

Meaningful Linkages Between Summer Programs, Schools, and Community Partners: Conditions and Strategies for Success

Highlights of a Report from the National Summer Learning Association
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Partnerships are a proven and cost-effective way for schools and community organizations to provide more meaningful summer learning experiences—making a real difference in the lives of children and families.



ABOUT THE REPORT

What schools or community-based organizations (CBOs) can't do alone, they can often do together.

When budgets are tight, successful partnerships allow organizations to leverage resources that expand and enrich young peoples' lives.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 11 summer programs that have successfully forged dynamic linkages between summer programs, schools, and community organizations.

Many of these are award-winning programs, and all are noteworthy for their innovation and ability to obtain desired outcomes. Based upon those interviews, we compiled this summary and the related report to provide guidance and examples for developing and managing effective summer learning partnerships in your community.

WHY MEANINGFUL LINKAGES?

In the context of this report, **linkages** are specific relationships between organizations involved in implementing summer programs for youth. **Meaningful linkages** extend beyond networking or more superficial relationships to collaborating in order to improve outcomes for youth and families.

Meaningful linkages are those that deepen into a **collaboration or partnership** where organizations share risks, responsibilities and rewards.

It requires a substantial time commitment, very high trust level, and “turf” sharing, including exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, and enhancing each other’s capacity for mutual benefit to achieve a common goal.

If organizations and individuals are willing to learn from each other, they can become better at what they do.

Several themes emerged that highlight the primary benefits of meaningful linkages as relayed by the programs in our sample.

1. Better access to information about youth and families,
2. Greater alignment in content and curriculum,
3. More and varied enrichment offerings,
4. Unique, yet complementary, staff skill sets and expertise,
5. Greater variation in instructional delivery methods, and
6. Increased likelihood of positive relationships with youth and families.

WHAT CONDITIONS ALLOW PARTNERSHIPS TO THRIVE?

Supportive Leadership Supportive leadership can be defined as the active backing and participation of key decision-makers in program planning, implementation, assessment, and improvement. School leadership, in particular, is often critical, as many summer programs that operate in partnership with schools are located on school grounds. In many cases, the principal is the critical link; however, superintendents and other administrative leaders also need to be supportive and involved, depending on the context of the program and the nature of the relationship. Supportive community leaders are also critical to successful partnerships.

Complementary Missions and Shared Values The most effective summer programs demonstrate a clear understanding of mission and values, and communicate those values broadly to all stakeholders. When building effective linkages with partners, it is critical that all partners share a commitment to a broader set of values and to achieving the missions of the partnering organizations.

Formal and Informal Communication Structures Communication might include the formal (a Memorandum of Understanding or MOU) or more informal—meetings, emails, and joint professional development opportunities.

Conditions vs. Strategies

- ▶ **Conditions** for meaningful linkages refer to existing situations that often work to strengthen relationships between partners. Conditions may be present at the onset of a partnership, or may evolve or change over time.
- ▶ **Strategies** for deepening linkages are activities partners engage in so that they can create better conditions for success. The more strategies partners use to strengthen their relationships, the greater the likelihood that they will have favorable conditions for success.

Multidimensional Relationships Although leadership is often responsible for laying the foundation for strong linkages, relationships need to exist on all levels and among all staffs. Programs must make a concerted effort to engage teachers, staff, administrators, families, youth and other stakeholders in their work. These relationships must also be developed year-round and not just during the summer months.

Shared Systems and Data The linkages between the program, school, and community can undoubtedly be strengthened by administrative systems, particularly when space or data are shared. Management information systems for data collection and sharing help secure the linkage and hold the program, schools, and community partners accountable to one another with respect to youth outcomes.

Favorable Policy and Funding Climate With policy and funding conditions in flux, how can you maximize the support of decision-makers at the local, state, and federal levels? At present, no federal and few state programs address the summer months specifically, so local support can be critical to influencing the policy and funding decisions of board members and other local education decision-makers.

In an ideal linkage, all six of these conditions are present. Partners have regular discussions about the relative “health” of the linkage, and triage as necessary to increase chances of success. Leadership and staff from schools and CBOs should not underestimate or undervalue the amount of effort and energy that goes into strengthening the linkages. As more of the conditions take root and thrive, it is easier to add to or build upon what is already in place. ■

STRATEGIES FOR DEEPENING LINKAGES

How do you build and strengthen meaningful linkages?

Successful partners share resources and play to each others’ strengths, tapping into resources not previously considered. The Association’s characteristics for effective summer programs offer a framework for these strategies.

Focus on accelerating learning that complements school content with an eye toward state standards and age-appropriate developmental outcomes

- ✓ Shared selection, development and/or review of curriculum
- ✓ Shared buy-in to instructional delivery that looks and feels different from the school day

Firm commitment to youth outcomes by focusing on the developmental needs of the child, and involving family, school, and community partners in the delivery of program activities

- ✓ Playing to the strengths of each partner in the delivery of services
- ✓ Shared understanding of child and youth development theory and its relationship to learning
- ✓ Eliciting multiple partners to deliver a range of activities

Proactive approach to summer learning through shared conversations and understanding about the research on summer learning loss and the importance of sustained participation in summer learning experiences

- ✓ Intentional planning to minimize summer learning loss
- ✓ Consistent meetings among program providers, schools, and research professionals about research on summer learning

Strong, empowering leadership from the school and community stakeholders, including those who have experience in academic learning and child/youth development

- ✓ Mutual hiring of staff that have youth development experience and public school experience
- ✓ Using community, family, and district leadership to be champions and stakeholders in the success of the program

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STRATEGIES FOR DEEPENING LINKAGES

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Advance, collaborative planning that includes coordinated program design, data sharing, recruitment, and public relations efforts

- ✓ Joint identification and referral of youth to programs
- ✓ A series of planning meetings involving all partners in reviewing data and program design
- ✓ Joint branding and public relations efforts to create greater visibility

Extensive opportunities for staff development through professional development opportunities, cofacilitation or team teaching, and mentoring

- ✓ Joint trainings to foster mutual understanding and respect
- ✓ Joint staffing models, including team teaching, cofacilitation, or mentoring opportunities

Strategic partnerships with clearly delineated roles, mutually reinforcing benefits, and advantageous use of resources

- ✓ Clear delineation of roles and responsibilities through the development of an MOU
- ✓ Consistent monitoring of the benefit of the partnership to all organizations
- ✓ Advantageous use of resources, such as facilities

Rigorous approach to evaluation and commitment to program improvement through shared tracking and dissemination of student progress

- ✓ Implementation of a management information system that can track and store student progress
- ✓ System of sharing important documents (i.e., report cards, evaluations, test scores between programs and schools)
- ✓ Collection of program and school feedback through surveys of major stakeholders (i.e., parents, teacher, administrators)

Clear focus on sustainability and cost-effectiveness by leveraging relationships to secure resources (financial and in-kind) and influence policy

- ✓ Collaboration to identify and secure funding, including joint grant proposals and appropriation of funds
- ✓ Firm commitment of in-kind resources leveraged through partnerships
- ✓ Joint marketing and promotion of programs
- ✓ Cross-membership on school and community policy committees

BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION

Many barriers attempt to interfere with successful collaboration, including time constraints, complications with data sharing, and practical complications involving insurance and liability.

However, these obstacles are not insurmountable. For example, although data sharing tends to be one of the most time-consuming hurdles to jump, program directors stressed how important it is to their overall ability to improve their services. Several partners have been able to coordinate the collection of data into one management information system, allowing multiple partners to input and access varying levels of individual and program information.

WHY IT MATTERS

More than 100 years of research underscores the importance of providing high-quality summer learning experiences for children. When budgets are tight, summer programs can fall by the wayside, particularly affecting low-income families that can't access private resources.

Partnerships are a proven and cost-effective way for schools and organizations to expand what they can offer children and provide more meaningful summer learning experiences—making a real difference in the lives of children, families, and communities.

But the benefits reach beyond summer. If meaningful summer linkages can enhance outcomes for youth and families, perhaps these lessons are applicable to a larger view of education reform.

For a complete review of strategies, program examples, and to get a sense of the types of challenges partners may face and how to overcome them, see the full report, available at www.summerlearning.org.

