



national summer
learning association

summer opportunities: a research agenda



“In the past decade, interest in summer learning has grown, as has our understanding of it. As NSLA’s agenda suggests, continuing research on increasing access, achieving quality, measuring outcomes and the supports that enable them, will play an important role in shifting summer from a time when disadvantaged students lose ground, to a time of opportunity and growth.” — Ann Stone, Senior Research Officer, The Wallace Foundation



25 years of making summers matter

In popular mythology, the summer months are a welcome respite from the drudgery of school, a time of fun and adventure. But for too many children, summer is something quite different—a time of great peril. That is especially the case for poor children and disadvantaged minority youth. These youngsters fall behind academically during the summer months—many of them far behind—and once behind, they rarely catch up.

That profound insight is the lesson learned from first-generation research into summer learning loss, and its realization is what motivates the work of the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) and its Research Advisory Council, which I chair.

Second-generation research, now underway, poses a different question: How can we push back against the grave peril that summer poses, transforming it into a time of fun and adventure as intended, but also a time that helps children realize their potential? The research agenda put forth in these pages can help guide the way. It is a “need to know” road map, building on lessons learned and identifying the huge knowledge gaps that remain.

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The National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) is a national nonprofit organization focused on the powerful impact of one achievable goal: investing in summer learning to help close the achievement gap. NSLA uses the power of research, advocacy, training, and policy to transform America’s neighborhoods and communities, one child at a time.

For 25 years, NSLA has captured the magic and hidden value of summer. We believe that by investing in summer learning, we can open doors and create better outcomes for young people.

Our work is based on the simple idea that summer—a time that is easily overlooked yet critical to educational development—is bursting with possibility. Smart use of summer learning time is instrumental in closing the achievement gap between privileged children and less-resourced children, and it helps all children reach their full potential. By casting a spotlight on summer learning loss, and galvanizing parents, educators, legislators, and community organizations to embrace the power of summer opportunities, we have created a space for deeper learning and greater achievement for all children.

We founded the summer learning movement to bring attention to the unique opportunity summer offers for building knowledge and addressing the health and well-being of children and young people across the nation. As we approach our next 25 years, we continue to build a foundation for even greater possibilities.



Summer Opportunities: A Research Agenda

The summer learning field is grounded in more than 100 years of research about summer learning loss. The research demonstrates the disproportionate effect on poor and minority youth, the long-term effects on achievement, and best practices for programs and policies.

Today, the landscape for summer learning as a whole is shifting, and research and data needs are evolving with the field. Summer opportunities occur in many more places than just the summer school classroom, and include digital learning platforms, community-based programs with a wide range of academic and enrichment activities and supports, summer programs taking place at community parks and recreation centers, drop-in learning adventures at the library, and even resources put into the hands of families and home caregivers to keep youth engaged during summer.

With a solid knowledge base regarding the problem of summer learning loss and important components of quality for traditional summer programs, the field is turning to more nuanced questions regarding access, quality, and outcomes of summer learning opportunities, with special attention to discovering what works best for particular types of communities or youth living in particular circumstances. Answering these questions helps us understand the network of summer opportunities that needs to blanket a community to ensure that all students remain safe, healthy, and learning during the summer months.

The Research Agenda Framework

This research agenda is organized under **three broad categories** that are central to efforts to move the field of summer learning to the next level on a wide scale and help communities invest in opportunities that will best support the needs of their particular youth.

Under each of these broad categories, common questions arise regarding contrasting characteristics, combined across three domains: environmental, individual, and programmatic.

- ▶ Research to study environmental factors that affect the **quality** of summer programs. Prior studies have indicated largely positive outcomes for specific kinds of summer programs. New studies are needed to clarify the features in a variety of program models that have the most significant impact on student learning, under what conditions, and for what types of youth.
- ▶ Research to study individual factors that affect **access** to summer programs. Though some communities have identified and addressed gaps between service and needs, more research and better data are needed to fully understand who has opportunities to participate in summer programming, where and why gaps exist, and what kinds of resources must be invested to ensure opportunities are available where they are most needed.
- ▶ Research to study programmatic factors that affect outcomes of summer programs confirm the positive effects of summer learning with regard to academic and social/

emotional outcomes. Access and quality matter little if they do not result in measurable and meaningful **outcomes**. A much-needed area of study is the longer-term effect of summer programs on individual youth, as well as their school and community environments.

Most questions about the field of summer learning touch on some combination of these common factors, as we seek to learn more about the kinds of programs that work for particular categories of students, and in what kinds of settings. Particularly under-studied factors include rural communities; youth with intellectual, developmental, and behavioral disabilities; youth learning English as a second language; and youth at middle-level socioeconomic strata.



Individual factors

- ▶ Socioeconomic status
- ▶ Gender Ethnicity
- ▶ Primary language/ English-language learners
- ▶ Achievement level
- ▶ Age/grade level Risk factors



Environmental factors

- ▶ Regional program setting
- ▶ Special opportunities
- ▶ Special barriers
- ▶ Funding opportunities
- ▶ Policy landscape

Programmatic factors

- ▶ Degree of formality
- ▶ Scale
- ▶ Dosage days, weeks, year round
- ▶ Collaboration/ partnerships
- ▶ Curriculum (academic, enrichment)
- ▶ Staffing

Quality

The summer learning field has a strong base of research regarding characteristics of quality that lead to student outcomes. However, this research is limited to a fairly narrow range of program models and settings. Communities that operate many types of programs need to know which quality features to apply under different sets of conditions to maintain or improve outcomes. As communities widen the lens of summer opportunities to include not only traditional academics but also social-emotional development, workplace skills for older youth, and specialized activities like STEM camps or athletic programs, we begin to dig into questions of what quality looks like in these different programs and settings.

Examples of research issues focused on issues of quality

What characteristics of traditional quality summer programming apply in a camp setting, a youth employment setting, a childcare setting, or a home setting?	Environmental
What characteristics of quality matter most for different demographic groups or ages of youth? Do different quality elements matter more for specific groups?	Programmatic, Individual
How do we measure quality of social-emotional instruction? Do these skills have to be taught explicitly? What is an appropriate balance between social-emotional and academic programming, and how do these combinations affect outcomes?	Programmatic
How do quality elements translate to digital learning experiences?	Environmental, Programmatic
How are programs effectively aligning summer experiences with school-year learning?	Programmatic, Individual
How do consistency and dosage, including over multiple summers, interact with quality elements to produce outcomes?	Programmatic
How does what we know about quality of staff translate to specialized programs like STEM learning or physical activities? Who teaches different kinds of programs, and what are the implications for quality and outcomes?	Programmatic

Access

Nationally, about one-third of students are enrolled in a formal summer program each year. While a formal program may not be the right solution for every child, all youth need and deserve the chance to engage in productive summer activities matched to their individual skills and interests. It is up to local communities to ensure youth with fewer home resources have the opportunity to access meaningful activities. As communities dig into the gaps between available services and needs, we have much to learn as a field about who has opportunities to participate in summer programming, where and why gaps exist, and what kinds of resources must be invested to ensure that opportunities are matched to youth and family needs and desires.

Examples of research issues focused on issues of access

Where are youth going for summer services? What are patterns of concentration and gaps in various types of services across communities?	Environmental, Individual
What drives motivation for families or students to participate in summer programs? What barriers prevent students and families from accessing programs?	Environmental, Programmatic, Individual
What kinds of home-based activities do youth of different ages access during the summer months, and what kinds of supports are needed to make these effective?	Environmental, Individual
How do young people, not in formal programs, spend their summers, and what are the benefits and consequences?	Programmatic, Individual
What local, state, and federal resources are tapped to launch and sustain summer opportunities? How do districts consistently fund summer school? What impact do federal, state, local, and district policies have on launch and sustainability of summer programs?	Environmental
How do collective impact strategies improve access to and outcomes of summer learning activities?	Environmental

Outcomes

Research has already shown that specific types of high-quality summer programs have a positive effect on student academics and other outcomes. These outcomes for specific program models have helped the field develop best practices for quality. As communities expand the menu of summer offerings through many types of providers and agencies, new information is needed about how these variations translate to meaningful outcomes for youth. School-based academic outcomes are some of the most important effects that we measure, knowing that summer learning is part of a larger education system. However, we also know that during the summer, students and their capacity to learn are often engaged in ways very different

from school, and in different settings. We also know that summer opportunities create effects beyond the individual student—reaching families, teachers, classrooms, schools, and communities. The field must explore these short- and long-term outcomes in ways that can translate to policy and practice. We also know that summer programs affect students and their capacity to learn in ways very different from school. We also know that summer opportunities create effects beyond the individual student—reaching families, teachers, classrooms, schools, and communities. The field must explore these short- and long-term outcomes in ways that can translate to policy and practice.

Examples of research issues focused on short-term outcomes

Is there a sweet spot of grade level or age that communities should target for maximum impact	Individual
What do students at specific grade levels need during the summer to reach specific academic milestones on time, such as kindergarten readiness, third grade literacy, eighth grade algebra, ninth grade completion, and high school graduation?	Programmatic, Individual
How do we best capture the impact of summer experiences when students return to school?	Environmental, Programmatic
What are the impacts of summer programs in nontraditional settings such as libraries, museums, camp programs, and at home?	Programmatic
How does collaboration between public and private community partners impact outcomes?	Environmental
What is the combined impact of summer and afterschool together?	Programmatic
To what degree does participation in a summer program displace engagement in unhealthy or negative activity?	Programmatic, Individual

How does summer activity impact teacher quality and teacher experience? Is this a valid form of professional development? How do we make it measurably effective?	Programmatic, Individual
How long do the effects of summer programs last? Does participation over multiple summer magnify outcomes? Does impact fade over time?	Individual
How does participation in summer opportunities contribute to college and career readiness? How does exposure to summer experiences lead to college and career choices? Does interest developed during the summer lead to future study?	Individual
How do community investments in summer programs affect key indicators of community health? What is the economic impact of high-quality summer programs that narrow the achievement gap, improve high school and college graduation rates, and reduce obesity-related illnesses?	Environmental, Individual



Data to Inform, Evaluate, and Improve Summer Opportunities

Underpinning these questions are the need for better and more accessible data about youth academic, social, and other needs, and the services and resources that youth and families can and cannot access in the summer and year-round. Without sufficient data to see the problem, communities struggle to implement the right solutions. On a broader scale, policymakers are looking for a more complete and evidenced-based picture of summer to inform the public investments that support and sustain effective programming.

Data is the most powerful tool that communities and researchers have for understanding these issues and developing effective solutions. While some data systems and data sets are robust and useful, lack of sharing, access, and consistency of data create roadblocks to using this information to drive action. Being able to link data

Where could this data come from? Some of the existing public data sets that potentially help answer these questions include:

- ▶ Schools, districts, and state longitudinal data systems
- ▶ State and federal child care subsidy program data
- ▶ State and federal education grant programs, such as the 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) program
- ▶ National district evaluations such as National Assessment of Educational Progress and Trial Urban District Assessment
- ▶ Civil rights education data reports from the states
- ▶ Juvenile justice systems
- ▶ Other non-education federal programs that reach the lives of low-income youth and families, such as nutrition, health, housing, and other services.

“Big data” – information gathered by web-based and other digital learning services offers another window into learning that happens outside of the traditional school day and year. This information is frequently gathered in partnership with schools and districts through contracts and could easily be stripped of personal identifiers and made available to researchers to study the impact of this kind of learning.

Despite these many opportunities, some challenges exist in using these data sets for our purposes:

- ▶ These sources typically do not identify summer-specific activities or outcomes
- ▶ There is a systemic lack of data sharing across agencies, even those that serve the same students and families.
- ▶ Collecting and using generalized, depersonalized, or student-specific data for action or for research purposes requires rigorous protections for security and attention to privacy. While privacy laws do not prohibit data sharing and usage outright, communities struggle to interpret regulations in a way that protects privacy while also building knowledge for action and evaluating program impacts.

In this research agenda, we call for policymakers to support deliberate and thoughtful use of data to drive decision making in community programming and services. Greater collaboration around collecting and reporting data would open doors to understanding many facets of summer learning and how summer programming helps or hinders youth health, academic standing, and safety, and the larger benefits to the community at large.

across systems is a basic need in this area. Having research voices at the table early on ensures that programs are designed to collect the kind of information that allows for future evaluation of impact.

Beyond basic questions of participation and demographics, existing local, state, and federal data systems and longitudinal data sets (with a few modifications) offer an opportunity for researchers to look at summer opportunities over time and examine the role of summer programming in the context of other life factors.



Research Is an Integral Part of Practical Summer Solutions

How does exploration of these questions relate to summer programs and systems currently in progress? How do leaders use this information to guide community-wide solutions and policy changes to launch, grow, and sustain summer learning? Across the country, community and program leaders are working hand in hand with researchers to study, inform, and improve the field of summer opportunities in real time. Policymakers are turning to the best examples to invest in summer opportunities at scale.

Program-Level Research and Improvement

Most summer programs undergo some level of data-driven evaluation, starting with basic inputs and outputs, and striving toward measuring more meaningful outcomes. Some of the most significant national summer programs have engaged in third-party research and deep, rigorous evaluation of their own short- and long-term outcomes and impacts, making significant contributions to the field's understanding of what works in summer learning. When we dig into the research currently underway in these programs, new questions emerge that illustrate potential applications of the framework, and the unique challenges of making the most of the short summer months.

What are the right tools for assessing summer gains, demonstrating progress through curriculum, and making data-driven decisions about daily or weekly instruction on the ground level? An important next step for the field is a comprehensive review of the appropriate tools available to measure summer learning programs. Creating an evaluation "template" for summer learning programs would support a wider research and data knowledge base that allows comparisons to be made across programs, communities, and demographic circumstances. Programs would benefit from a summer evaluation roadmap for starting with the simpler questions about inputs and outputs and moving along a trajectory to more complex and refined questions about impact.

To support this work, the field needs deeper support, training, and professional guidance for programs that are stepping up their research efforts.





Community-Wide Summer Opportunities

Building a summer system takes many steps and commitments. It starts with a shared vision of citywide coordination, with a summer opportunity action plan that looks at many youth services, resources, and outcomes. With engaged leadership, a “summer dream team” of stakeholders addresses issues across the system, including data and evaluation, continuous improvement, marketing and communications, and sustainability. This in-depth, system-wide planning leads to strategic investments in summer opportunities that target issues like literacy, health, summer jobs for youth, and digital or “anywhere, anytime” learning.

Improved collection, use, and sharing of data ensures these investments are thoughtful and impactful, while also raising interesting new questions for study. Mapping of community resources, identifying numbers of youth accessing them, and quantifying budgets and costs for programs within each of these domains are first steps that create vital data for planning future investments. A deeper dive into these efforts illustrates the short- and long-term return on these investments. Creating community-wide systems for data and evaluation lead to higher quality and eventually drive better outcomes as future decision making is grounded in locally relevant research findings.

Examples of Community Research Questions:

- ▶ Where are literacy, nutrition, and recreational resources located, and how do youth access them?
- ▶ What is the relationship between high school summer programming and juvenile crime reduction?
- ▶ What wages do youth earn during the summer, and how do they contribute to a community’s economy?
- ▶ What is the reach of community service projects in terms of youth and community benefits?
- ▶ How does community broadband affect access to web-based services for youth?
- ▶ How do opportunities in a wide variety of learning spaces contribute to achievement of student and community goals?
- ▶ How is key data about students shared and coordinated across partners and agencies, and between summer and school-year operators?
- ▶ How do communities reduce overlap and close gaps in services?
- ▶ What barriers hinder use of existing funds and other resources by a variety of stakeholders?
- ▶ In rural settings, how are distances and low-population densities addressed?

Examples of Program-Based Research Questions:

- ▶ What literacy resources are present in homes, and how do families use them?
- ▶ How many youth are served by formal and informal programs?
- ▶ How do impacts of formal and informal recreation activities differ?
- ▶ What is the relationship between congregate feeding and youth outcomes such as health and academic achievement?
- ▶ What is the relationship between summer college preparatory activity and college matriculation, retention, and completion?
- ▶ How does summer service learning impact student achievement and student high school success?
- ▶ What kinds of resources do youth access through personal technology, and how frequently?
- ▶ How do families engage with online learning together?
- ▶ What role do families play in youth engagement and success over the long term?
- ▶ What do we know about students who are not engaged in a formal summer opportunity?

A LONG-TERM COMMITMENT: MANY COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS SERVE THE SAME STUDENTS OVER MULTIPLE SUMMERS, OPENING THE DOOR TO STUDY THE IMPACT OF THIS KIND OF SUSTAINED INTERVENTION WITH YOUTH AND FAMILIES, AT A VARIETY OF “DOSAGE” LEVELS.

There are larger-scale questions to explore about community collaboration around summer learning, too. What happens when different state-level agencies serving youth collaborate around summer resources and programs? How do rural, suburban, and urban communities address these challenges differently? What are the key relationships between state and local governments that launch and sustain effective solutions? Exploring independent and connected questions at the student, program, local, state, and federal levels are all important as we look to close persistent opportunity and achievement gaps nationwide.

Policy solutions

How does better research and data inform policy in support of summer learning? The National Summer Learning Association's policy priorities are aimed at creating better and more efficient networks of summer opportunities, making the most of existing community resources, and strategically investing where need is the greatest. These policy solutions in turn suggest new sets of research questions to keep the field moving forward.

Examples of Policy Research Questions:

- ▶ Which public and private organizations are operating at the highest quality and generating the best outcomes?
- ▶ What combination of public and private resources is available in a community to support summer learning?
- ▶ Where would strategic investment of new resources have the greatest return?
- ▶ How are resources allocated between the summer and school year?
- ▶ What policies and regulations best support high-quality, effective programming across a community?
- ▶ What are the barriers to effective and efficient community systems?



Conclusion: Recommendations for Implementing the Research Agenda

- ▶ **Researchers** should look at this research agenda as a guide for the next generation of research questions about the field of summer learning. We know that summer learning loss occurs, for whom, and that it can be mitigated through structured academic programs. As the summer opportunity field expands to include many more types of programs and settings, issues of quality, access, and outcomes grow more complex. We need more nuanced answers about who benefits from different types of programs, and under what conditions programs and youth will thrive in the summer.
- ▶ **Parents, students, and families** should have access to information about what makes a quality program, how to choose the right program or summer experience to meet their child's needs, and how to support academic and nonacademic development at home during the summer months.
- ▶ **Communities and programs** should look to disrupt the pattern of addressing issues of access first and quality second. Starting with questions of outcomes would lead to better evaluation early on, providing a strong base from which to quickly bring effective programs to scale. Communities and programs should bring researchers to the table at the outset of planning, to ensure that considerations for meaningful evaluation are factored in at the design phase of efforts.
- ▶ **Owners of critical community, state, and federal data systems** should consider including questions about summer into existing data collection efforts to create a broader base of information to support research efforts. Better general knowledge of field conditions would accelerate the process of getting to more nuanced questions and answers.
- ▶ **Public and private funding** should support training and professional guidance for programs and communities to invest in research efforts, as well as for teachers and others in the education space who could influence the effective use of learning time and resources during the summer months.
- ▶ **Policymakers** should carefully consider the opportunities and barriers that program guidelines create for researching the effects of summer opportunities, and work with local leaders who are already demonstrating great results to thoughtfully bring solutions to scale, while respecting the differing needs and conditions in different communities. Policymakers should engage researchers in the legislative process for expertise around issues like access, cost, and program design.



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