

1

Getting a Head Start on the Common Core

How education leaders can use summer programs to stop summer learning loss, and build student and staff capacity to succeed in the new Common Core environment.

Partnership for Children & Youth
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Summer Learning Gives Students Expanded Time to Build Common Core Skills

As school districts in California continue their transition to the Common Core State Standards, they face many challenges. Not the least of these is helping students adapt to changes in what is expected of them and what constitutes success in school.

Educators have to navigate this change while under continuing pressure to provide extra support to lower-achieving students and dramatically improve their educational outcomes. At the same time, teachers are having to adjust their instructional strategies and lesson plans to address Common Core standards.

Evidence from summer learning programs operating in California in 2013 suggests an innovative approach to addressing these challenges. These high-quality programs can prevent the summer learning loss that keeps students back and frontload some of the skills students need to succeed in a Common Core learning environment. They can also give teachers time and flexibility for experimenting with new strategies and curriculum.

A Summer of Learning Instead of Learning Loss

Research shows that the lack of opportunity for summer learning can hurt high-need students, regardless of what happens during the school year. Cuts to summer school common in recent years throughout California, exacerbate the problem. The students who could benefit most from summer learning opportunities instead lose some of the knowledge and skills they gained during the prior school year. That can leave them even further from the deeper learning and habits of mind called for in the Common Core.

Since 2009, the Summer Matters Campaign has supported the creation, operation, and evaluation of high-quality summer learning programs for students from low-income communities in California. The hallmark of these programs is an intentional synergy and balance between the remediation often found in traditional, district-run summer schools and the fun engagement of summer camps. *(See the box on page 4 for more about the Summer Matters Campaign.)*



Engaging Experiences Invite Critical Thinking and Innovation

The educators and staff at these programs emphasize learning that excites students in new ways about reading, science, writing, and math. For example, all use project-based learning to engage and empower children and youth. School agencies are finding that these summer learning programs, in contrast to some of their previous practices, are consistent with instructional strategies recommended for the Common Core.

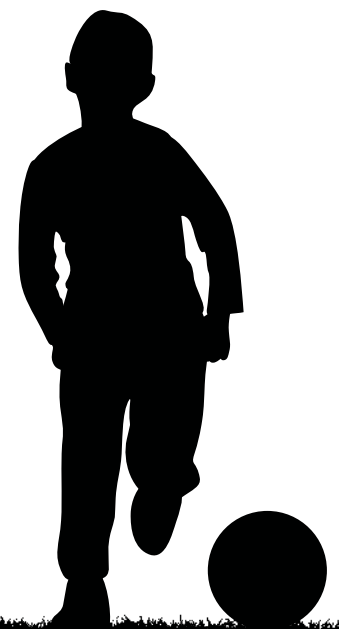
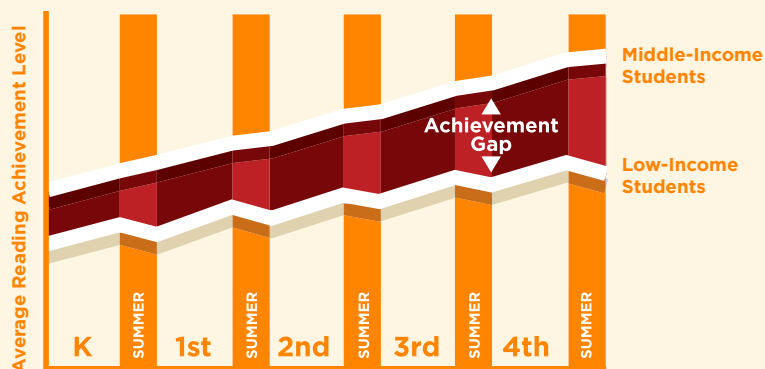
Through their experiences during the summer of 2013, children and youth from some of California's highest-need communities participated in activities and learning experiences that prepared them for the new expectations they will face under the Common Core. They tackled complex open-ended questions. They made active choices related to what they were learning. They worked collaboratively in all different types of group settings. They connected themes and knowledge across subject matter areas. They honed their communication skills through the use of media as well as through public speaking. In short, they were given a head start on the new learning standards they and their peers will be encountering.

This report describes some of those student experiences. It also explains the unique opportunity the summer programs gave educators working to implement the Common Core. They were able to experiment with new lesson plans and instructional strategies, assessing their effectiveness in a low-pressure, but very genuine learning environment.

“A century’s worth of research has documented that young people lose academic skills over the summer break. These losses, especially in reading, accumulate to contribute significantly to the achievement gap between low-income youth and their middle-income peers. Summer learning loss also holds students and schools back from reaching higher performance targets required to get young people ready for college and careers, such as the new Common Core State Standards.”

The National Summer Learning Association

Reading Achievement



High-Quality Summer Learning Programs Supported by the Summer Matters Campaign

In 12 California communities, the Summer Matters Campaign has helped education leaders and their community partners create, operate, and refine a new breed of summer learning programs. The instructional strategies they use are strikingly similar to ones recommended for implementation of the Common Core. The programs focus on strengthening students' critical thinking skills, problem-solving ability, collaboration with their peers, and confidence in their own ability as learners.

The local education agencies offering these free summer learning programs depend heavily on their after-school providers to develop and operate the programs. This keeps operating costs down while building the skills and knowledge of after-school staff. In every community, credentialed teachers play important roles: coaching the program staff, reviewing curriculum, and/or teaching specific content. A variety of partners also contribute to the program, including local libraries, parks, and community-based organizations.

Evaluation and continuous improvement are integral to these programs, which serve elementary and middle-grade students. The programs set up specific student outcome goals such as improved reading fluency, stronger information-gathering skills, greater nutrition awareness, and practice at public speaking.

As partners in the Summer Matters Campaign, all of the programs also use a common tool to assess their quality. The Comprehensive Assessment of Summer Programs (CASP), created by the National Summer Learning Association, provides a set of metrics that program directors and evaluators use to continuously improve program planning and implementation. The programs work closely with a growing network of technical assistance providers around the state to get training and coaching to improve specific practices identified using the CASP.

With this intensive focus on quality, the Summer Matters partner communities have built model summer learning programs that are strongly supported by school leadership and community partners. Increasingly, statewide education organizations, superintendents, school board members, and the media point to these programs as the right way to do summer learning.



Summer Matters is an initiative of the Partnership for Children & Youth and its partners at The David & Lucile Packard Foundation, the National Summer Learning Association, ASAPconnect, FowlerHoffman, PR & Co. and Children Now.

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- The David & Lucile Packard Foundation
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- Noyce Foundation
- PG&E
- Irene S. Scully Foundation
- The Fort Fund
- Give Something Back Office Supplies

Summer Learning Programs Demonstrate Strong Linkages to the Common Core's Learning Objectives

Staff members from the 2013 Summer Matters Campaign partner programs unanimously reported a high level of engagement among their young participants across multiple activities that align with the Common Core standards. They produced work that had a purpose and value, created tangible products or performances, and presented or shared their work with others. As examples from the programs illustrate, much of this was done through projects that challenged students to think critically, hone their academic skills, explore new concepts, make connections between their schools and communities, and develop their ability to present what they learned.

Project-Based Learning Challenges Children and Youth to Solve Problems and Work Collaboratively

Project-based learning provided the backbone for every one of the partner programs. Through their projects students worked collaboratively to complete some type of culminating performance or activity that capped off their four-to six-week experiences. The age of program participants—in this case either elementary or middle-grades—shapes the scope and ambition of the projects and dictates the balance between student and staff-driven choices.

At Broad Avenue Elementary, the program run by L.A.'s BEST revolved around the theme of "Exploring Countries of the World." The kindergarten to 5th grade youngsters learned about what builds a strong identity for a country, including languages, flags, food, customs, art, and music. They began their experience by exploring these aspects of five different countries with each classroom decorated to represent a different country. They wrote down what they learned in "passports" which functioned as learning journals.

The final project for the students was to create their own countries. They worked in groups, using what they had learned and their own imaginations. The program ended with the children sharing flags they had made to symbolize their countries, clothes they had designed, art they had created, and performances they had carefully rehearsed.

In Sacramento City Unified School District, the junior high programs were based on a "Summer of Service" theme. At Sam Brannan Junior High, the seventh and eighth graders began their summer experiences by identifying issues in their community. The students were then grouped based on their interests and together decided what kind of project they could do to address their issue.

- The recycling group developed an awareness campaign, collected recyclables to raise money, and then purchased reusable canteens for all the students in the summer program.
- A group concerned about preventing drug and alcohol use decided to create lessons for parents so they could recognize language that could be a warning sign.
- Youth who wanted to help the homeless learned about related community services and prepared a meal for occupants of a nearby shelter.

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The program staff was trained in how to facilitate and guide student choices, but the goal was to put the planning and management of the projects into student hands to the greatest degree possible. The district provided a conceptual framework around the theme of service learning. It also developed a strategy for helping the students move from a diffuse concern to a specific project.

That strategy, called the “Change Agent Tree,” provided both staff and students with experience using open-ended questions to develop understanding and meaning. Once a community problem had been identified, the staff used a process of asking five “Why” questions to help the students hone in on what they could realistically do to address the problem within the constraints of their time, resources, and sphere of influence. After the students had chosen their project, they had to create a timeline and budget for it, laying out a plan that included fundraising, and developing milestones to mark their progress toward completion.

Results from the Comprehensive Assessment of Summer Programs

Program activities reflect an intentional focus on meeting learning goals that are consistent with the Common Core



Combined Score
All Programs

Critical Thinking: Staff use open-ended questions and encourage youth to use critical thinking to extend their answers and draw conclusions through analysis of information.



Daily Learning Objectives: Staff communicates daily learning objectives at the group or program level that are connected to youth outcome goals.



Debriefs/Checks for Learning: All staff use debriefing techniques, recall and checks for understanding during and at the end of each activity. Staff may ask participants to recall factual information, make generalizations, inferences or real-world applications based on what they have learned.



Skill Building: Most activities are intentionally linked to age-appropriate academic and developmental skills and work to build subject matter expertise and skill mastery through deep analysis of a subject or idea.

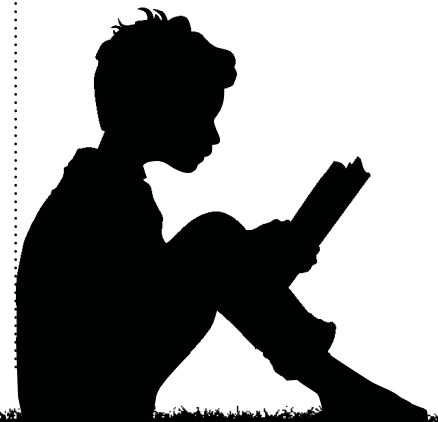


These scores are based on intensive quality assessments done for each program that measure the extent to which programs are intentionally implementing these strategies. Staff use the data to identify specific practices that need to be improved for the next summer. Score definitions: 1 = Basic; 2 = Emerging; 3 = Proficient; 4 = Exemplary.

Open-Ended Questions and Assignments Support Critical Thinking Skills

The use of open-ended questions and inquiry-based learning were also integral to the summer program for kindergarten to 5th grade children at Orange Grove Elementary in the Whittier City School District. The culminating project there was closely aligned to the book that set the theme for the summer: *How to Eat Fried Worms* by Thomas Rockwell.

The book provided a catalyst for children to think about and describe what they themselves know how to do. Led by the credentialed teacher who was part of the summer program staff, the final project was also aligned with a new writing genre the district was working with as part of its Common Core implementation.



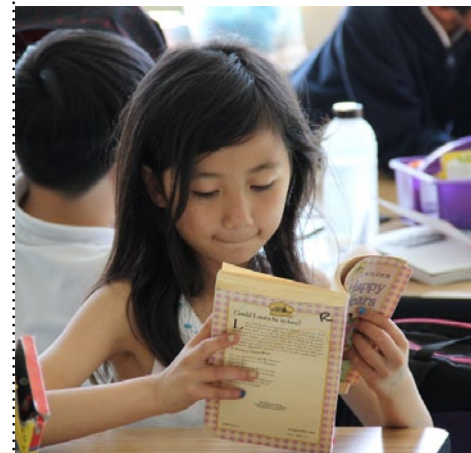
The teacher had every child focus on one area of expertise they felt they had. He began by asking them several open-ended questions that used the book as a jumping off point but led them to think deeply and respond uniquely. They then had to write about how to do that activity and prepare a lesson they could teach their classmates. The basic task was the same for everyone, but the expectations were differentiated based on students' interests, ages, and abilities. By the end of the program, the children had written and published their own "How To..." books and presented their new-found knowledge to their peers.

"It opened up their willingness to write," said the teacher. "Kids often don't see themselves as having anything to write, but when it's about them and what they know how to do, it's different. They were comfortable sharing it on paper and a lot of them really embraced the challenge of presenting it out loud as well. Some also identified deficiencies in their own explanations based on the reaction they got from other students, and they went back and improved on what they had written."

A book choice also set the theme at Central Enrichment Summer Adventures (CESA), a middle-grades program at Central Unified School District that is operated by the Fresno County Office of Education (FCOE). The common experience of everyone reading the book *Gone*, by Michael Grant, created a platform for vocabulary development across all the activities youth participated in during the six-hour daily program.

In planning for this shared reading experience, the program manager at FCOE developed lesson plans consistent with Common Core reading goals. The summer staff members were trained to use these "Think Out Loud" approaches to deepen student engagement with and comprehension of the book they were reading and to help them develop critical thinking skills.

Reading together enabled the staff to gain experience with multiple grouping strategies. **At CESA, youth chose each day whether to read by themselves, join small groups, or do a whole group "pop-corn" reading with everyone taking a turn reading aloud. The staff reported that giving middle graders this kind of choice increased the students' interest in the reading and addressed the needs of readers at various skill levels.**



"Think Out Loud" Approach to Reading Comprehension at CESA

A key learning objective for the reading portion of the CESA program was to strengthen students' comprehension skills. The staff were trained on how to use a variety of instructional strategies for doing this. Some examples of student activities during the reading period included:

- Discussing what happened previously.
- Making predictions about what will occur next in the book.
- Taking notes or highlighting passages while they read and asking themselves questions.
- Validating or restructuring their predictions and making new ones.
- Talking about the day's reading and summarizing what happened.
- Discussing the content and making associations with something in their past or present.
- Using a timeline for the book to identify the main events as a group.



Student Voice and Facilitation Opportunities Strengthen Speaking and Listening Skills



In every summer learning program, the culminating activity provides children and youth with the chance to give a performance they have practiced. This may be a skit, a film they produce, or a clinic where they teach younger children a new skill.

Beyond these kinds of formal speaking opportunities, however, the day-to-day programs encourage their young participants to speak up and also to listen to each other, a key skill area in the English Language Arts portion of the Common Core. In Fresno, for example, staff are trained to prompt students to “stand and deliver,” requiring that they speak loudly and clearly and think through their responses before speaking. These kinds of activities have particular value for students who are learning English.

Another way this occurs is through an intentional focus with the students on the objectives behind many activities. These learning objectives are prominently displayed and discussed when the activity begins, whether it’s a reading session, part of their project work, or even a sports activity.

At the end of the activity, the staff member conducts a debrief, giving the students a chance to reflect on how things went, what they learned, and whether the objective was met.

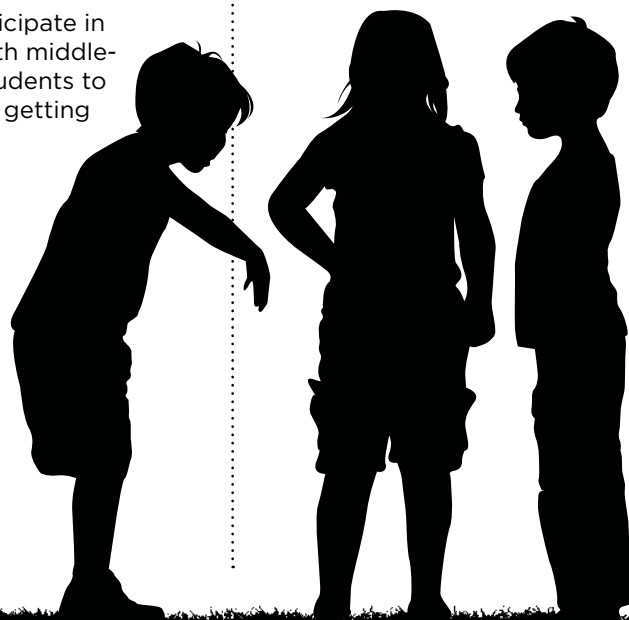
In some of the programs, students are encouraged not only to participate in whole group discussions, but also to facilitate them. Particularly with middle-grades youth, staff at times purposely step back and require the students to run things. At Sam Brannan Junior High, the program had a goal of getting to the point where 80% of the class activity would be student-led.

Summer Program Themes Naturally Support Subject Matter Integration

Whether it was based on a book selection or something else, every Summer Matters partner program created a theme of some kind. The themes provide a powerful and natural way for staff to integrate multiple subject areas and activities together.

At Noble Elementary, operated by L.A.’s BEST in LAUSD, the staff and students chose a superhero theme. The idea of heroism provided the basis for the children, ages kindergarten to 5th grade, to learn about their community and themselves.

“The day-to-day programs encourage their young participants to speak up and also to listen to each other, a key skill area in the English Language Arts portion of the Common Core.”



One particularly important strategy was the strong use of children’s experiences and a context they were familiar with as the basis for teaching them vocabulary.

The summer program took full advantage of this authentic use of sophisticated vocabulary to strengthen children’s literacy and expose them to a variety of other skills consistent with the Common Core. For example:

- Vocabulary development was part of every day activity and included concepts like civic awareness, heroes, and villains.
- The children explored these concepts further through art and physical activities.
- They developed their media awareness by dissecting the various aspects of video—such as scripts, sets, and actors—in preparation for creating their own short film.
- Their “movie trailer” project also introduced them to the use of video equipment for filming and editing.

SFUSD’s Hillcrest Elementary took a distinctly different approach. The program’s theme, “Project San Francisco,” tied academics to an exploration of the school’s home city. The children and staff took multiple field trips every week, including walking to the local library, taking public transit to the Maritime Museum, or riding a charter bus across the Golden Gate Bridge to nearby Tomales Bay.

Before heading out, the children researched the places they were going and in the process learned about the rich history and distinctive neighborhoods of San Francisco. When they were out and about, they sketched what they saw or wrote in their journals. Second graders were introduced to the field of structural engineering while exploring the geometry underlying the construction of the city’s famous bridges, which they then rode across on their field trip. Another class created a scale model of the places they visited, in the process practicing ratios while “building San Francisco” during their six-week program.

Results from the Comprehensive Assessment of Summer Programs

The program builds skills, knowledge, and behaviors that promote academic success and healthy development. As recommended in the Common Core State Standards, activities blend academic and social-emotional development strategies.



Combined Score
All Programs

Thematic learning: Program is designed to make clear connections for youth among all regular classroom experiences, field trips, and special events through projects or thematic units.



Inquiry-based learning: Most activities involve a hands-on, kinesthetic or project-based component that allows youth to engage in in-depth investigations and draw meaning and understanding from those experiences.



Collaborative learning: Most activities promote collaborative learning and interdependence among youth. Successful completion requires youth to work together to produce a product or display of their shared learning.



Multiple grouping strategies: Most activities show a blend of large group, small group, and individualized instruction.



These scores are based on intensive quality assessments done for each program that measure the extent to which programs are intentionally implementing these strategies. Staff use the data to identify specific practices that need to be improved for the next summer. Score definitions: 1 = Basic; 2 = Emerging; 3 = Proficient; 4 = Exemplary.

Credentialed Teachers Use Summer Programs as a Learning Laboratory

Will C. Wood Junior High is one of Sacramento City Unified School District's high-priority schools, and the district is pushing to see a turn-around in student performance. One part of the school's improvement strategy is the use of project-based learning to better engage and motivate students, a strategy that is consistent with the Common Core, but that really challenges teachers to change their practices.

The credentialed teachers who worked as staff in the summer program used the experience to develop and try out some of those new approaches that they could then repeat and share with other teachers during the regular school year.

One teacher developed a garden project that required students to gain an understanding of history, science, and nutrition. They then translated that knowledge into lesson plans for other students as part of the Summer of Service. They also designed table-top displays for the school garden, bringing math, writing, and art skills to bear in the process.

Having taught in the summer program the previous year, this teacher saw how the experience affected the students. **"They start back to school in September knowing things. I see Summer of Service kids speaking the language they learned during the summer, so for example they understand what it takes to plan and do a project. They understand everything it includes."**

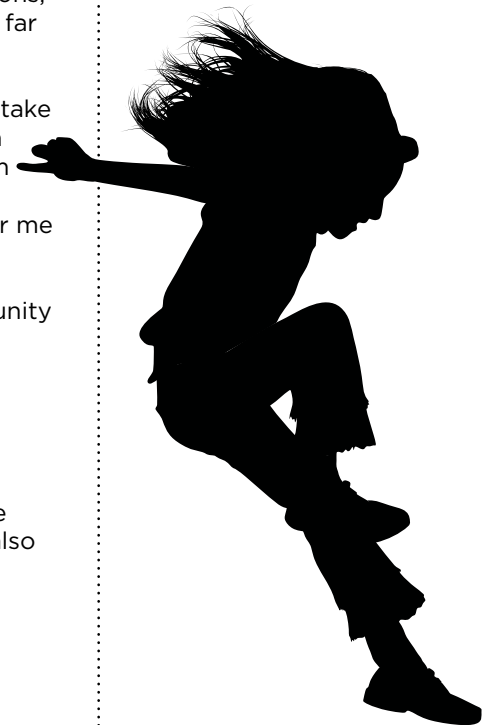
"This summer program is a nice way to get the kids used to less structure and a great way for me to try out new things, new ideas, and new projects."

Another teacher taught a summer robotics class. As their service project, the summer participants chose to create a user's manual for elementary students interested in robotics. The students first had to learn how to use the robotic kits, and, as they did programming, they also wrote instructions that younger students would be able to follow. The teacher supported their work by making suggestions, but they carried the project forward, edited each other's work, and often went far beyond what she expected.

As she explained, "Letting kids work on their own is a huge thing. It's going to take a lot for students to realize that's going to start happening under the Common Core. As teachers we need to train ourselves on those techniques. The problem is that we don't have time to experiment during the school year. This summer program is a nice way to get the kids used to less structure and a great way for me to try out new things, new ideas, and new projects."

Teachers in the Whittier program expressed similar enthusiasm for the opportunity summer gave them to develop new lesson plans and try out project-based approaches. One teacher who was preparing to teach an 8th grade remedial reading class said, "I will use all of the strategies we developed in summer to implement into that class in the fall. I've been teaching for 20 years, and I love working with this staff and being part of the team."

In other programs, the districts used summer training sessions to introduce the overarching goals of the Common Core to the program staffs, most of whom also work in their after-school programs.



High Quality Summer Learning Programs Come in Various Shapes, but All Commit to Continuous Improvement



The strategies summer staff use—and the challenges they confront—vary in part based on the ages of the children they are working with.

In elementary school programs, the themes need to work across a wide age range, typically K-5th grade. The activities children do must be differentiated in order to be developmentally appropriate. Opportunities for student choice are generally more limited, and the programs typically keep like ages together. Some rotate staff among the age groups to provide children with a wide range of activities while others keep children largely with the same staff all day.

In programs serving middle-grade youth, the age groups are more likely to be mixed together based on students' interests. Students have more choices and more responsibility for directing their own activities. For this age group, one key marker of success is that the kids show up each day. Given that the programs are voluntary, they “vote with their feet” as one staff member said.

Across the board, participants were enthusiastic about the programs. Nearly nine out of ten students responded on surveys that they both learned something interesting in the program and felt a sense of belonging.

Programs Provide a Training Ground for Common Core Skill Development

While each program looks different, high-quality summer learning programs also share many characteristics, several of which support the learning goals of the Common Core State Standards. For example, on a staff survey conducted at several Summer Matters partner sites, all respondents reported that children and youth in their programs were supported in understanding other perspectives and cultures; and in making sense of problems and persisting in solving them.

The staff members were also nearly unanimous in reporting that youth made day-to-day choices about the activities they participated in, the groups they worked with, and the materials they used. Results from the CASP evaluations affirmed that this practice was common across all the programs and generally well done.



The programs also universally give both staff and students experience with the kind of project-based learning that is recommended as part of Common Core implementation. Those projects—and the camp themes more generally—provide a natural way to create an integrated learning experience that connects multiple subject areas. They also create the kind of performance opportunities that engage students and facilitate their development of speaking and learning skills, plus their use of new learning technologies.

Technical Assistance Builds Program Quality and Staff Skills over Time

The ability to implement these kinds of innovative practices requires an intentional and consistent focus on quality. Each Summer Matters partner program is supported in its quality improvement efforts by a technical assistance (TA) provider, a local expert in after-school and summer programming who supports program managers and staff in building effective infrastructure, practices, and skills.

These TA providers work with program leads to review data, identify areas for improvement, and plan specific strategies to make those improvements. Around Common Core practices, for example, many TA providers in the Summer Matters network trained program staff on multiple grouping strategies, learning objectives and debriefs, and the use of open-ended questions. Extensive self-evaluation, including data collection, assures that the lessons from one summer are used to make improvements the following year. These continuous improvement practices are familiar to districts and, when done well, will play a valuable part in partner districts' successful implementation of the Common Core throughout the year.

The school agencies involved in the Summer Matters Campaign have made a long-term commitment to their summer programs. They are using multiple strategies to create programs that are a smart and sustainable investment. In the process they provide vital opportunities for students, who might otherwise fall behind during the summer months, to get ahead in the types of skills that will be critical to their success in a Common Core environment.



School agencies differ in the configuration and operation of their summer programs

The Summer Matters partners vary significantly in how they structure and operate their programs. The differences reflect existing structures related to after-school staffing and also the needs of their respective communities, including the preferences of local school agencies. Los Angeles and Sacramento City Unified School Districts provide two examples.



Summer Adventures and Explorations

District: Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)

Program management: LA's BEST

In California's largest school district, the Summer Matters partner program is a combined effort of LAUSD and LA's BEST, an after-school program with a rich 25-year history in the community.

The district and the central office of LA's BEST together define summer learning goals that align with the district's curricular approach and objectives. For both the after-school and summer programs, LA's BEST assigns two-person teams who work together to manage approximately five school sites. The team includes a coach to help with instruction and a program supervisor to oversee operational issues.

During the summer of 2013, LA's BEST created four themes from which staff at their 70 elementary and middle school programs could choose. The program goals were the same across all four themes, and all relied heavily on project-based learning.

Subject matter cohorts developed the curriculum during late spring. For example, all STEM instructors gathered to write lesson plans, give each other feedback, and share ideas. The program also purchased some curriculum, such as fitness courses.

Training for some members of the site-level staff included an introduction to the English Language Arts Capacities and Mathematics Principles that served as the overarching goals of the Common Core. Training also involved a simulation of what students ought to be experiencing and how to combine fun and academics based on the program goals. The emphasis

was on connecting learning objectives and lessons and on creating a "camp culture." At each site, staff had a day of paid time before the program started that they used, in part, to extensively decorate their campus and rooms in line with their themes.

Staff at each site had the freedom to shape their specific curriculum and projects to make their chosen theme come to life. For the most part, the after-school staff at each site acted as the summer program staff so they knew each other, the students, and their families. Each site typically served about 100 children, and most could have served more if funding had been available. The programs ran for six hours a day for six weeks.

Community partners contributed to the program in a variety of ways including hosting field trips, coming to the sites to provide special instruction, training staff, and donating meals and snacks. The California State Parks Department and the Los Angeles Public Library were partners for all the summer programs in the district.

Contact: Regino Chavez, LA's BEST
info@summermatters2you.net

Summer of Service

District: Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD)

Program management: District oversight with contract agencies such as City of Sacramento Parks Department

The SCUSD created its “Summer of Service” theme around its goal of providing civic education to 7th and 8th grade students. On average, 100 students attend each site, although the number varies. Another goal of the program is to introduce incoming 7th graders to the junior high campus they will attend in the fall.

SCUSD contracts with several different providers who hire staff and implement the district’s program. These are typically, but not always, the same organizations that provide after-school programs at the sites. Two credentialed teachers are included in the staff of each program. The district’s extended learning office provides centralized support from coordinating field trips to conducting program evaluations.

The district establishes a committee, which includes school site representatives, that meets throughout the spring to plan the summer program. They then provide a single-day training in preparation for the summer program, including both the credentialed and line staff

in the same training to the greatest extent possible. In addition, the individual program providers do their own staff development, typically as part of their after-school operation.

At every site, students learn basic elements of Service Learning and then apply them to complete a student-selected and designed service project. Project-based learning is a major focus as students are expected to plan their work and complete the service project they have designed. The activities and “culture” of the programs vary, reflecting the approach taken by the program providers, the needs of the students and families at the school, and the priorities of the school site principals who are involved with summer program planning.

Contact: Brit Irby, SCUSD
info@summermatters2you.net



The Putting Summer To Work report series includes:

- Getting a Head Start on the Common Core
 - Teaching Kids How to Succeed in School
 - A High Impact Training Ground for Teachers and Staff
-

All are available for download at <http://summermatters2you.net/putting-summer-to-work>

At <http://summermatters2you.net> you will find a wealth of resources for school district leaders and program providers wanting more information about the Summer Matters Campaign and assistance in planning a high-quality summer learning program. Those resources include information about:

- Program design
- Funding and sustainability
- Assessment and evaluation
- Numerous research reports on summer learning loss and programs that address it

Author: Mary Perry, Consultant
Partnership for Children & Youth

