

# More than Just Summer Reading

## The Shift to “Summer Learning”

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Yay summer! At the end of every school year, children are excited to begin their summer vacations. During this time off many students also look forward to a summer enrichment camp, traveling with their families, visiting local museums and historical sites, or many other experiences.

For many others, especially children and teens from low-income communities, their summer vacation is not full of learning opportunities. Research over the last several years indicates that children who do not participate in learning experiences over the summer year after year have an academic achievement gap that grows throughout the elementary and middle school years. This summer learning loss can add up to about two-thirds of the gap in reading achievement by ninth grade.<sup>1</sup>

Libraries are at the center of the communities they serve, from storytimes to afterschool activities to outreach to schools and more. For more than a century, libraries have offered summer reading programs to both encourage children to read for pleasure and to borrow books, as well as to avert the “summer slide” that occurs because of lack of opportunity in some communities.<sup>2</sup> Over the last several years, libraries’ summer reading

programs have begun to transform into summer learning programs. What’s the difference? Why does it matter?

Summer learning is an approach to engaging children by providing active learning experiences that are positive, experiential, educational, but most importantly, fun! Summer learning activities can include reading and literacy activities, so it’s really an expansion of what librarians have been doing for decades. Want to share stories and create art projects with children? Summer Learning! Read a book together and host a discussion? Summer Learning! Look at informational books about water and do floating and sinking experiments? Summer Learning!

Many libraries that have transitioned to add more diverse hands-on-learning experiences have found that they are reaching new audiences who may not have been as interested in traditional summer reading programming in the past. Children who struggle with reading may not be comfortable coming to libraries for reading programs, but can feel more welcome in a hands-on activity that has a more experiential approach. Slightly changing or enhancing programming can reach many more families than traditional reading programs (see “Summer Learning in Action @ San Francisco Public Library”).



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In addition, one area that children can struggle with as they are learning to read is comprehension. Some children are very fluid readers and can read aloud very well, but when they are asked a question about what they have read, they are not able to answer. One of the reasons they may struggle is because they may not have experience with the topic to relate to it on a personal level. As children move from learning to read to reading to learn, comprehension becomes even more critical to their education. By providing experiences that can scaffold children's understanding of the words they are reading, libraries are not only providing fun experiences for children and families, but they are helping children build personal experiences and supporting their academic learning and comprehension levels.

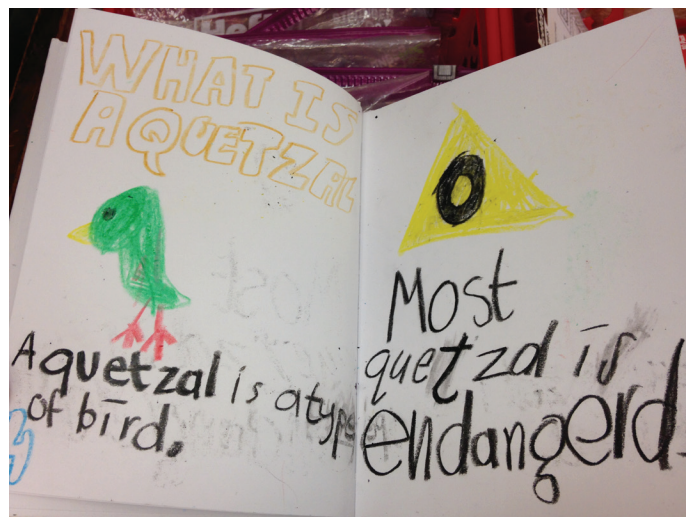
As the online and in-person discussions over the last year or two about summer reading and learning have increased, and librarians across the country have been rethinking what their programming could look like for children, teens, and families, the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) has taken note.

At the 2016 American Library Association (ALA) Midwinter Meeting, the ALSC board considered summer reading and learning as an area of significant strategic relevance. The board recognized that summer reading and learning is an area of focus for many members and decided to expand and strengthen the ways in which ALSC supports members in this work.

Last year, ALSC appointed a task force to explore and make recommendations to the board regarding ways in which ALSC can expand and strengthen its support of members in their summer reading and learning work.

During 2016 the task force solicited feedback from ALSC members through an online community forum, a conversation at the ALA Networking Uncommons, blog posts, and general conversations with colleagues to better understand how members would like ALSC to support their work. After hearing the feedback and reviewing existing research, the task force made several recommendations over the course of the year. These recommendations included both short-term and longer-term goals. Short-term goals included working with other ALA units to discuss mutual areas of interest, meeting with other national organizations that are also focusing on summer learning, and requesting an ALA council resolution declaring the role of libraries in summer reading and learning.

Longer-term goals include creating opportunities throughout ALSC's portfolio of existing professional development for members to share and learn best practices, including webinars, conference presentations, and a preconference later in the timeline.



A Jumpstart Camp student-created endangered animal book.

The task force also recommended that ALSC evaluate the possibility of creating an organized service model for summer learning that libraries could use in both summer and school year learning programs, like Every Child Ready to Read does for early literacy programming. The task force is working with the ALSC leadership, ALSC staff, and existing ALSC committees to update and move the recommendations forward.

ALSC is already working on summer initiatives including the annual summer reading lists and the ALSC Baker & Taylor Summer Reading Program Grant. Recently, ALSC received a grant from the Dollar General Literacy Foundation and awarded twelve \$5,000 Strengthening Communities through Libraries minigrants to provide children's programming that strengthens community opportunities for STEAM learning during school breaks.

As part of this project, ALSC is also developing additional resources that will be shared widely to support the out-of-school time programming of libraries and other community organizations. &

## References

1. Karl L. Alexander, Doris R Entwisle, and Linda Steffel Olson, "Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap," *American Sociological Review* (2007): 167–80.
2. David Von Drehle, "The Case Against Summer Vacation," *Time*, July 22, 2010.

## Summer Learning in Action @ San Francisco Public Library

Christy Estrovitz



Tracking Tree

San Francisco Public Library is serious about summer learning opportunities and outcomes. Inspired by Urban Libraries Council's Accelerate Summer findings, attendance at the National Summer Learning Association Conference, and participation in ALSC's Summer Learning Task Force, the team dropped the traditional Summer Reading model to make way for Summer Stride, a

community engagement focused summer learning program for all ages and abilities.

We simplified the message and requirements and focused on active learning experiences, a vibrant city-wide campaign, weekly raffles, and more than nine hundred free programs. Teaming up with award-winning illustrator Christian Robinson, Chronicle Books, and National Park Service (NPS) Centennial, the stars aligned for small changes and big impact. The City of San Francisco, Oakland Public Library, and San Mateo County Library System adopted the library's tagline and graphics to present a unifying and powerful message to our shared communities.

For Summer Stride 2016: Read, Create, Explore, we made strategic shifts to increase engagement at every level. In comparison to the previous year, Summer Stride yielded 27 percent more participants, 68 percent more reading, 33 percent more programs, 80 percent more teen volunteers, 3,760 lunches for youth, 50,720 raffle entries, and best staff engagement in the history of the library.

Here's what worked and will continue in summer 2017 with a bigger focus on closing the achievement gap.

- **Early Start.** The library started before school ended to increase engagement with teacher librarians. We provide each with a set of tri-lingual Summer Stride post-

ers and a Reading Ranger badge (the prize) to help them promote directly to students during the final weeks of school. Teacher librarians raved about the goodies and opportunity to actively champion the program. We also filmed a PSA with the Superintendent of Schools (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsWIAe0mj-E>).

- **Free Excursions.** In collaboration with National Park Service, we expanded the program menu to provide free shuttles from the ten libraries to ten national local parks. Summer Stride launched during NPS's Junior Ranger Jamboree. Our partners provided extra shuttles to ensure every person, stroller, and wheelchair had a safe journey. To learn more, read Cristina Mitra's blog post for ALSC at <http://www.alsc.org/blog/2016/06/summer-learning-national-parks/>.
- **Data Tracker.** We provided a Tracking Tree summer learning activity log to every Pre-K to fifth grader at San Francisco Unified School District, our local public school system. With a unique number on each Tracking Tree, we knew what gameboards went to which school and how many returned to the library. This was a new data point we wanted to track to inform our outreach in the following year.
- **Staff Reward.** In addition to embedding "why summer matters" into the staff training, we created a staff incentive program. Every library that exceeded the previous year's registration by 10 percent received a gift card to Safeway grocery store for a party of their choosing. Our internal data team posted the stats weekly. It's no surprise several branches surpassed their goal by 100 percent.
- **Simple Survey Monkey.** We needed clean data and an easy entry portal. Staff and teen volunteers used Survey Monkey to input registration and finishing information. We included a quick survey to capture even more data. We learned 59 percent were first-time participants, 90 percent read more, 84 percent visited a local park, 84 percent learned something new, 54 percent attended a program, and 98 percent plan to return to the library after summer learning.



## Summer Learning in Action @ Free Library of Philadelphia

Christine Caputo

The Free Library of Philadelphia continued its mission to advance literacy, guide learning, and inspire curiosity during its 2016 Summer of Wonder program. The goal of Summer of Wonder is three-fold: to support and enhance twenty-first-century literacy skills for all ages with hands-on learning activities and opportunities; to foster a love of reading and learning in all Philadelphians; and to help combat summer learning loss, a real concern for children and teens in many of the most challenged communities in Philadelphia.

Summer of Wonder took place for eight weeks at neighborhood libraries. Promotional and programmatic materials featured the artwork of illustrator Lauren Castillo, whose whimsical urban illustration set the stage with a city theme. The early childhood portion of the Summer of Wonder emphasized the five Every Child Ready to Read skills and offered opportunities for interactive programs and workshops at every neighborhood library. The school-age portion encouraged participants to create comic strips, write a letter to a favorite author or book character, and engage in STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math) activities. Libraries also hosted LEGO Clubs, dance classes, story times, music and film workshops, and Spy Clubs. Summer of Wonder 2016 reached more than thirty-six thousand children, teens, and adults.

The activity bags, Wonder Kits, were packed with enriching activities with themes related to city in the summer. Each library received eight kits for the summer, which gave library staff an opportunity to provide a rich tapestry of programming, both in libraries and in community organizations and summer camps. Themes included Philadelphia, nature, mail, art, bridges, transportation, buildings, and mapping.

Summer of Wonder partnered with organizations to bring art, science, social sciences, and literacy to libraries throughout the city. The Philadelphia Museum of Art and Philadelphia Arts in Education Partnership brought art programs to fifteen neighborhood libraries. The Franklin Institute Science Center brought Science in the Summer, a free science-education program for school-age children, to twenty-six neighborhood libraries. The program



Summer LEGO club.

is sponsored by GlaxoSmithKline (now just known as GSK) and hosted in communities around the country.

As part of the city's Campaign for Grade Level Reading, Read by 4th, The Free Library of Philadelphia provided professional development, read aloud books with hand-outs of active learning experiences for kindergarteners through third graders, and books for independent reading to more than one hundred summer camps to better support summer learning for children across the city. In addition the Library hosted a Jumpstart Back to School camp at the end of August to provide more learning opportunities for children whose camp experience ended before school started in September.

In working to expand the reach of summer learning, a new online platform was used to engage children and families in earning badges for completing online learning tracks that supported explorations at home and in the community. Summer teen employees also supported rich experiences in neighborhood libraries through near peer mentoring of younger students and exploration of creative activities, working to discover new ideas together.

For more information on the Words at Play Vocabulary Initiative at the Free Library of Philadelphia, visit <https://libwww.freelibrary.org/programs/words-at-play/>.