

# **Adopting a Summer Learning Approach for Increased Impact: a YALSA Position Paper**

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## **Introduction**

Public libraries are an integral part of every community's learning ecosystem. This is particularly true in the summer when youth and their families rely on institutions, such as the public library, to provide both safe spaces and free, high-quality activities that are both fun and educational. Traditionally, libraries' response to families' summer expectations have been limited to primarily reading and literacy-based programs. However, the needs of today's youth are significantly different from earlier generations. In addition to these evolving needs, recent studies show that all youth experience learning loss in reading as well as academic areas over the summer if they do not participate in a range of educational activities that keep their brains engaged. These factors and others point to a need for libraries to revisit their traditional summer reading program model in order to ensure that the services and resources they provide meet the needs of today's youth and their families. This position paper is meant to help guide libraries as they re-envision the services and programs they provide youth during the summer months.

## **Abstract**

Traditional library summer reading programs do not meet many of the needs of today's youth because both the demographics of youth and the environment in which they live has changed significantly over the past generation. Libraries must evolve in order to address these newer needs, which include but are not limited to building 21st century skills for the workplace, improving English language skills, and having a safe space to explore their passions and interests. Libraries can boost their relevance and impact by working with community partners to expand their efforts beyond summer reading in order to identify and meet the particular needs of the youth in their community. In addition, library staff must gain skills in facilitating hands-on, informal learning for and with youth and their families.

## **Problem Statement**

Five societal factors have emerged that relate to how libraries serve youth, especially the programs and services they offer over the summer:

- The demographics of today's youth are significantly different from the past.
- There is growing economic disparity in the U.S. that is having a direct impact on youth.
- The skills needed to be successful in the modern workplace have changed, and schools alone cannot prepare youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce.
- Recent research has documented that young people who do not participate in educational activities over the summer experience a significant learning loss.
- Young people are increasingly learning and acquiring information through non-text based formats, including but not limited to YouTube, podcasts, games, apps, and hands-on experiences.

## **Demographics**

As YALSA's recent report, the "Future of Library Services for and with Teens: a Call to Action" points out, today's youth comprise the most diverse generation ever in the U.S. 22% of young people in the U.S. today speak a language other than English at home. Between 2000 and 2010 the number of Hispanic youth in the U.S. increased by 39%, while the number of non-Hispanic Asian and Pacific Islander youth grew by 31%. Unfortunately, persistent and growing gaps exist in terms of student achievement and race. The National Assessment for Educational Progress reports that Hispanic and African American youth consistently score lower on standardized reading and math tests than their Caucasian and Asian-American peers. In addition to the increasing diversity of the youth population, many are facing significant societal issues that they cannot address on their own. For example, 22% of children in America live below the poverty line, and 1.3 million children experience homelessness each year. In an increasingly diverse environment, cultural competency will be a key point to success in school and life. Building cultural competency skills requires active, peer-to-peer experiences that go beyond learning through reading text.

### **Economic Disparity**

There is a growing inequality faced by youth and families in lower socio-economic brackets, and this is having a profound impact on the long term success of youth.

- For the first time ever, the number of students in the U.S. who come from low-income families has reached the majority. 51% of youth today live in low-income families, compared to 38% in 2000. <sup>[1]</sup>
- Wealthy or poor, children have pretty similar cognitive abilities under the age of 1. However, by the time they reach kindergarten, children from the highest earning households score twice as high as poor children on literacy and math tests. <sup>[2]</sup>
- Wealthy families spend seven times more on educational enhancement tools for their children than low-income families (\$9,000 per child per year vs. \$1,300).
- Since 1970, the achievement gap between low- and high-income youth has grown to 70%. <sup>[3]</sup>
- Only one in ten youth from low-income families has a bachelor's degree by the age of 25, yet a college degree remains a low-income student's best hope of making it out of poverty. <sup>[4]</sup>

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills**

Rapid changes in society have led to the need for today's youth to acquire different skills from past generations.

"Today, much success lies in being able to communicate, share, and use information to solve complex problems, in being able to adapt and innovate in response to new demands and changing circumstances, in being able to command and expand the power of technology to create new knowledge."<sup>[5]</sup>

Apart from the ability to use digital tools effectively, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills also include critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, teamwork, conflict management, and decision making. YALSA's report highlights the fact that today's youth are entering the workforce without these skills, because the education system has not been able to keep up with the changes of an increasingly global, competitive and technology dependent society.

### **Summer Slide**

As research from the National Summer Learning Association points out, all young people who do not engage in educational activities over the summer experience learning loss. Over the summer low-income students lose more than two months in math skills and reading achievement, despite the fact that their middle-class peers make slight gains.<sup>[6]</sup> Oxford Learning provides these even more sobering statistics:

- More than half of the achievement gap between lower- and higher-income youth can be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities. As a result, low-income youth are less likely to graduate from high school or enter college.<sup>[7]</sup>
- By the end of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, students who experience summer learning loss are an average of two years behind their peers.<sup>[8]</sup>
- Two thirds of the income-based achievement gap is attributed to summer learning loss by the start of high school.<sup>[9]</sup>

This is a call to action for libraries to broaden their focus beyond reading activities, especially during the summer months. Reading is an important element of summer learning, but the integration of activities that is focused on learning overall creates stronger high-quality opportunities to mitigate the summer slide that many families living in poverty face. Additionally, by integrating reading and literacy into activities that center around youth passions and interests, youth are better able to engage their brains and gain skills and knowledge that sticks with them over an extended period of time.

### **Effective Learning Methods**

Learning opportunities in libraries, including those that are carried out throughout the summer months, need to expand beyond just reading, because today's young people learn from a variety of ways other than reading text. In addition, learning theorists believe that mere information is not an effective way to learn. Instead, more successful learning comes through doing. While the concept of learning by doing, or experiential learning, is not new, recent studies have shown that students doing more activities learn more than students reading more pages or watching more videos<sup>[10]</sup>. Adopting a connected learning approach, which focuses on interest-driven and hands-on learning, helps maximize learning for young people.

### **Proposed Solution**

Public libraries have a strong history of providing communities with summer classes and events. Youth and their families think of the library as a place for summer opportunities, which perfectly positions libraries to help mitigate the learning loss and other issues youth face, particularly over the summer months. In order to achieve this however, libraries must

- Expand their focus beyond traditional reading and literacy-focused resources, programs and services.
- Accept a broader definition of reading and literacy in order to help young people build the wide array of literacies skills (including text-based literacy, visual literacy, media literacy, etc.) needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace.
- Embrace an expanded focus for programs for and with youth that integrates hands-on learning activities related to STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), 21st century learning, and literacy.

- Curate content and develop collections with teen input that span a variety of formats, including digital tools and human resources.
- Incorporate best practices in connected learning into summer learning programs by developing hands-on activities that support youth passions and interests and integrate youth voice into planning and implementation.
- Make a commitment to reach out to and serve the most vulnerable youth in their communities and address their needs, whatever they may be, such as opportunities to gain English language skills, the chance to participate in the USDA's Summer Food Service Program, or having a safe space to go to.
- Provide programs and activities at locations in the community where youth spend their summer hours.
- Focus measurement on outcomes and determining what knowledge and skills young people gain from the services and programs the library provides in order to demonstrate the impact libraries have on young peoples' summer learning.
- Leverage community resources (including human resources who may act as experts in particular fields of study) to plan, implement and evaluate learning activities for and with youth.
- Work closely with other community agencies and schools to maximize impact, share resources, and avoid duplication of effort.
- Engage the whole family along with caregivers in young people's learning and development.
- Help library staff build skills in areas of need, including but not limited to cultural competence, outcomes-based evaluation, managing community partnerships, community asset mapping, digital media and learning, facilitating learning and connected learning.

### **Selected Resources**

- Accelerate Summer Learning, [www.urbanlibraries.org/accelerate-summer-initial-findings-pages-450.php](http://www.urbanlibraries.org/accelerate-summer-initial-findings-pages-450.php) (<http://www.urbanlibraries.org/accelerate-summer-initial-findings-pages-450.php>)
- Adolescent Literacies wiki page, [http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Adolescent\\_Literacy](http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Adolescent_Literacy) ([http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Adolescent\\_Literacy](http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Adolescent_Literacy))
- Cities of Learning, <http://citiesoflearning.org/> (<http://citiesoflearning.org/>)
- Cultural Competence wiki page, [http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Cultural\\_Competence](http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Cultural_Competence) ([http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Cultural\\_Competence](http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Cultural_Competence))
- Dominican University (2012). The Dominican Study: Public Library Summer Reading Programs Close the Reading Gap, [http://connect.ala.org/files/66202/readingstudyexecsummary\\_pdf\\_21253.pdf](http://connect.ala.org/files/66202/readingstudyexecsummary_pdf_21253.pdf) ([http://connect.ala.org/files/66202/readingstudyexecsummary\\_pdf\\_21253.pdf](http://connect.ala.org/files/66202/readingstudyexecsummary_pdf_21253.pdf))
- "The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: a Call to Action," [www.ala.org/yaforum/future-library-services-and-teens-project-report](http://www.ala.org/yaforum/future-library-services-and-teens-project-report) (<http://www.ala.org/yaforum/future-library-services-and-teens-project-report>)
- Lawrence, Salika A. et. al. (2009) Summer Program Helps Adolescents Merge Technology, Popular Culture, Reading and Writing for Academic Purposes,

- [http://connect.ala.org/files/66202/summer\\_program\\_helps\\_adolescents\\_pdf\\_12477.pdf](http://connect.ala.org/files/66202/summer_program_helps_adolescents_pdf_12477.pdf)  
([http://connect.ala.org/files/66202/summer\\_program\\_helps\\_adolescents\\_pdf\\_12477.pdf](http://connect.ala.org/files/66202/summer_program_helps_adolescents_pdf_12477.pdf))
- Lu, Ya-Ling and Carol Gordon (2009). Reading Takes you Places: a Study of a Web-Based Summer Reading Program, [www.oregon.gov/OSL/LD/youthsvcs/srp.certificates/AASL.Reading.Takes.You....](http://www.oregon.gov/OSL/LD/youthsvcs/srp.certificates/AASL.Reading.Takes.You....)  
(<http://www.oregon.gov/OSL/LD/youthsvcs/srp.certificates/AASL.Reading.Takes.You.Places.pdf>)
  - Maker & DIY Programs wiki page, [http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Maker\\_%26\\_DIY\\_Programs](http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Maker_%26_DIY_Programs)  
([http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Maker\\_%25252526\\_DIY\\_Programs](http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Maker_%25252526_DIY_Programs))
  - Museums, Libraries and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, [www.imls.gov/impact-imls/national-initiatives/museums-libraries-and-21st-century-skills/museums-libraries-and-21st-century-skills-definitions](http://www.imls.gov/impact-imls/national-initiatives/museums-libraries-and-21st-century-skills/museums-libraries-and-21st-century-skills-definitions)  
(<http://www.imls.gov/impact-imls/national-initiatives/museums-libraries-and-21st-century-skills/museums-libraries-and-21st-century-skills-definitions>)
  - National Summer Learning Association, [www.summerlearning.org/](http://www.summerlearning.org/) (<http://www.summerlearning.org/>)
  - Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning, [www.p21.org/](http://www.p21.org/) (<http://www.p21.org/>)
  - remakelearning.org, <http://remakelearning.org/> (<http://remakelearning.org/>)
  - Serving Diverse Teens wiki page,  
[http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Serving\\_Diverse\\_Teens\\_@\\_Your\\_Library](http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Serving_Diverse_Teens_@_Your_Library)  
([http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Serving\\_Diverse\\_Teens\\_@\\_Your\\_Library](http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Serving_Diverse_Teens_@_Your_Library))
  - Summer Food Service Program, [www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program-sfsp](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program-sfsp)  
(<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program-sfsp>)
  - Summer of Making & Learning, [www.makesummer.org/](http://www.makesummer.org/) (<http://www.makesummer.org/>)
  - Summer Matters, [www.summermatters.net/](http://www.summermatters.net/) (<http://www.summermatters.net/>)
  - Teen Programming Guidelines, [www.ala.org/yalsa/teen-programming-guidelines](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/teen-programming-guidelines)  
(<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/teen-programming-guidelines>)
  - Teen Programming HQ, <http://hq.yalsa.net/index.html> (<http://hq.yalsa.net/index.html>)
  - Terzlan, M. et. al. (2009). Effective and Promising Summer Learning Programs and Approaches for Economically Disadvantaged Children and Youth. Wallace Foundation.  
[www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/summer-and-extended-learning-time/summer-learning/documents/effective-and-promising-summer-learning-programs.pdf](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/summer-and-extended-learning-time/summer-learning/documents/effective-and-promising-summer-learning-programs.pdf)  
(<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/summer-and-extended-learning-time/summer-learning/documents/effective-and-promising-summer-learning-programs.pdf>)
  - Wallace Foundation, [www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/summer-and-extended-learning-time/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/summer-and-extended-learning-time/Pages/default.aspx) (<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/summer-and-extended-learning-time/Pages/default.aspx>)
  - YALSA's Summer Learning Site, <http://summerreading.ning.com/> (<http://summerreading.ning.com/>)
  - YOUmedia Network Community of Practice, <http://youmedia.org/> (<http://youmedia.org/>)

*Adopted by YALSA's Board of Directors, April 22, 2016*

[1] NCES

[2] Hamilton Project

[3] Ibid

[4] National Education Longitudinal Study

[5] Pacific Policy Research Center. (2010). "21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills for Students and Teachers,"  
[http://www.ksbe.edu/\\_assets/spi/pdfs/21\\_century\\_skills\\_full.pdf](http://www.ksbe.edu/_assets/spi/pdfs/21_century_skills_full.pdf)  
([http://www.ksbe.edu/\\_assets/spi/pdfs/21\\_century\\_skills\\_full.pdf](http://www.ksbe.edu/_assets/spi/pdfs/21_century_skills_full.pdf)) (accessed on March 28, 2016)

[6] Oxford Learning. "Summer Learning Loss Statistics Infographic."  
<http://www.oxfordlearning.com/2015/04/15/summer-learning-loss-statistics/>  
(<http://www.oxfordlearning.com/2015/04/15/summer-learning-loss-statistics/>) (accessed Sept. 22, 2015)

[7] Ibid

[8] Ibid

[9] Ibid

[10] Koedinger, K. et.al. (2015). "Learning is Not a Spectator Sport: Doing is Better than Watching for Learning from a MOOC," Learning.