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Investments and Opportunities in Summer Learning: A Community Assessment of Birmingham, Alabama

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Extensive research confirms that youth typically lose up to two months of math achievement during the summer, and low-income youth fall chronically behind their peers in reading. Research from Johns Hopkins University attributes two-thirds of the 9th grade achievement gap in reading to unequal summer learning opportunities during the elementary school years. Summer presents an opportunity for strategic investments in learning that help close the achievement gap and offer youth chances to explore new interests and skills.

Research on childhood health and nutrition brings attention to additional risks associated with summer break. Children are at greater risk for unhealthy weight gain during the summer than during the school year, particularly black and Hispanic youth, and youth who are already overweight. In addition, millions of children go without access to federally subsidized meals when schools close for summer.

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In spring 2011, with generous support from the Belk Foundation, the National Summer Learning Association (the Association) launched the Birmingham Summer Learning Initiative, aimed at increasing local awareness of the issue of summer learning loss, and improving the coordination and alignment of local resources in order to advance summer opportunities for youth in the community.

In partnership with key stakeholders representing city agencies and schools, philanthropy, and community-based programs, the Association conducted a community assessment to investigate:

- community assets and needs;
- the range of opportunities available to low-income families and youth during the summer; and
- the level and nature of public and private investments in summer learning.

This investments and opportunities scan illustrates a snapshot of the resources currently committed to engaging and educating youth in Birmingham during the summer, and highlights areas for potential growth as well as improvement both systematically and for different groups of providers. This is the first known study that details summer learning options for Birmingham youth.

PURPOSE AND METHODS

The Association solicited information on summer learning investments and opportunities available to Birmingham youth in 2011, including funding, enrollment, and key program characteristics. Through surveys and interviews, the research team received partial data either directly from programs or indirectly through their funders or sponsors on a total of 37 summer programs in Birmingham.



Photo courtesy of College First, Impact Alabama

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Of the 37 programs, researchers received complete data on a subset of 19 programs, including details on areas such as their enrollment capacity, primary activity focus, and proportion of attendees from low-income families. The research team typically received, at minimum, data on funding and enrollments for programs with partial data.

For the purposes of this study, a summer program was defined as a set of organized activities for school-age children that take place during the summer months, designed to meet a specific need or offer participants the opportunity to attain a defined goal. It has a specific schedule, requires that participants be enrolled in the program (i.e. not a “drop-in” program), and operates a minimum of 10 hours over the course of the summer.

KEY FINDINGS

Researchers gathered information on a total of 37 Birmingham area 2011 summer programs from city agencies, national and local nonprofit organizations through program documents, funder data submissions, and provider surveys and interviews. Based on the data, approximately 18.34% of eligible youth are served by these programs. This data is consistent with the statewide finding from the Afterschool Alliance of summer participation of 20% of eligible Alabama youth, compared to the national average of around 25%.¹ The table below reflects the data obtained on enrollment and funding for all 37 programs.

Of the 37, 19 programs contributed data on key program characteristics, which provide insight into the similarities and differences among

Investments and Opportunities Scan survey reported a total capacity of 3,131 slots for summer 2011, and an enrollment of 2,806, indicating that approximately 90% of available slots in these Birmingham area programs were filled.

Program Staffing

A core indicator of summer learning program quality is staff to youth ratio. According to the Association's standards for summer learning, a program staff to youth ratio of 1 to 8 is considered the highest benchmark of quality. On average, summer programs in Birmingham reported a ratio of one adult for every 11 youth.

Program Cost per Participant

Research has produced a variety of estimates for the average cost of summer programming for youth. One study, commissioned by the

Enrollment and Funding Category	Totals and Averages
Reported Summer Program Enrollment	24,514
Total Reported Funding	\$5,840,969
Average Program Length	301 Hours
Reported Funding per Participant	\$563.65

summer learning programs in Birmingham. Four categories of interest emerged during the analysis: youth recruitment and enrollment, program staffing, programming characteristics, and program cost per participant.

Youth Recruitment and Enrollment

The 19 programs that directly responded to the

¹ For more information on findings from the Afterschool Alliance on summer participation, visit http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM_Summer.cfm.

Wallace Foundation, found estimated cost ranges of between \$2.00 and \$5.00 per hour per slot for elementary and middle school youth, and between \$3.00 and \$12.00 for teenage youth. A more recent RAND study, however, found an estimated cost per slot range of \$7.00 to \$14.00 for academically focused summer programs serving at least 1,000 youth for the K-8 grades. The differences in these estimates reflect the slightly different groups each study examined. A preliminary

review of program funding and enrollment data appears to indicate that the per participant, per hour budgeted amount for most Birmingham summer programs is very low.

EXISTING CHALLENGES IN BIRMINGHAM AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

This scan and the larger community assessment project identified a number of challenges and opportunities in local summer programming. These challenges and opportunities could be addressed by systematic coordination and planning among the different government agencies, program providers, and funding organizations involved in the different summer learning options for Birmingham youth.

Improve Data Systems and Data Sharing

Developing a systematic approach to summer learning in Birmingham, where different providers, government agencies, and funding organizations cooperate and coordinate to best serve youth, requires the creation of a common data sharing system that makes key program information available to all stakeholders.

Improved data collection at the program level can attract funding for growth, call attention to organizational best practices, help program management identify interventions to support program quality, and justify organizational growth.² Investments in a common data collection system by multiple providers can create an opportunity to track and analyze this data at a lower cost than if each program did so individually.

² For more information on the increasingly essential role program data plays in attracting funds and supporting organizational growth, see:

1. Campbell, K., Taft-Pearman, M., Lee, M. (2008). *Getting Replication Right: The Decisions that Matter Most for Nonprofit Organizations Looking to Expand*. The Bridgespan Group. This content can be accessed at: <http://www.bridgespan.org/LearningCenter/ResourceDetail.aspx?id=398>
2. Campbell, K. and Menezes, R. (2010). *Four Pillars of Growth for Youth-Serving Nonprofits*. The Bridgespan Group. This content can be accessed at: <http://www.bridgespan.org/four-pillars-of-growth-for-youth-serving-nonprofits.aspx>

Increase Access to the Summer Food Service Program Resources

Many youth lack access to nutritious meals during the summer months. Research shows that children gain weight three times faster during the summer than during the school year. Summer programs can help prevent this weight gain by providing structured activities, nutritious food, and nutrition education, and engaging youth in a variety of physical activities including exercise.³

The Birmingham data in the Investments and Opportunities scan supports statewide findings—while Alabama ranks approximately 4th in states with the highest poverty rates and is the 23rd most populous state, it also ranks 46th among states for summer food nutrition participation in 2009 and 2010.⁴

Summer learning stakeholders in Birmingham can leverage the Summer Food Service, a federally-funded program that offers providers an opportunity to connect participants with nutritious food at a lower cost. Of the 19 programs surveyed, only four take advantage of this program. Stakeholders should solicit information from programs currently using this program, as well as engage in a strategic discussion about how to expand the use of the resource.⁵

³ For more information on weight gain during summer months, see the Association's research brief, "Research in Brief: Summertime and Weight Gain." This content can be accessed at: <http://www.summerlearning.org/resource/resmgr/publications/2009.summertimeweightgain.pdf>

⁴ Food and Research Action Center, *Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2010*. (Washington, DC: Food Research and Action Center, 2010), 1

⁵ For more information on the Summer Food Service program, see the Association's program resource brief: "Resources in Brief: Federal Funding for Meals during the Summer." This document can be accessed at: http://www.summerlearning.org/resource/resmgr/wellness/wellness_resources_in_brief.pdf.

A strong partnership between community providers and the school district will lead to specific, age-appropriate youth outcomes that are intentionally targeted throughout the year.

Improve Transportation Strategies

Transportation was explicitly identified as a challenge to full enrollment by many providers during the community assessment. Out of the 19 programs surveyed, only two stakeholders provided transportation to and from their 2011 programs. Discussions about challenges and potential solutions among stakeholders would highlight opportunities for leveraging resources, such as collective negotiations for coordinated transportation services and shared costs across the community, benefitting all participating parties at a lower cost than independent contracting for transportation.

Improve Citywide Program Outreach and Marketing Strategies

Programs indicated that they lacked capacity to effectively market their programs and understand barriers to participation from the perspective of parents and youth. Birmingham should implement a communications and outreach strategy that will build awareness of the need for and availability of summer learning opportunities.

Strengthen Opportunities through Intentional Partnerships

Data from programs provide some examples of partnerships and collaborative efforts between providers and other stakeholders, such as schools. Several programs work in partnership with targeted schools to recruit youth, and in

some cases, had strong partnerships extending beyond recruitment.

Stakeholders identified growth in this area as a top priority for year one of the Birmingham Summer Learning Initiative. A strong partnership between community providers and the school district will lead to specific, age-appropriate youth outcomes that are intentionally targeted throughout the year.

Improve Support for Summer Employment and College Preparation for Older Youth

There are limited summer learning opportunities for older youth when compared to the range of programming available for the elementary and middle grades. Older youth continue to need educational and developmental supports that will help them graduate on time, transition to college, and ultimately attain a fulfilling career.



By increasing support and opportunities for older youth to obtain summer employment, Birmingham can show these students how their academic studies link to their career and employment goals, and cultivate a professional attitude that prepares youth to succeed in the workplace.

Leverage Resources and Funding for Program Sustainability

Increasing collaboration between Birmingham area programs promises to make the best use of programs' capacity to identify and secure diversified and sustainable funding sources. With limited resources, programs can best use staff time if grant applications, review timelines, and reporting requirements use common standards and applications across different area funders.

Sustaining current summer programs and expanding opportunities to reach even more youth will require both strategic investments in infrastructure and additional funding to increase the number of available slots and expand staff capacity.

Establish an Entity Responsible for Summer Learning Coordination and Capacity-Building

A key challenge for developing sustainable summer learning systems in Birmingham is the absence of an intermediary organization to coordinate efforts, conduct or assist with data collection and analysis, provide technical assistance, and advocate for the issue. An established intermediary would have the ability to play a crucial role in coordinating and providing the capacity-building supports addressed in the recommendations.

CONCLUSION

This Investments and Opportunities Scan confirmed the need to build citywide systems in Birmingham to support summer learning opportunities for families and youth. Building this system will require participation from all stakeholders. In an Action Plan that accompanies this document, the Association has outlined the first steps identified by a core group of stakeholders serving as members of the Birmingham Summer Learning Strategic Planning Committee for community partners to follow for better summers for Birmingham youth.

More details on the research and findings are available in the full report, *Investments and Opportunities in Summer Learning: a Community Assessment of Birmingham, Alabama*. To request a copy, please contact Hillary Stroud, Director, Strategic Initiatives and Evaluation at the National Summer Learning Association, at hstroud@summerlearning.org or 410-856-1370 x 202.



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