

Summer Learning In the Time of COVID-19

It's no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed when and how students learn. It has also shined a light on the importance of out of school time and, particularly, summer learning. Although difficult, it was the right decision to close schools across the state in March and urge families to remain indoors. It helped delay the spread of the disease, which has spiked dramatically over the last few weeks across Arkansas.

Yet, we know that the pandemic has disparately impacted some children and families. The COVID-19 pandemic has widened the existing opportunity gap between children from low-income families and those with greater wealth. This pandemic has also widened the opportunity gap for children in rural communities versus those in more populated cities. For example, it has highlighted inequities in our school systems and communities through issues like the significant digital divide, food insecurities, childcare funding shortages and learning losses that thousands of underserved students and their families face every summer.

According to the National Summer Learning Association, the COVID-19 learning loss combined with the usual summer slide may see a ripple effect for years. The Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) predicts significant learning loss from COVID school closures, especially in math. Their findings project that "students may return in fall 2020 with roughly 70% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year, less than 50% of the learning gains in math, and in some grades, nearly a full year behind what we would observe in normal conditions.

That is precisely why summer learning is more important than ever. As a long-time advocate for the out-of-school time field, I know the last ring of the school bell does not mean learning stops. It merely signals a change in "location" -- a different building, field, gym, or studio or online where apps, tools and content are abundant. This summer learning programs are stepping up like never before. Across Arkansas, providers are adapting and innovating to ensure children and their families can access quality summer learning opportunities and critical supports and services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

More than ever, the resources supporting out-of-school programs are being utilized and community partnerships are stronger than ever. Here in Arkansas, the summer learning community has been called on by medical providers, business leaders, non-profit organizations, government officials, parents and others, to engage in new ways, contribute expertise, and meet local needs.

For example, summer learning programs continue to explore safe ways to host camps and community-based programs, developing virtual and at-home learning experiences that families can do together, while securing funding and policy support to expand summer meal programs in communities experiencing an increase in food insecurity due to job losses and school closures.

Some programs have gone above and beyond to keeps kids and families engaged. Programs like Tendaji CDC in Little Rock are offering families virtual tutoring appointments for core subjects. They also launched a virtual art camp in July, in which students picked up boxes of materials and created at-home art projects by following instructions through an online platform.

Informal quality summer experiences also offer children and youth, of all backgrounds, the opportunity to explore interests and learn in new and different ways that are limited in the school year. With that in mind, a number of summer learning programs and their partners are creating Facebook Live learning videos. The Museum of Discovery and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art are providing STEAM education videos and lesson plans multiple times a week to continue engagement. The Arkansas Regional Innovation Hub is even offering online 3D printer videos to help combat the shortage of personal protective equipment in the state's medical community.

Good summer programs also provide students with access to nutritious meals since many children go hungry during the summer. Research shows that only 1 in 7 youth eligible for summer meal programs received them. Arkansas's summer learning programs are changing that! City Youth Ministries in Jonesboro is another example

of a program that is stepping up, building partnerships and working to help families in need. In addition to helping students build academic skills, the program has delivered more than 2,600 meals to local families since May.

Social distancing hasn't slowed the Boys and Girls Club of El Dorado down over the summer. After ramping up sanitizing protocol, their sites are open and serving kids of all ages. From coding, to art class, physical education to cooking and core subjects, the club is working to make sure kids don't fall behind because of the pandemic. Not only are the clubs working diligently to keep kids engaged, they're also closing the summer opportunity gap.

In the aftermath of this pandemic, there will be no shortage of assessments examining where society did well and where systems failed the public, including in education. However, there is no question that summer learning providers expanded their reach, delivered learning programs and supported parents, educators and entire communities in new, innovative and meaningful ways.

In the long term, the question for providers, policy makers and decision makers is how best to utilize the full range of resources available. As we prepare to start the upcoming school year, it is important to focus on that question and come together around concrete solutions for communities across the state and country. For now, the needs are immediate, urgent and call for nimble organizations to shift resources and solve what requires fixing. Summer learning providers are responding quickly and in innovative ways.