

The Role of Parks in High Quality Summer Learning Programs: Implications for Action in California

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Executive Summary

Regular attendance in high-quality summer programs is associated with a range of positive academic and social development outcomes, including improved skills in literacy and math, successful transition to the next grade, improved self-esteem and leadership skills, increased attachment to the labor market and increased likelihood of future employment. However, research in afterschool has shown that program attendance alone will not make a difference for young people and that as many as half of existing programs show no positive youth outcomes. Rather, it takes a high quality program to make a lasting impact on youth.

The summer space is not without its challenges; summer learning loss is real, documented and contributes to more than two-thirds of the ninth grade reading achievement gap. However, research on nature exposure, play and informal learning has also documented the good news- that parks-based summer programs have an opportunity to stem and even reverse summer learning loss through programs and partnerships that foster positive youth development and outside-the-box learning.

Challenges and Opportunities from Youth Research

Summer learning loss is particularly acute among low-income youth and has lasting consequences in both reading and math. Research suggests that summer learning differences at an early age substantially account for achievement-related differences later in youth's lives, such as whether they complete high school, attend a four-year college, and land a higher-paying job. Parents, particularly low-income parents, consistently cite summer as the most difficult time to find quality programming and care for their children.

The activity levels of children during the summer months are also of particular concern. Studies show that children may be more susceptible to obesity during the summer months. Researchers discovered that once summer vacation from school began, children had lower levels of fitness and increased body fat, as well as increased Body Mass Index. Summer break may result in less structured days for children and fewer opportunities for adult supervision, which could contribute to less physical activity opportunities and a less healthy diet. Particular subgroups are especially at risk, including children who are African-American, Hispanic, and already overweight.

Quality summer programming can address a range of summertime concerns. Parks programs in particular show promise as a way to address summer learning loss, childhood obesity and physical inactivity, and promote developmental assets in a naturally engaging environment. Additionally, nature can have a powerful therapeutic affect on depression, obesity, and attention-deficit disorder, increase children's ability to concentrate and spark a sense of wonder. Studies have found that even brief exposures to nature boost children's cognitive function, reduce stress, and improve test scores. Nature also provides opportunities for experiential learning, either as informal science inquiry or service learning projects.

Designing and Implementing a High-Quality Parks Summer Learning Program

It is not enough to open the doors to youth, families and educators in the summer; summer learning programs must be designed with clear goals and quality structural features in order to promote positive outcomes. Research and practice have documented these key components of a high-quality summer learning program:

- 1. Intentional Learning Experiences with Desired Outcomes
- 2. Evaluation Tied to Continuous Improvement
- 3. Targeted Staff Training/Development
- 4. Relationship Building
- 5. Opportunities for Youth Engagement
- 6. Family Engagement
- 7. Meaningful Linkages

For each of these seven components, research provides valuable insights into best practices that parks can use in developing a strong summer program.

Next Steps for California State Parks

The authors recommend two next Steps for the California parks community to move toward establishing parks staff and programs as leaders in summer learning: regional staff trainings and advocacy and outreach work. Regional trainings for program directors, interpreters and rangers on "Summer Learning 101" are a logical starting place for establishing a shared vision for summer program quality. The California State Parks Foundation could help to build state and local capacity for increasing access to high quality summer learning parks programs by identifying regional leaders to receive in-depth training and resources they could then use to train a wider local audience of parks staff and partners.

Parks currently lack a strong advocacy base in the K-12 education community. Programs such as Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students (PORTS) are an excellent springboard for conversations about deepening partnerships for learning with individual schools, districts and the California Department of Education (CDE). Using this paper as a guide, the California State Parks Foundation can develop a Fact Sheet to support the role of Parks in summer learning and in education more broadly, in conversations with CDE, districts and principals. With budget cuts eliminating many summer school options, opening communication lines with targeted schools or districts will allow Parks to build the goodwill and relationships critical in these times of dire capacity restrictions.

Conclusions

The California State Parks Foundation, in partnership with California State Parks, is well positioned to offer leadership and promote synergistic local and regional partnerships for summer learning. Moreover, change agents such as the California STEM Innovation Network and funders such as the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Stewardship Council are ready audiences for innovation in nature-based learning for youth. With a focus on building the capacity of park entities to implement innovative high-quality summer learning programs, and targeted outreach to schools and other community partners, California State Parks can make sure that summer is a season of life-changing learning for all children and youth.
