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Q&A: How States Can Improve Summer Learning

By [Nora Fleming](#) on July 19, 2011 9:50 AM | [No comments](#) | [No recommendations](#)

Some leaders in California are working to increase the options, availability, and quality of summer programs in the state, particularly for low-income kids.

In 2008, a bill established a [legislative task force on summer learning](#) to make research-backed recommendations to California officials on how to meet the needs of the state's underserved children in the summer. The task force has been [advising state leaders since](#), including generating recent legislation that may enable California to use state and federal after-school funding to build summer programs and make summer learning a priority in future efforts. According to the [National Summer Learning Association](#), California is one of only two states that are pushing legislation to increase summer programs in their states. (Rhode Island is the other.)

Jennifer Peck, executive director of the [Partnership for Children and Youth](#), a Bay-area nonprofit that works with schools and organizations to build quality out-of-school time programs, helped establish the state's task force on summer learning and serves as its leader. Peck, who worked at the federal Department of Education for eight years advising and facilitating education initiatives, is also the senior policy adviser to California Superintendent of Public Instruction [Tom Torlakson](#).



Peck shared information about the variety of funding opportunities for summer programs, the importance of data-driven accountability and quality programming in summer learning, and how summer programs can play an important role in combating childhood obesity.

Q: Given the declining stimulus funds many districts have used to support summer programs these past few years when their budgets were tight, what other federal sources can districts turn to? Are the additional decreases in [21st Century Community Learning Center \(CCLC\)](#) funding, and great competition between after-school programs for this funding, making it less likely that these funds can be used for summer programs?

A: Districts can choose to use Title I for these programs, and some do, but it's the exception rather than the rule, particularly in this budget environment when there are so many other demands for those dollars during the school year. Our 21st CCLC dollars have held relatively steady, but a vast majority of those dollars in California are dedicated to school-year programs. We have been working to change that through state legislation—we believe these dollars should support year-round learning opportunities for students. Some districts have used [federal] School Improvement Grants for summer learning. We'd like to see more of that happen but also recognize that those SIG funds are time-limited like the stimulus dollars.

Q: There is building support from the private sector for summer programming. What thoughts do you have on getting more donors behind this "movement" and how existing programs (and schools) can continue to build this support to enhance their programs?

A: I don't think there's any way we can ever provide summer learning programs for all kids who need them without the support of the business and philanthropic sectors. Our experience has been that once you talk to



people about the research—what's really happening to hundreds of thousands of children in our state in the summertime and the effect it's having on the achievement gap and on children's health—they get it and are open to playing a role. It's our job to find meaningful and effective ways for the private sector to contribute and make sure we are effectively and continuously communicating the results of their investment. We are currently working with our partners in philanthropy who are already invested in this issue to come up with some specific strategies to dramatically increase private investment in summer learning programs in California.

Q: While talk of "summer slide" (and the research to support its existence) is common, there are fewer studies and discussions on the ramifications the summer months can have on children's health. One of the recommendations your task force makes is building summer programs that also focus on nutrition. What suggestions do you have for executing this and using summer programs to help curb growing rates of childhood obesity?

A: Research from University of California, Irvine, and other studies, such as the work of Ohio State University statistician Paul von Hippel, show that low-income children gain weight more rapidly in the summertime, we presume, because they lose access to organized school-year physical-activity programs, and they lose access to school meals, which may be healthier than what they eat at home. We know many children in poor neighborhoods are more sedentary in the summer, either because their families can't afford summer programs, or it may not be safe to play outside in their neighborhood.

The best solution here, like for prevention of learning loss, is to get more kids—and particularly the most vulnerable kids¹⁵¹;into summer programs. The [National Summer Learning Association](#) sets the quality standard for physical activity as at least 30 minutes per day. NSLA also encourages activities and structures that encourage all youth to participate. These quality standards—based on successful programs across the country—are an important tool in guiding programs to practices that will have an impact on youth. Also, offering free food is another NSLA standard that helps combat obesity. Many summer programs are able to offer meals and snacks through the federal summer meals program. This food may be the only balanced meals that young people in very low-income communities get, and may prevent their filling up on snacks and junk food with high calories but little nutritional value.

[Nora's Note: A study [that just came out](#) from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education urges 60 minutes of exercise daily for children and youths.]



Q: The importance and value of data-sharing is often discussed in the OST realm. How can we improve the data-sharing between summer programs and schools when many are not as closely linked as are programs during the year?

A: We see this in the same way we see the importance of data-sharing between after-school programs/providers and schools. It's essential that each player in a student's learning continuum understands where the child is, where the child needs to be, what's working and what's not. Our most successful after-school programs in California are ones that have data-sharing agreements with schools so that they can regularly assess student progress and tweak the programming to maximize after-school learning time. In most cases, the after-school provider is the same as the summer provider, offering the opportunity to continue those data-sharing agreements into the summer.

Ideally school staff and summer program staff are co-planning the summer program - jointly developing learning goals for targeted students based on school-year performance data, jointly designing programming and activities that will supplement and reinforce school year learning, and agreeing on appropriate assessments for the summer program.

Q: One of the recommendations the task force made was to have summer programs serve as

"laboratories of innovation" that can help drive school-year reforms. Can you expand on how the summer might be a time to experiment with teaching and programming that could lead to best practices during the school year? How can we link summer and the traditional year but still keep summer distinct and not "more of the same"?

A: In the summer, when there are fewer constraints on teachers and youth workers to fit within a particular frame of time, schedules, and content, they have more freedom to test strategies and approaches to instruction that may be difficult to employ during the school year. We've seen this concretely in several of the communities that we've been working with. In Whittier City school district, for example, the credentialed teachers have been very enthusiastic about the opportunity to teach standards-based content in new and creative ways. They have been excited to bring more hands-on projects into their school-year classrooms because they've seen how engaged and motivated students become.

Across the board, teachers understand that high quality instruction involves the type of flexibility, creativity and integration of academics and enrichment that is possible during the summer. Alignment between summer and the school year is happening through the teachers and youth workers who interact and support each other in the summer programs and translate their experiences for school day and after-school teaching. We would expect that more formal information sharing will take place¹⁵¹;back and forth between school day, summer, and after-school, as teachers and administrators continue to see the impact that out-of-school time programs are having on their students.

Q: What expectations do California OST leaders have with the new state administration in regards to efforts expanding and promoting extended learning programs? Do you think building a sustainable summer program model (like the state's after-school model) is realistic, aside from the major public-funding hurdles you face?

A: We think it's possible and we think it's essential, but it won't be quick.

But we have a few really promising things going for us in this regard in California. Our new state superintendent of public instruction, Tom Torlakson, is a longtime advocate for after-school programs, dating back to his time in the legislature, and really understands the importance of summer learning programs. He is a critical partner in thinking through how we can utilize existing dollars to support summer programming as well as thinking about how new education revenue in the future can help support summer learning. Second, we have a growing number of state legislators who have been paying attention to the research and stepping forward to support legislation that addresses summer learning. Additionally, we are in the third year of piloting and building a cadre of summer programs in California that are employing research-based practices (such as full-day programming that blends academics, enrichment, and recreation; has clear learning goals; and has commitment to ongoing improvement). This Summer Learning Initiative, which is generously supported by the [David and Lucile Packard Foundation](#), leverages existing public dollars and is allowing us to demonstrate what's possible in California communities. The data and the stories we are collecting from these programs help us build the case across the state that summer learning matters.



Photos:

Jennifer Peck, executive director, Partnership for Children and Youth. (Courtesy of Partnership for Children and Youth)

Sacramento students celebrate Summer Learning Day on June 21 at the Capitol. (Courtesy of Center for Multicultural Cooperation)

California Sen. Mark DeSaulnier speaks on the importance of summer learning at the Summer Learning Day event in Sacramento.

(Courtesy of Center for Multicultural Cooperation)

California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson gives a science lesson at the event. (Courtesy of Center for Multicultural Cooperation)