer, Society for Human Resource Management

Several leaders also posed summer as a valuable learning space for adults. District teams described it as a time to support newer teachers, pilot new routines, and make room for approaches that are harder to test during the school year. Community providers pointed to shared curriculum, common assessments, and peer learning across sites as ways to strengthen quality without flattening the distinct character of different programs. That part of the conversation was important because it showed summer not only as a service for young people, but also as a place where systems can learn and improve.

The rural examples grounded the section in a different kind of reality. In many communities, the challenge is not a lack of belief in summer’s value. It is the practical question of how to make programs work across distance, transportation barriers, staffing shortages, and small-scale ecosystems. Even so, leaders pointed to a practical truth: the strongest solutions often start with assets already present in the community, including existing organizations, local leaders, alums, faith groups, libraries, and portable programming that travels to children rather than asking children to travel to one central site.



4. Career readiness, workforce, and economic mobility

The workforce conversations were some of the clearest in the forum because they stayed focused on access. Leaders talked less about skills in the abstract and more about whether young people have meaningful, sustained, and often paid opportunities to begin building a future they can see for themselves. Summer is one of the few seasons when a young person can explore work opportunities, earn money, build confidence, and connect with caring adults outside of school.

One of the strongest themes in the workforce conversation was the importance of paid experience as an entry point to future opportunity. Leaders were clear that the quality of those opportunities matters. Internships and workplace experiences are most valuable when they are mentored, supervised, and connected to real pathways. Registered apprenticeships stood out as a particularly strong model because they combine on-the-job learning with related instruction and can extend beyond the traditional trades into fields such as early childhood, nursing, and social work.

“Summer is an exciting opportunity for families, for young people, and to do things differently than we do during the school year... to really reach those vulnerable children, especially at the elementary to middle transition, middle to high and high school to college, where they really need a launch pad into their next step.”-- Bryan Joffe, Director, AASA, The School Superintendents Association

The conversation also pointed to the broader set of skills summer can help young people build. Communication, adaptability, critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving take shape through experience, responsibility, and relationships. Summer gives young people a place to practice those skills in real settings, while also giving employers a chance to connect with future talent in more intentional ways.

Working families were central to the workforce discussion. When summer programs are unavailable, parents often reduce hours, leave jobs, or rely on unstable care arrangements. That makes summer not only an education issue but also an immediate workforce and long-term talent pipeline issue.

“Strong programs, of course, connect youth to real career pathways, but these are not just seasonal jobs or internships. These are programs that are designed to provide early career exposure to professional environments and skills, but clear connections to long term career opportunity.”-- Victoria Adams Phipps, Vice President, Global Philanthropy, JPMorgan Chase

Leaders also pointed to the importance of intermediaries in making these opportunities work. Employers may not have the time, internal language, or staff capacity to design youth opportunities well, and schools or providers may not know who inside a company can actually say yes. Chambers of Commerce, workforce teams, industry associations, and regional intermediaries can help close that gap when they are funded to do more than simply broker introductions.

The AI and STEM conversations extended in the same direction. Young people are often already experimenting with new tools and ideas, and summer can give that curiosity a stronger direction through trusted adults, better guardrails, and closer ties to career-connected learning. Even here, the questions leaders raised were practical ones: Who prepares staff? - Who helps families understand the value? - Who chooses tools thoughtfully? - Who brings in industry? - without letting the experience turn into a sales pitch.



Insights to Action

Why this matters for summer leaders: High-quality summer design brings academics, enrichment, belonging, wellness, and future readiness into one connected experience. Young people are more likely to attend, engage, and grow when the program feels purposeful, supportive, and worth returning to. For summer leaders, strong design means creating experiences where learning is meaningful, relationships are intentional, and young people can see new possibilities for themselves.

What strong implementation can look like:

- Schedules that balance instruction, enrichment, movement, and relationship-building
- Staff are prepared to build trust and notice when young people need support
- Clear and timely communication with families
- Opportunities for youth voice, choice, leadership, and school credit
- Hands-on learning, mentoring, career exposure, arts, sports, outdoor learning, or paid experiences
- Program elements that reinforce each other instead of competing for time

Questions for reflection:

1. Does our program feel like something young people want to attend, not just something adults think they need?
2. Where do academics, belonging, enrichment, wellness, and future-focused opportunities reinforce each other in our design, and where do they still feel disconnected?
3. How do you ensure students and families do not leave their programs without knowing the options for the next year?

How NSLA is Advancing This Work

- Convenes and trains thousands of program leaders through online and in-person events
- Operates 12 year-round Professional Learning Communities on key topics
- Supports cross-sector collaboration through trainings and live webinars
- Provides tools and resources for parents, families, programs, and youth development professionals



PART III: How Coalitions Scale Impact

5. Community partnerships for impact

Strong partnerships need more than goodwill to be effective. In Fairhope, leaders kept returning to the importance of structure: shared goals, clear roles, practical agreements, and a convener with enough trust and legitimacy to keep partners aligned over time. In the strongest examples, someone knew where the funding sat, where transportation challenges were getting in the way, which programs had open seats, and which partners needed to be brought back into the conversation. That kind of coordination and leadership made the partnership feel actionable rather than aspirational.

Cities and funders often played an important role in that work because they could bring together partners who might not respond to school invitations on their own. In places like Tuscaloosa, summer was framed as part of a broader community effort rather than a district-owned side project. That required real work behind the scenes: braiding funding, setting shared priorities, engaging elected officials early, and building outcomes that schools, providers, families, and employers could all recognize as meaningful.

The conversation also pointed to the importance of humility across sectors. Public, charter, private, homeschool, faith-based, and community partners each bring assets and blind spots. The strongest examples did not assume one set of norms would define the work for everyone else. They built shared purpose, low-risk pilots, and co-location where it made sense, and portable programming that expanded participation without forcing every partner into the same mold.

“I think what we all have heard summer is not a break. It should be a bridge. It reinforces what you’ve learned throughout the year. It provides us an opportunity to work with youth in many different ways and ways that have depth, in ways that connect youth to others, that gives them the opportunity to do even more within this concentrated time.” -- Tysha Hardy-Sellers, Program Director, Education and Youth Programs, Lilly Endowment, Inc.

6. Policy, funding, and systems alignment

The policy conversations in Fairhope felt grounded in the same practical question: What makes collaboration easier to do well? Leaders were not asking for abstract support. They were asking for laws, funding structures, and state guidance that help districts and community partners work together more effectively. One of the recurring challenges was that major funding streams still tend to move first through states and districts, even when community-based organizations are essential to designing and delivering strong summer experiences.

Alabama offered one example of how that can start to shift. Requirements helped bring districts and community partners to the table, while clearer expectations, coaching, and template agreements helped turn partnerships that only lived on paper into more practical ones. Other states offered ideas as well. Michigan’s path, for example, emphasized a dedicated statewide out-of-school-time funding stream, a broader coalition, and an intermediary with enough relationships and data to keep the work moving.



“There’s not a lack of people or ideas focusing on summer... We don’t need more ideas for programs. We don’t need more people. What we need is more of an ability to bring them together, to organize and focus on how do we bring more awareness, more funding, more support, more expertise to the people who are already passionate about addressing these issues.” -- Dan Levi, Chief Marketing Officer / EVP, Clear Channel Outdoor

Leaders pointed to compliance culture as a real barrier to effective collaboration. District leaders worry about audit risk, federal program staff often default to the safest reading of what is allowed, and community organizations are invited to partner without the tools, scopes of work, or funding needed to work effectively. As a result, the same needs came up again and again: clear guidance, model budgets, sample agreements, and trusted bridge people who can help partners understand what is possible and how to act on it responsibly.

Rural communities made that challenge even more clear. Policies that assume a deep bench of high-capacity providers can unintentionally create barriers in places where community support systems are thinner, and transportation needs are greater. Better alignment means designing policy that reflects the actual conditions communities are working within, including the need to build capacity over time where it does not yet exist.

7. Measuring what matters

Measurement came up throughout the forum, but the conversations stayed focused on what evidence is meant to do. Leaders were looking for information that could guide decisions, strengthen the public case for investment, and still reflect what summer programs are actually designed to support. That means keeping academic outcomes in view while also recognizing the broader set of results that matter to the young people, families, and communities each program served.

Leaders discussed measurement in ways that reflected what summer programs are actually trying to achieve. Academic indicators like reading growth, math proficiency, attendance, and retention remain important, but they are only part of the picture. Belonging, repeated participation, family trust, and consistent access to books, meals, transportation, and safe spaces also shape whether young people can fully engage. In some communities, an early sign of progress is whether families finally have a summer option they know about, trust, and can realistically use. That may not look like a traditional outcome at first, but it still signals that the system is becoming more useful and more responsive.

Stories were part of that conversation as well. Not because they replace data, but because they help different audiences understand what the numbers mean. Legislators may want statewide trends and cost logic. Families may want to hear what changed for children like their own. Employers may want to understand how summer supports talent development and family stability. The challenge for the field is not choosing between data and story. It is getting better at pairing them, so the case for summer is both credible and human.

“There is now a growing body of research that indicates that young people who regularly participate in organized summer activities... make a big difference in their readiness for school and in life, and it makes a big difference in them having something to do and stay out of trouble. So it’s a win-win from almost every perspective, to offer more engaging summer opportunities across the community all summer long.” -- Terry Peterson, Education Consultant, Mott Foundation



8. From promising pilots to sustained scale



At the heart of this section is a practical question: what helps promising work last? In Fairhope, leaders pointed to a consistent answer. Durable progress rarely depends on a single charismatic leader, a single temporary grant, or a single standout program. It takes shape when communities build the conditions for the work to endure, grounded in shared language, local ownership, and enough public expectation that summer will continue to matter and be a time of engagement for the whole community.

That is why statewide afterschool networks, city offices, backbone organizations, and regional intermediaries appear so often in the strongest summer learning examples. They help ideas travel from one place to another, keep partners connected between funding cycles, and spread training, tools, and lessons in ways that make progress easier to build on. Over time, that kind of connective tissue helps one community’s success become another community’s starting point instead of remaining a distant example.

What emerged most clearly is that scale is less about replicating a single program and more about strengthening an approach to program design that communities can sustain. Shared vision, realistic budgets, trusted communication with families, stronger agreements between partners, youth and family voice, and public stories that can defend the work when conditions shift all matter here. These conditions help summer move beyond isolated success stories and become something communities can sustain, strengthen, and grow over time.

“If someone asks you what NSLA stands for, you can tell them: Needs, Solutions, Leadership, and Action. -- Aaron P. Dworkin, CEO, National Summer Learning Association



What Summer Can Solve

Summer is a time when we have the chance to help close learning gaps and overcome barriers for all young people. It cannot solve every challenge facing young people, families, and communities, but it does offer something unusually valuable: a flexible season where needs become visible quickly, coordination matters immediately, and aligned effort can make a real difference. When summer is well-designed, children participate, families find relief, partners work more closely together, and communities get a clearer picture of what young people actually need.

That is what made the conversations in Fairhope feel so productive and inspiring. Leaders were talking about summer in broader and more practical terms, describing it as a time when states can align literacy policy, district planning, community partnerships, and public funding. They framed it as an imperative time for cities to treat out-of-school time as part of community infrastructure and showed what that looks like through real-world examples. They positioned employers as a resource for creating meaningful paid opportunities. They proved it possible to empower families with the information they need early enough to make informed choices. At its best, summer creates room for young people to find places that feel safe, engaging, rigorous, and worth returning to.

The clearest takeaway from this playbook is that the field does not need a broader case for why summer matters nearly as much as it needs stronger pathways for building programs well. That means funding the connective tissue, pairing rigor with joy, building family communication as carefully as curriculum, paying for transportation, preparing adults to support belonging and growth, using intermediaries, and measuring progress in ways that reflect what programs are actually designed to do. It also means continuing to connect summer to the larger goals leaders already care about: reading, math, safety, workforce, family stability, and community trust.

Insights to Action

Why this matters for summer leaders:

Scale grows from the conditions that allow strong summer work to last, improve, and reach more young people. Clear roles, trusted partnerships, aligned funding, useful data, shared language, and durable infrastructure help communities carry the work forward when people, budgets, or priorities change.

What strong implementation can look like:

- Written partner agreements with clear roles
- Shared planning tables that continue beyond launch
- Common measures that reflect both access and quality
- Coordinated funding strategies
- Family and youth feedback loops
- A clear process for communicating results

- Intermediaries or backbone organizations that help partners stay aligned
- Time in the fall to reflect on the past summer and to start planning for the next one

Questions for reflection:

1. What part of our summer work depends too heavily on one person, one grant, one informal relationship, or one temporary condition?
2. Do we have the structures in place to learn from this summer and make next summer stronger?

A practical next move:

Identify one piece of infrastructure that would make your summer work more durable, such as a partner agreement, shared data plan, family communication calendar, transportation strategy, funding map, or post-summer impact report.

What became clear at the 2026 Summer Solutions Forum is that summer has real power when communities build it together. When schools, families, community partners, employers, and public leaders align around that work, young people gain access to experiences that help them learn, belong, and move forward with stronger systems of support around them. Providing a great summer experience to every young person in the US who wants one is not a dream. It is an important, realistic, achievable goal we can collectively cross off America’s long to do list.

“The conversations that we begin here will stretch our thinking, steady our resolve and return us to our communities with the clarity and courage that this moment in time demands.” -- Brodrick Clarke, Vice President of Programs and Systems Quality, National Summer Learning Association

Insights to Action

Why this matters for summer leaders:

The clearest message of the playbook is that summer has power when communities build it together. A strong summer strategy helps young people learn, belong, explore, and move forward, while also helping families, schools, employers, and communities work in more connected ways. The next step is turning that shared belief into a stronger local practice.

What strong implementation can look like:

- Partners who share responsibility for summer success
- Families who know about and trust available options
- Young people who feel safe, challenged, and known
- Leaders who can explain the value of summer clearly
- Lessons from each summer used to improve the next one
- A stronger case for continued investment

Questions for reflection:

1. What would it take for our community to treat summer as essential infrastructure for young people and families?
2. What did we learn from this playbook that should change how we plan, communicate, partner, or measure our summer work?

A practical next move:

Bring key partners together after summer to review what worked, what families and young people needed, what barriers remained, and what should be planned differently before the next summer cycle begins.

How NSLA is Advancing This Work

For more than three decades, the National Summer Learning Association has served as the trusted national convener, catalyst, and capacity builder for the summer learning field. We recognize that helping young people thrive during the summer requires more than strong programs—it requires strong partnerships.

NSLA works across sectors to connect schools, community-based organizations, employers, government agencies, funders, researchers, and families around a shared vision for expanding opportunity. Through professional learning, technical assistance, research, leadership development, policy advocacy, national convenings, and practical tools and resources, we help communities strengthen partnerships, improve program quality, build local capacity, and create sustainable systems that support young people year after year.

The challenges facing our communities cannot be solved by any one organization alone. By bringing diverse leaders together, sharing proven practices, and investing in the people and partnerships that make summer possible, NSLA is helping communities turn collaboration into action—so every young person, regardless of income or zip code, can access a high-quality summer experience that helps them learn, grow, and succeed.

Now, we invite you to be part of this growing movement. Whether you are an educator, nonprofit leader, policymaker, business leader, funder, researcher, or advocate, your voice, expertise, and partnership can help expand opportunities for millions more young people. Join NSLA as a member, become a strategic partner, share your expertise, and help shape the future of summer learning. Together, we can strengthen communities, elevate the field, and ensure that every child has access to the transformative power of summer.

About NSLA

The National Summer Learning Association works to ensure all of America’s students, regardless of background, income, or zip code, can access and benefit from a high-quality summer learning experience every year.

For more than 30 years, NSLA has worked to combat summer learning loss and close the opportunity gap which research shows grows most dramatically between lower and higher income students over the summer months.

NSLA NSLA convenes, trains and supports a national network of 35,000 programs partners in the key areas of Program Quality, Partnerhsips, Policy, Public Awareness and Leaderhsip Development.

Learn more at summerlearning.org and discoversummer.org

Thank You to the Salon Leaders & Participants

TOPIC: MEETING BASIC NEEDS

“The Youth Mental Health Crisis”

How can summer provide the connections and community young people need?”

“When Sport Becomes a Path to Healing”

Can summer sports be intentionally designed to support healing, safety, and growth for young people?”

“Big Summers for Our Smallest Learners”

In what ways can summer experiences supercharge school readiness and early literacy?”

“Aligning Systems for Kids: The Summer Proof Point”

What happens when policy, funding, practice and youth development lock together?”

“Belonging at the Heart of Youth Thriving”

In what ways can summer camps and other spaces build the safety, relationships, and identity young people need to thrive?”

“The Promise and Potential of Summer Opportunities for All”

Can cities treat out-of-school time as core public infrastructure, not a patchwork of programs and services?”

TOPIC: PROVIDING LEARNING AND ENRICHMENT

“When the Fourth Quarter Changes the Game”

How Can Districts Strategically Shift Summer Learning—and Outcomes?”

“When Summer Math Isn’t Optional”

Can intensive summer math interventions build lasting confidence?”

“Who Gets Reading Power?”

Can summer tip the balance on literacy for kids furthest from opportunity?”

“Character as a Compass in a Turbulent World”

How can summer experiences grow the courage, empathy, and responsibility young people, especially adolescents, need to thrive?”

“Choosing to Be Together in Summer”

Can summer partnerships bring young people across public, charter, private, and homeschool lines into a shared community?”

TOPIC: PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

“When Policy Pulls in the Same Direction”

Can aligned federal and state decisions unlock sustained access to summer opportunities at scale?”

“Who College Still Leaves Out”

Can summer unlock earlier access to campus spaces, guidance, and social capital, reshaping who applies, persists, and has real options?”

“When Summer Is Miles Apart”

How can rural communities design summer opportunities when distance, staffing, and scale look nothing like urban systems?”

“State Systems as Engines of Innovation”

In what ways can statewide summer strategies spark and scale what works?”

“The Centrality of Relationships”

How can summer provide the time and space for tutors, mentors, coaches, and parents to strengthen student achievement all year long?”

“Where the Future Workforce Spends the Summer”

Will summer experiences, jobs, and apprenticeships narrow—or widen—the gaps in who is ready for work?”

“STEM, AI, and the New Workforce”

Will summer be where young people actually try the futures we keep talking about?”

Summer Solutions Leadership Forum Agenda Overview

MONDAY, JANUARY 26 SUMMER IMPROVEMENT	TUESDAY, JANUARY 27 SUMMER INNOVATION	WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 28 SUMMER IMPACT
	SUNRISE EXPERIENCES 7:00 AM - 8:00 AM Yoga, Meditation, Stretch & Reset, Fun Run, Nature Walk, Water Aerobics, Bikes on the Bay. Small groups, registration required BREAKFAST CONNECTIONS 8:00 AM - 9:00 AM PLENARY SUMMER SANDBOX: SCALING INNOVATION AND GROWING THE ECONOMY 9:00 AM - 10:15 AM SUMMER SOLUTIONS SALONS 10:30 AM - 11:45 AM Join cross-sector leaders in a small, facilitated working session to help shape the national Summer Solutions Playbook. NETWORKING ACTIVITIES 1:30 PM - 3:30 PM Meet the NSLA Team and enjoy refreshments. Then choose your own adventure: Bayfront Walk & Talk, The Grand Scavenger Hunt, Bikes on the Bay, Puzzles & Trivia, and more. PLC & AFFINITY MEETUPS AT THE CANNON 3:45 PM - 4:45 PM Sunset cannon fire to remember Civil War casualties when the site served as a military hospital. OPENING PLENARY THE STATE OF SUMMER IN ALABAMA & ACROSS THE US 5:00 PM - 7:00 PM SUMMER LEADERSHIP DINNER 7:00 PM - 8:30 PM EVENING FESTIVITIES 8:30 PM - 10:30 PM Live Music & S'mores by the Fire	SUNRISE EXPERIENCES 7:00 AM - 8:00 AM Yoga, Meditation, Stretch & Reset, Fun Run, Nature Walk, Water Aerobics, Bikes on the Bay. Small groups, registration required BREAKFAST CONNECTIONS 8:00 AM - 9:00 AM PLENARY COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS FOR IMPACT 9:00 AM - 10:15 AM SUMMER SOLUTIONS SALONS 10:30 AM - 11:45 AM Join cross-sector leaders in a small, facilitated working session to help shape the national Summer Solutions Playbook. LUNCH & PLENARY POLICY LEVERS AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT 12:30 - 2:00 PM DESIGN THE SUMMER SOLUTIONS PLAYBOOK 2:15 PM - 3:30 PM Help distill key insights, identify leading strategies, and build the foundation of a National Summer Solutions Playbook, a guide to cross-sector impact to shape the future of summer learning. NETWORKING ACTIVITIES 3:30 PM - 4:30 PM Bayfront Walk & Talk, Make your own scrub, Beer Tasting, Fun Run, Stretch & Reset, Tibetan Sound Bowls SUNSET HAPPY HOUR, BBQ, AND SPECIAL PERFORMANCE AT THE POINT 5:00 PM - 8:00 PM EVENING FESTIVITIES 8:00 PM - 9:00 PM Bourbon & Blankets by the Fire

Thank You to Attending Organizations

A+ Education Partnership	Amara	California Department Of Education	Council Of Chief State School Officers
AASA, The School Superintendents Association	American Camp Association	Camp Fire National Headquarters	Cristo Rey Network
ACA, New York and New Jersey	American Institutes For Research	Camp For All LLC	Developing Kingdoms In Different Stages (Developing KIDS)
Afterschool Alliance	Amp Up Arts	Camp Southern Ground	Downtown Boxing Gym
Afterschool HQ	Andy Roddick Foundation	Camp Twin Lakes	DPL Foundation
Afterschool Labs	Arete Health	Cedar Rapids Public Library	DREAM
Aim High	ARI	Center For Healing and Justice Through Sport	EDFarm
AL Dept Of Early Childhood Education	Arts & Scraps	Central Alabama Marines-Council	EdTrust
Alabama Alliance Of Boys & Girls Clubs	Arts For Learning Maryland	Children's National	Education Commission Of The States
Alabama Commission On The Evaluation Of Services	Ballmer Group	Children's National Hospital	Education Reimagined
Alabama Department Of Education	BCCYMCA	Christian Camp and Conference Association	Engaging Creative Minds
Alabama Department Of Human Resources	Betabox	City Of Charlotte	Erie 1 BOCES
Alabama Education Association	Big Thought	City Of Detroit	Erie County, NY
Alabama Expanded Learning Alliance (AELA)	Bill & Crissy Haslam Foundation	City Of Rochester	ESC Region 11
Alabama Legislature	Black Girls Love Math	City Of Seattle	ESports Creative League
Alabama Office of Apprenticeship	Blount County Education Foundation	Collaborative Communications	Every Hour Counts
Alabama Possible	Boston Beyond	College Admissions Made Possible	Fab Youth Philly
Alabama Power Foundation	Boys & Girls Clubs Of America	Common Ground Troy	FHI 360
All Turtles and mmhmm	Boys & Girls Clubs Of South Alabama	Communities In Schools	First Book
Alliance For Youth Thriving	Boys and Girls Clubs Of The Northern Indiana Corridor	Community Foundation For Southeast Michigan	Fiver Children's Foundation
Allied For Progress	Breakthrough Birmingham	Connecticut State Department Of Education	Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)
	Breakthrough Collaborative	Council Consulting	Gallup
	Building Impact Partners		Georgia Department Of Education

Thank You to Attending Organizations

Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network	Library	NAASS / Syracuse University	Partnership For After School Education
Girlstart	Lavinia Group	Nashville After Zone Alliance	Partnership for Student Success
Good Samaritan Community Services	Learning Heroes	National 4-H Council	PEAR Inc
Grantmakers for Education	Lever for Change	National League Of Cities	Peck + Riemer Consulting
Harlem Children's Zone	Lilly Endowment Inc.	National Parents Union	Phalen Leadership Academies
Harmony Academy At National University	LMcC Consulting, LLC	National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA)	Playworks
Hartford's Camp Courant	Maryland Out of School Time Network	National Summer Learning Association	Policy Studies Associates
Hello Insight	Math Corps	National Summer School Initiative	Portland Public Schools
High Performance Academy, LLC	Max and Marian Farash Charitable Foundation	New Mexico Public Education Department	Positive Coaching Alliance
Hoover City Schools	MENTOR	New Profit	PPS Board Of Education
Horizons National	MetaMetrics	New York Life	Prime Time Palm Beach County
Housing Is	MGT	Newark Board Of Education	Project Horseshoe Farm
Innovative Camp Company	Michigan Afterschool Partnership	NFTE (Network For Teaching Entrepreneurship)	Project Morry
Institute For Educational Leadership	Michigan Department Of Education	NJSACC	Project Play Western New York- CFGB
Institute For Learning Innovation	Michigan Department Of Lifelong Education, Advancement & Potential	North Carolina Center For Afterschool Programs	Prosper
Instructure	Michigan House Of Representatives	NPR and Stable G Productions	Quitman County Board Of Education
Jacksonville State University Regional Inservice Center	MiLEAP	Office Of Senator Elissa Slotkin	Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation
Johnson Sterling	Mizzen Education	Oklahoma Partnership For Expanded Learning	RAND
JP Morgan Chase	Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF)	OregonASK	RTL Foundation, Inc.
Kansas Enrichment Network	Mott Foundation	Orr Group	RWJR
kid-grit	Mountain Empire Unified School District	Partners For Rural Impact	Safe Kids Worldwide
Kinetic West			Safe Kids Worldwide, Children's National Hospital
La Porte County Public			

Thank You to Attending Organizations

SAIL (Summer Adventures In Learning)	The Children's Trust	Washington Hospitality Association
School District Of Philadelphia	The Cullen Foundation Of Western New York	Education Foundation
SCOPE		Waterford.Org
Seattle Public Schools	The Daniel Foundation Of Alabama	Woodcraft Rangers
SeriousFun Children's Network	The GEMS Camp (Girls Interested In Engineering, Mathematics, and	WPS Institute
SHRM Foundation	The Harlem Children's Zone	YMCA of Greater Boston
SkillsUSA, Inc.	The Jed Foundation (JED)	YMCA Of The USA
Smithsonian	The Learning Agenda	Youth Service America
South Dakota Afterschool Network	The Lux School	Zander Media
SPARC	The Skillman Foundation	
Speak The Speech	The STEM Alliance	
State Alliance Of Michigan YMCAs	TIPs	
STEM Next Opportunity Fund	Tumblehome, Inc	
StriveTogether	Tuscaloosa City Schools	
Summer and Executive Education at Barnard College	Tusk Philanthropies	
Summer On Campus Impact	United Stated	
Summer Search	United States Department Of Education	
SUNY Science Of Reading Center	United Way For Southeastern Michigan	
TAJ Global Advisors	United Way Worldwide	
TalentFirst	University Instructors	
Tech Sassy Girlz	University Of Maryland, Baltimore	
The Akribos Group	Urban Libraries Council	
The Annie E. Casey Foundation	Virtual Enterprises International	
The Aspen Institute/Weave: The Social Fabric Project	VOICES For Alabama's Children	
	W.K. Kellogg Foundation	

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