Making the Shift to Summer Learning

Are We Reaching Everyone?

ELIZABETH MCCHESNEY

Building a stable structure in a storybook science program.

Flashback to August 2012: the Children's Services team at the Chicago Public Library (CPL) was running a successful summer reading program that was humming along across the Windy City. After years of a structure in which children read and reported on either twenty-five picture books or ten chapter books depending on their age and reading level, my team and I decided to conduct some focus groups of children and parents to find out if our program was still meeting needs. Frankly, I assumed we were.

The results changed nearly everything about summer for CPL and charted a new course for our department. A national shift from summer *reading* to summer *learning* began, and that started a dialogue about equity in summer programs by shining a light on the "summer slide" and opportunity gap for children in poverty.

Those focus groups helped us learn a hard truth: our libraries didn't always feel like a place that seemed welcoming for our families. Children on the autism spectrum and their families told us they sometimes struggled with having to follow the rules so carefully. Other children told us they wanted more interest-driven activities of which they could be in charge. Some children came to the focus groups only because we were giving out snacks and they had heard about it from a friend.

"I don't like to read, so I don't come here," said a girl with her arms locked tightly in front of her. One little guy, perched on a chair as if he were a bird, summed it up for me when he said, "The thing is, I only want to do what I want to do."

Bingo. *I only want to do what I want to do.* Don't we all? And don't we all learn more when we are interested in the topic?

These focus groups led us to dig into Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind: Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (Basic Books, 1983), which states that there are eight different intelligences that help describe the "human potential" in each individual.

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This theory encourages us to learn as much as we can about each child and find ways in which they are successful as learners.

We asked each other, "How do you learn? What are your interests? What are your strengths?" We found no two of us, even on our small team, were alike. This propelled us forward into wanting to make our program individualized for our participants. If there were kids who weren't coming to us because they saw reading as the only entry point to the library, were we showcasing all that the library had to offer? Were we reaching everybody?

Another key focus for us was the parents and the whole extended family who help raise our children. We've all seen the full spectrum in our libraries—from kids alone in the library to the parent pushing their child to complete activities (or even completing them *for* the child), nannies who serve as surrogates during long workdays, and extended families and others who help in child-rearing as parents work multiple shifts and times. Were we reaching them with our message of summer reading and the parent as a child's first teacher?

We wanted to find a way that would create moments of family learning and celebrate parents and caregivers for their engagement with their child. The National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools found that children with involved families are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, be promoted to the next grade, attend school regularly, have better social skills and adapt well, graduate, and go on to post-secondary education.[1]

Clearly, we needed to lift up parents and families in our program. Using more inclusive language, thinking about a true and broader definition of family, and encouraging our kids to draw in all the many people in their lives was critical to engaging families. This led us to develop a parent engagement component that both gives parents an opportunity to log their own activities and to reflect on family learning for an opportunity to win a tech package at the end of summer. The tech package contains a laptop, digital camera, dictionary, and thesaurus to connect summer learning to the school year.

All of our thinking at CPL solidified when we traveled to the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) Annual Conference in fall 2012. NSLA is an independent nonprofit that provides research and guidance to all who are associated with summer learning, including school districts, municipalities, and out-of-school-time providers. Their research findings show that the summer slide is real and that children, most especially those from low-income families, lose some of the achievements made during the previous school year because of lack of opportunity and access to high-quality summer programming.[2]

In 2007, Johns Hopkins researcher Karl Alexander and his colleagues showed a direct link between summer opportunity and academic achievement during the school year.[3] This research solidified what we had been thinking about kids and learning and led us to use this research in our redesign of summer. We knew we needed to help close the opportunity gap between those children with access to high-quality programs and those who live without that access.

On top of this, more than 80 percent of Chicago's public school children have indicators of living in poverty, so we knew that focusing on how to stop the summer slide would be important in the work of our large, urban library system.[4] By focusing on the summer slide and the missed opportunities of so many of our children, we began to prioritize equity and call out how we seek to find ways to close that gap for our kids.
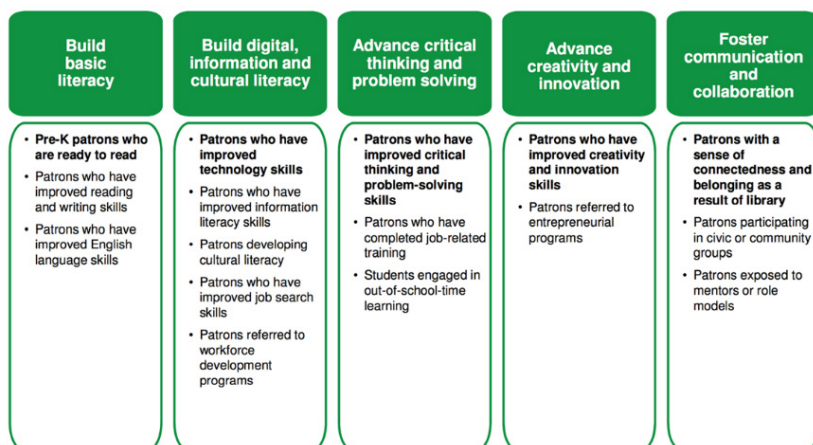
Aligning Summer with Institutional Priorities

At the same time CPL's Children's Services team was thinking through summer's effectiveness, the CPL Senior Leadership Team was working to assess our core areas of impact across the city. Through an arduous process, our senior staff came up with five areas of impact that we felt stood for us at CPL (see figure 1). Using evidence, benchmark data, and stakeholder engagement, we redefined our areas of impact in Chicago.

Our new summer approach needed to align to all five areas of impact outlined in figure 1. We kept this in the forefront as we worked on the redesign of our program. We knew that an effective summer program for Chicago's kids would need to always reference these institutional priorities, and we would need to measure it against these priorities. Keeping your own library's strategic plan or impact areas at the forefront of your summer planning allows you to advocate for your program with internal and external stakeholders, partners, and policymakers and helps you to align your services in a meaningful way.

Another key consideration for us was how to bring in twenty-first-century learning skills to this critical out-of-school time

Figure 1. Chicago Public Library's Five Areas of Impact

Build basic literacy	Build digital, information and cultural literacy	Advance critical thinking and problem solving	Advance creativity and innovation	Foster communication and collaboration
• Pre-K patrons who are ready to read • Patrons who have improved reading and writing skills • Patrons who have improved English language skills	• Patrons who have improved technology skills • Patrons who have improved information literacy skills • Patrons developing cultural literacy • Patrons who have improved job search skills • Patrons referred to workforce development programs	• Patrons who have improved critical thinking and problem-solving skills • Patrons who have completed job-related training • Students engaged in out-of-school-time learning	• Patrons who have improved creativity and innovation skills • Patrons referred to entrepreneurial programs	• Patrons with a sense of connectedness and belonging as a result of library • Patrons participating in civic or community groups • Patrons exposed to mentors or role models

called summer vacation. Around the new millennium, an organization called P21, a group of educators, businesspeople, and civic leaders came together to think about the skills and habits of minds that children need to be successful in a changing technological world. In the quickly evolving new world, children need to be able to contribute and create content, to tinker and fix, to actively employ empathy, persistence, problem-solving, and working together.

P21 created a framework for learning in the twenty-first century. These can be distilled to the Four C's of twenty-first-century learning—critical thinking, communication, creativity, and collaboration. To equip our kids for success, we need to find the lens for twenty-first-century learning to happen within summer library programming.

While we, like many libraries across the nation, had been early adopters of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programming, we now could see that STEM learning would also provide us with the framework through which the Four C's could readily happen. Helping children to feel comfortable with making contributions and talking about failure is an important role we play in children's learning.

Through STEM—which we soon broadened to STEAM to draw in art and artistic expression—we saw that kids built the habits that are needed to effectively navigate the changing and technological world. With STEAM learning, children are able to develop their brains to think in a way that fits the changing needs of the twenty-first century.

Twenty-First-Century Skills

Children can flex their ability to persist in the face of failure, to learn to iterate, to explore new ways of collaborating and communicating with others, and to do it in a way that is relevant to the world around them while building on school learning, without making the summertime feel like more school. We always use books as the starting point with STEAM learning because books are essential to all our work and to how children learn. Starting with the reading of a book allows us to expose a child to a book and reading time, frame a problem or experience of a character, and then build on the knowledge they have in the book.

Additionally, they are learning new literacies including coding and computational thinking, which are essential to the developing workforce. In essence, they learn how to learn, and they learn how to develop grit, persistence, teamwork skills, and even empathy while practicing the skills that will be needed in a quickly changing world. While a lot of library programs everywhere do have these skills as outcomes, calling them out helps youth build their own awareness of the importance of this and the skill building they are actively doing. Through our partnership with the Museum of Science and Industry, we promote their eight vetted Summer

Brain Games each year. These easy STEAM projects combine everyday objects with science learning to increase access to fun experiments and games. And most importantly to us, it opened our doors for new learners.

"Are we reaching everyone?" That resounding question that started our focus groups was one which led us to understand more about how people learn and are drawn to informal learning. We thought about what kids need to learn in a changing world and what our library does within the community. And all this, undergirded with NSLA research about summer slide and equity in service, how we were reaching children with varying learning styles, and what we offered for children in poverty, led us to see that we had a mandate to rethink how we promoted reading *and* all learning. All of us at CPL saw we needed to reconsider summer to meet the needs our community told us they wanted and needed.

Exploring geodesic dome building with storybooks, toothpicks, and gumdrops.

Making All Learning Count

We had been focusing on the number of books a child read and reported on each summer. In our redesigned program, we began to broaden our view of how youth are learning in our libraries, and this meant shifting what we count. With a focus on the learning that happens throughout the library, we wanted our focus to include not only reading, but also on STEAM learning and the learning children gain from making and from art. This set us on the path of broadening summer reading to summer learning and to counting three tracks of learning across the summer—read, discover, create.

Read, Discover, Create

These three tracks allow a child to have an immediate "win" when they start the program and report on something special to them. Make a piece of art, attend a program about reptiles, build a solution to the age-old problem of the little pigs' straw-and-stick houses, or read a book. There is now an entry point to the program for multiple types of learning and learners. We believe it is up to us to then take that entry point and help the child access the other types of learning they can do. This means that the child who comes to us for an art program or for LEGO Club can then find their way to a book that we recommend.

Additionally, each child directs their learning—they can set their own goals and make choices about what they want to pursue. We give each child a booklet, our annual Explorer's Guide, which is filled with activities, puzzles, engineering design challenges, STEM activities from the Museum of Science and Industry, and art prompts to complete. Parents report that this approach to tracking multiple styles of learning has helped many children be more enthusiastic about coming to the library, to "own" their own learning development and to be motivated to continue to learn—all of which we see as a great win for our program, our system, and Chicago children.

All of our programs are now aligned to learning outcomes— what you want each child to know or learn at the end of each program. We start each program plan with an objective statement so we can keep in mind what the desired impact is and why we are conducting the program. It's easier to get to a destination using a navigation tool, and this helps you do just that. For us, that means we are more intentional in our programming. We now make sure that there is some rationale and a specific learning effort. It also helps us to choose our activities.

Reflection and book reporting have always been important and distinctive features of CPL's program. Book reporting has been a part of our summer program for more than forty-five years, and we knew it needed to continue for many reasons— it gives children a chance to talk about their reading and to make connections between their reading and the summer theme, it allows our staff to provide invaluable reader's advisory for children and families, and it helps build healthy social-emotional learning as we celebrate the books kids read.

Reflection in its many forms (oral, written, acted out, video production . . . the list goes on!) also allows you to check on the learning outcomes for which you planned and hope to see in your participants. We now promote videos as a form of reflection and encourage families to submit short videos that we share on our website. Other children love to watch these and connect with fellow learners.

Through immense research in learning theories, we know that reflection is an indispensable part of knowledge acquisition. John Dewey himself referenced this in 1910 when he defined reflection as the "active, persistent and careful consideration of a belief."[5] Learning can be thought of as a cyclical process, and the way we close that learning loop is through reflection—actively thinking and talking about what has been learned.

We see that talking about learning of all kinds (book reading, STEAM learning, art, and maker activities) gives children a chance to organize their thinking, synthesize what it means, and then apply it to their real life. Good reflection allows children to transfer new learning to what they already know of the world and make real-life connections (think of it as the "Aha!" moment). Drawing these conclusions helps to contextualize school learning with out-of-school learning and makes each child a more engaged and thoughtful lifelong learner.

Better Together, or, How an Effective Partnership Can Amplify Results

Partnerships are widely discussed in libraries. How do we form them? How do we keep them? What do we do once we have them? A partnership is, essentially, a union formed between organizations with a mutual understanding about a common goal. Because of this, a partnership to accelerate your summer program may be easier to form than others. Practically speaking, both institutions must agree to the shared outcome of supporting children's learning in the summertime.

One you have identified your library's learning goals, you can think about who in your community can support those goals alongside you. Are your goals about self-expression and social-emotional learning? Perhaps an arts-based organization can best help you. Are your goals about advancing computational thinking or the engineering design process? Once you have a clear focus, you can then ask yourself who can lend tech support to your program?

In Chicago, our goals were clearly about STEAM learning as a gateway for twenty-first-century skills. The Museum of Science and Industry (MSI) was—and still is—a natural partner for us to reach these goals. Together we shared our missions and our vision and we found there was a lot of overlap. As major institutions serving Chicago's youth, we both wanted to:

- maximize our summertime reach into communities;

- help stop the summer slide for kids through quality out-of-school-time educational opportunities offered with a stretch and a depth into each community; and

- provide high-quality STEAM experiences.

It is important to articulate your goals. This allows you to develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or to draft a letter of intent that clearly outlines the facets of what you have mutually agreed to do. In Chicago, we entered into a five-year MOU with the MSI. At this writing we are now entering our eighth year of working together and, while no longer a formal MOU, an annual letter between institutional leaders is exchanged to keep the work and the relationship mindful and a priority for both the library and museum. This partnership has many facets and has grown and changed in the last eight years. MSI now trains CPL librarians and offers about forty hours a year of free professional development to our staff each year. We partner on a number of other initiatives including Sensory STEM for youth on the autism spectrum, school year

science clubs, a new middle grade STEM initiative led by the Urban Libraries Council, and preschool maker programs.

When seeking out a partnership for the library, remember that you are not just asking for help; YOU have a lot to offer, too! Your partner will gain the credibility of the library's name for their work. They will get access to the footprint of the library through your programmatic materials. They will also gain exposure of their work to parents, teachers, and other constituents who vote, sit on boards, and otherwise defend organizations within their communities. These are important for you to articulate. The give and get of a partnership means the relationship is a two-way street. You should always find ways to support your partner.

In Chicago, we provide booklists for MSI's museum exhibits, we train staff on books, databases, and information retrieval, and we now cross-train our staffs on things like evaluation of STEM, best practices in youth development, and social-emotional learning. We've conducted themed story hours near museum exhibits and are collaborating on professional development models that put STEAM and literacy together. Growing together in a partnership means that you continue to work at the relationship and find new ways to talk about your work together.

Gains for Chicago Kids

Summer is a time of high stakes for all public libraries. Children and families need us and we respond. We all run some of the largest programs in and for our communities, and they are funded by Friends' groups, boards, and in our case, the CPL Foundation. Using data to help tell the story of the impact on Chicago's kids is essential for us and for our foundation. Evaluation allows us to assess our programs' strengths and weaknesses; share our impact with our board and our funders, government, and other stakeholders; set goals for the future, and double down on our partnership roles.

Outcomes-based evaluation has changed the way we create and measure our programmatic success in Chicago. We use a logic model to help us build out the planning process of our program and to give us a path through evaluation. A logic model is a graphic organizer that allows you to chart a course for reaching your desired outcomes and ultimately your goals.

Consider a logic model as a chain that connects events to the ultimate goal. Start with your goals, which are aspirational and should address a need you are trying to fill. Next, you create your inputs, or all the things that are invested into your program. Watch out—it may surprise you how long this list becomes!

Now, list your activities, or all the things you do with those inputs to help you achieve success. This is followed by a list of outputs. An output is the quantifiable, direct product of a program activity. And finally, add your outcomes. They are the desired results of your program and can be measured in short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes.

Homemade earthworm "wormery."

You can now use this logic model to share your programmatic strategies and to help you evaluate your programs. First, you must determine your indicators, or the measures of how you have achieved your stated outcomes. For example, one of our outcomes is that children read twenty minutes a day for a target of at least five hundred minutes. The indicators used to measure this outcome are the total number of minutes children read.

One of the most tried-and-true methods of evaluation we use at CPL is surveys. We survey parents of early learners, parents of school-age children, school-age kids themselves, our tween and teen corps of volunteers, and our library staff. We make these surveys accessible and offer them in a variety of languages. We have also found it's useful to administer the surveys to people; a survey left on a table is just one more piece of paper. Taking the time to ask people their opinions and answers gets at deeper information.

There are many forms of assessment available. The Weikert Center has an effective tool to look at the quality of programming. Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) is widely known and used because of its flexibility and ease of use. NSLA worked with the Weikert Center to adapt this tool for use in summer programming. Additionally, NSLA's *Summer Starts in September Program Planning Guide* (2018) has a comprehensive planning guide you may find useful.

We evaluate our STEAM programming based on an Out-of-School-Time STEM evaluation tool called Dimensions of Success from Harvard University. This tool allows us to examine how we are deepening our science learning and knowledge acquisition and determine whether we are doing it in a way that aligns with what we know of best practice in youth-centered programming. There are twelve domains against which we now analyze our programs and observe our librarians in the development of their own programming. Brett Nicholas, MSI community initiatives manager, said, "The Dimensions of Success Tool is used by both MSI and CPL to give us a common language and tool to effectively measure the efficacy of our work. This tool helps us analyze where we are and where we want to go with our STEAM learning."

Chicago is also lucky to have connections to the University of Chicago (U of C). We have a data-sharing partnership

Summer DOES Matter

In spring 2020, *Summer Matters Greatest Hits* will be released by ALA Editions. It will highlight more than fifty great science experiences we have used and loved through the years with our STEM partner, Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry.

Summer reading for children is a longstanding and cherished tradition in public libraries across America, but today's kids need to master new skills and competencies. Today's summer programming needs to move beyond reading to engage children with hands-on activities, thus keeping their brains active even when school is out. In this work, the Chicago Public Library and the Museum of Science and Industry present a guide based on the award-winning, STEM-inspired approach. Readers get outlined practical steps for libraries and cultural institutions to partner in creating a sustainable summer learning program that's both fun and educational.

with U of C's Chapin Hall Research Collaborative, which is a research and policy center focused on improving outcomes for children and families in the city. We share information about our participants' read, discover, and create activities and Chapin Hall analyzes it against CPS student data. This is all anonymized, but it does allow us to know by ZIP code and school how children are doing because of their participation. The research findings are very clear, too: When children participate in the Summer Learning Challenge and show fidelity to the program (by reaching our target of five hundred minutes read, conducting hands-on learning, and completing a STEM, art, or maker activity) they score higher academically. In fact, children who participate score 20 percent higher on standardized math tests and 15 percent higher on standardized reading tests.

Using data from the Chapin Hall Research Collaborative, we can see that, with our redesigned program, the Summer Learning Challenge achieves our intended goal of helping stave off summer slide, and when kids participate to the recommend levels of learning, participation actually accelerates school-year gains. This is an important statistic to be able to share and shows the impact of our summer program on our communities. I encourage you to dive into your data; it will tell an equally important story about your library program.

Current State of Summer Learning

Since those initial focus groups in 2012, much has happened to advance the conversation about summer learning and the critical role of libraries in the out-of-school-time landscape.

In 2016, ALSC board members deemed summer reading and learning as an area of strategic significance and formed the Summer Reading and Learning Task Force. They issued final recommendations in 2017, and this led to ALSC's formation of the Summer/Out-of-School-Time Learning Task Force, which has advanced the work through national webinars and sessions at NSLA. This task force will conclude work in January 2020 with the goal of handing off recommendations to an implementation team.

Summer Matters: Making All Learning Count

My CPL team, in partnership with MSI, published a book, *Summer Matters: Making All Learning Count* (ALA Editions, 2017). This book is a how-to guide that provides the rationale for change, walks through setting up logic models and outcomes-based evaluation, and gives tricks and tips about different types of partnerships. In 2018, the formidable research pair of Natalie Cole and Virginia Walters published *Transforming Summer Programs at Your Library: Outreach and Outcomes in Action* (ALA Editions, 2018), which offers readers a solid vision of change in action through case studies and details the principals, strategies, and evaluation framework that the State of California has used to transform summer learning in their institutions.

NSLA has developed a deep and abiding partnership with libraries and actively works to promote the learning happening in our institutions all summer. In 2015, NSLA awarded Chicago Public Library the first ever excellence award, the Founder's Award, for an informal summer learning program and has now created the Land's End Love Learning Award to honor excellence in out-of-school-time programming such as in libraries. In 2018, NSLA featured reading and library learning during Summer Learning Day. Seven libraries from across the country served as Pillars of Summer Learning, celebrating summer reading with NSLA's National Summer Reading Ambassador Bryan Collier:

- CPL

- King County (WA) Library System

- Nashville Public Library

- New Orleans Public Library

- New York Public Library

- San Francisco Public Library

■ Salt Lake City Public Library

NSLA continues to build out work to promote the role of libraries. In 2019, they expanded Summer Learning Day to Summer Learning Week. This change allowed libraries across the country to register their events and help highlight the critical role of learning in summertime. National Summer Learning Association CEO Aaron Dworkin said, "The role of libraries in advancing and accelerating summer learning is clear, and we are happy to partner with libraries across the nation to help close the critical learning and opportunity gap in summer."

In October 2019, NSLA offered a preconference day for librarian professionals at its annual conference, Summer Changes Everything. This first-ever gathering included representation from ALSC, the Urban Libraries Council, multiple publishers, and museums, as well as practitioners from a variety of American libraries. Librarians from across the country came together to deepen understanding of how summer learning can impact children, families, and communities. With sessions led by librarians on STEM; equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI); and evaluation and data analysis, along with a partnership panel of both rural and urban library leaders, this day marked an important inflection point in this movement.

The Urban Libraries Council (ULC), in partnership with NSLA and with an IMLS grant, developed a well-used toolkit with a wide breadth of tools (available online at www .urbanlibraries.org/initiatives/summer-learning/summer -learning-resource-guide). ULC continues to explore and deepen the national thinking on summer learning in libraries and has hosted numerous convenings to help practitioners in the field understand the shift and make sense of it for their own library system. Through research and best practice from the field, ULC offers a deep clearinghouse of summer-learning resources for all libraries to access.

Here in Chicago, as I watch kids in our libraries learning by doing, I am reminded of that little boy who—half his childhood ago—said to me, "I only want to do what I want to do." Our numbers, which have doubled in the seven years since we started this transformation, reflect that he is not alone. In summer 2019, we went back to hosting focus groups of parents from around the city. We asked parents if the programs are meeting their needs, if they like the STEAM learning, and if the programs are fun and engaging. We asked if our Explorer's Guide works for them, what they want changed, and how the program works for them. The results were humbling and gratifying as we heard profound thanks for including science learning and artistic expression. We heard that children are motivated by the programs and moms have deeper trust in us for this work we have been doing. We learned that families become friends and strengthen their neighborhood ties and relationships while laughing and learning together. Parents appreciate a place that is safe for them to just have fun while everyone learns together. And while I thought maybe we would have major changes to make like we did eight years ago, what we heard was what I have been fortunate to see myself: the shift from summer reading to summer learning has allowed us to help pave the way for children who may struggle with reading, it has allowed us to keep up with the changing needs of our kids, to celebrate new and multiple literacies, to keep summer relevant and interest-driven in the twenty-first-century context. All of this together effectively positions our library and the Summer Learning Challenge as the city of Chicago's largest framework for serving children in the summer and keeping them learning.

I like to think that in Chicago, we have demonstrated what children's librarians have always known: that kids want to learn and are hungry for new experiences and connections. Our personal connections with children matter to how they learn. And, when we employ new ways to bring books and learning together in our communities, we prove that all learning counts. &

The success of the Chicago Public Library's transformation is possible because of the tireless work led by the Children's Services and Family Engagement Team and all the Children's Services staff, along with the CPL Foundation staff, board, and funders. Thank you to the entire staff of Chicago Public Library past and present, and to all who make summer learning possible for children.

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