



EPISODE 3

Empowering States to Leverage Summer Learning

A Network Approach

POLLY SINGH

Welcome to the Wallace Summer Learning podcast series. I am Polly Singh, Senior Program Officer at the Wallace Foundation and the host for today's episode. In this series, we'll be delving into an important area of our learning and enrichment portfolio at Wallace, summer learning. Wallace's support for summer learning started more than a decade ago. And one of the organizations that we've partnered with early on was the National Summer Learning Association. NSLA has been at the forefront of changing the narrative around summer as a time of opportunity. Once the pandemic hit and the importance of summer became even more pronounced, NSLA joined forces with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) on a compelling endeavor. Together, they pilot an effort to support state education agency leaders committed to implementing a broad vision for equity in summer learning. One that moves beyond remediation and credit recovery and engages more students and community partners to boost academic achievement and social and emotional learning goals while influencing teaching and learning throughout the year. Informational webinars are available to all states with nine states receiving intensive technical assistance provided by consultants.

Joining me are four people involved in this network to share their reflections. Kathleen Airhart serves as a summer learning advisor to CCSSO. Mashona Council is a consultant working with NSLA. Raquel Gwynn is an education specialist in the Oregon State Office of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment. And Cory Radisch is former acting director at the Office of Learning, Support, and Intervention in New Jersey. Thank you all for being here.

Let's start by setting the stage. Mashona, why are the summer months important for kids?

MASHONA COUNCIL

Thanks, Polly. It's good to be here with you all. I think one of the things that we know is summer has always been important. The National Summer Learning Association has been doing this work for over 30 years to really combat the summer learning loss and to close the achievement and

opportunity gaps, which we know present themselves even more in the summertime. Our vision has always been to ensure that all young people in America, regardless of background, income, zip code, can participate in and benefit from a high-quality summer learning experience every single year. We talk about what's called the faucet theory and this notion that when summer is out, many of the resources that young folks have access to, whether it's a caring adult, it's lunch, it's being able to access reading materials, many of that goes away when the summer comes. And so that gap in learning really does take place during the summertime.

When we discuss the importance of summer learning, we really are discussing ways to promote equity, create opportunity, and build community. Again, I'd say summer has always mattered. What's important is that you found that we have had shared community, we've had shared young people, we've had shared need, but now with the emphasis on summer learning, especially in the education space, we're able to have a shared vision and a shared language.

I think one of the things, when we start to think of what was summer school, and what did we know it to be, it was remedial and it was about the academic drill. It was about disengaging, and it was perhaps more punitive. It was mandatory for some students, but not for all. And so, part of the work has really been in redefining what does summer learning look like? And that becomes an opportunity to really focus on new and accelerated learning. It becomes an opportunity to get outside of the building. That it can happen in a variety of settings and locations. It's more comprehensive, it can be project-based. And so, it really begins to, again, create an opportunity for teachers and students alike, to be able to really explore what it means during these summer months and how to take advantage of them.

The big one, at NSLA, we talk about the four-"Is" of summer, that it's an opportunity for improvement for both students and staff. It's an opportunity for innovation so young folks and adults can begin to just try out new experiences and activities to learn a little bit more, whether that's STEM programming, whether it's hands-on in the arts, it's an opportunity for interconnection. What you begin to see is a lot of community organizations and also districts and school buildings coming together to really create the experience for young people. But it's also an opportunity to deepen the impact and to really allow young people to tap into not just their academic side, but also the enrichment side of learning, and gives more young

people an opportunity to engage in that way. So, summer has always mattered, and we know that it will continue to matter for our young people.

POLLY SINGH

Thank you. Mashona. I definitely see your point that summer gives young people a chance to bring their whole identity, not just their academic identity, but their whole selves in terms of both the academic and enrichment piece and to test out new skills. I love that innovation angle. With that in mind, Kathleen, tell us about why CCSSO and NSLA partnered to create this network and what the network does?

**KATHLEEN
AIRHART**

Thanks, Polly. CCSSO and NSLA, supported by the Wallace Foundation, partnered to elevate the importance of summer and out-school-learning at the state-level in early 2021. And it has been a great partnership.

We began with a series of universal technical assistance webinars for all states that elevated existing summer learning resources that came through NSLA and Wallace. Initially we weren't certain that states would be interested in the topic of summer learning. It is not something that's historically been a state venture, but we had a huge level of interest. Our first webinar in March, we had more than 40 states attending. By April, we had commitments from nine states to engage teams who would build knowledge, advance quality program standards, and begin planning for statewide initiatives. We encourage states to build teams across internal divisions, as well as including external partners, such as community-based organizations who were providing summer experiences for students. With COVID came challenges to how states would support summer learning. But thankfully they received resources in the form of ESSER ARP funding to sustain their work. States have devoted millions of dollars for districts and partnering community-based organizations to develop summer learning, afterschool and tutoring programs, putting together both need and opportunity. The timing was right to support states in this work.

POLLY SINGH

That's a really great point about timing and just the serendipitous nature in which we found out about ESSER happening just as this project was getting started. Mashona, you serve as a coach to some of these states. What's been the most surprising thing for you so far?

**MASHONA
COUNCIL**

Yeah. Great, great question. I'll say that I've thoroughly enjoyed working with the states and being able to have a fresh perspective into this work. You know, the National Summer Learning Association works with over 15,000 leaders of school districts, youth serving organizations, government

agencies, nonprofits, like all of the folks who have an opportunity to connect with young people. My sister is an educator in the state of Virginia, and I've always worked in the out-of-school-time world, running afterschool programs. And so we would get together for years, we've had family conversations about, it's not that different. I just happen to, you know, serve the young people when they get off the bus at 3:00 and you're greeting them first thing in the morning at 7:30. From the nonprofit side, there's always been the question, 'well, why can't we partner with schools differently?' We are serving these same young people. They're getting off of the bus. How do we make sure that that connection can be stronger? And so, one of the things that I think has been surprising in this work is understanding that while we promote partnerships and we've asked state agencies to look outside and to think of who those strategic partnerships are, what I've found is that it also is about looking internally and understanding this cross-departmental approach to being able to answer the call to summer learning and even year-round learning.

POLLY SINGH

That's great. I really see the opening of the aperture for more folks to be at the table to inform how summer learning is shaped locally. I want to turn to our leaders from our two states, New Jersey and Oregon. Raquel, why was your state interested in participating in this network? You're from Oregon? What has that work looked like?

RAQUEL GWYNN

Thank you, Polly. First, I just want to say I'm so honored to be a part of this group with these wonderful people that I've had the privilege to get to know over these many months. And so, thank you for your invitation. Mashona, I thought you were talking about us in your response! Basically, you named it. When we first started, we were a part of a group led by the Oregon Department of Education. We were participating as a team with our community partners. We were also focused on co-creating an Oregon summer collaborative that was bringing together our state agency, our community partners, culturally specific organizations, philanthropy and other educational leaders, school and district partners, bringing all of them together, and we were making great strides. But what was also true was that we had some internal agency work to do. Summer learning was somewhat siloed, and it was focused on individual grants.

So mainly our Title I, C program, migrant education program, our Title IV, B program, which is our 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant. And we also had one state-funded program - our Student Success Act Summer Learning grant. And while these grants were doing some amazing

work, the one thing that we didn't have was a comprehensive approach across not only these programs, but across our entire agency. And because it was somewhat siloed, we weren't doing a great job of integrating in a meaningful and purposeful way into the school day. So of course, when this opportunity came about, I was really excited.

Number one, because we could harness the expertise of CCSSO and NSLA, and it came with a coach. You know, how great is that? I was an instructional coach in some of my past lives in education, and I know the deep value of having that outside person who has an elevated perspective, a national perspective, to help coach our team. And it's just been invaluable. Also, the opportunity to work with other state agencies and a right size group--there's nine states, and we've had some great collaboration time. We've been able to work on similar problems of practice and, through this work, it's elevated in our agency and beyond, the potential of summer learning. We're in a much better place. We're excited to continue and there's a lot more work to do.

POLLY SINGH

Yes, this work is never ending is what we're finding. Cory, how did this work in New Jersey? How did you get started?

CORY RADISCH

First and foremost, I want to thank CCSSO, the Wallace Foundation and NSLA for this opportunity to represent New Jersey. And the way that it came about was an email from our commissioner to me asking if I was interested in being the liaison for the department with the nine-state cohort. Of course, I jumped at the opportunity to get involved and increase my role here at the department. But realistically we really need to thank our commissioner and her vision. As a champion for equity, she realized the space of summer needed transformation, from that traditional approach that people have talked about previously in their responses and looking to really transform what summertime learning could look like. So it really started with that email to join the state summer learning network.

And from there, through her vision in reorganizing the divisions and offices in the department, she created an office that was dedicated to summer programming and out-of-school-time programming. This office is called the Office of Learning Intervention and Support, it also has a focus on learning acceleration throughout the year as well. So due to her vision and her foresight, you know, we're really fortunate here in New Jersey to have an office. We just gained some staff members, which I'm excited to bring into the fold. But what we started to learn through these meetings, like Raquel

was talking about and interacting with other states, is we saw we had a lot of similarities across the nation--that we did need to increase the capacity at the state level as well as in our local education agencies.

So, one of the things that we did right out of the gate was we created a data landscape survey. We disseminated out to the field right before school started and just as New Jersey schools do, they rose to the occasion. We had over 300 responses from districts sharing their summer learning programming. And we were able to collect really good data to see where these programs fell as far as being transformational versus traditional, how they used their ESSER ARP funds and what other funds they were using. Did they partner with community-based organizations? It provided us an opportunity to kind of create a needs assessment, to see where the support would continue to flow. And one of the resulting issues that came from the data that we collected was creating some targeted technical assistance for our districts.

So, really trying to take what we do and motivate not mandate. We want to motivate our districts and our schools and our leaders and our teachers and our students that, you know, there is such a benefit to working and learning. And also, let's not forget having fun in the summer and creating those learning opportunities and experiences that students may normally not receive. And then seeing if we can transfer that into the 10-month school year, and also measure student outcomes. So, it's really been exciting starting a new office and, and being a steward of the commissioner's vision, and really working towards increasing everyone's capacity in the summer learning arena.

POLLY SINGH

Part of getting started involves coming together to set a vision around what you want your summer programming to be what you want both children and the adults to experience. Tell us about that process, Cory. I think we'll start with you because you've already started to describe some of that, if you could just tell us a little bit more...

CORY RADISCH

I think anytime we're looking at transformation in any industry you really have to address mindsets and hearts. Um, you know, even if we know some change is worthwhile and beneficial, if we're changing the way people work without looking at the culture, without looking at their mindset, it's probably going to fall on deaf ears or even cause some contention. So I think it's incumbent upon leaders to really build the capacity by looking at the purpose of summer learning, providing data that supports mitigating the

summer slides, so to speak, and really looking at what it does for kids and how it changes the possibilities for all kids that are involved. Particularly if you're looking at summer learning creating those experiences.

For example, we have a district here in New Jersey who it's a shore town, but many of those kids don't go to swimming pools. They don't go in the ocean. So, they work on their ELA, they work on their math, and then they have an opportunity for swim lessons and to do some beach expeditions.

And that transfers into the 10-month school year, because as you're going through your coursework, you may have some literature that you're reading that talks about the beach, could talk about beach erosion, and now they have that prior experience. So, you know, creating those opportunities is really steeped in increasing equity and equitable practices in schools. And then we also looked at the opportunity to increase our partnerships with community-based organizations. And one focus of our technical assistance was sharing other districts in New Jersey and the great work that they were doing with the partners in their communities, whether it was external as far as going out to different opportunities for the students or bringing partnerships in from the community to help teach some courses to help mentor certain students that were looking to go to a certain track. So, you know, it was really, it's really been a whirlwind. But I, we see the benefits providing the technical assistance and resources. And we're looking forward to continuing this great work.

POLLY SINGH

That's really great. Raquel, share with us your process.

RAQUEL GWYNN

I think the heart of our vision is embodied in our tagline, of all things, of our summer learning best practice guide and the companion toolkit. It says, "cultivating joy, connection, and curiosity in well-rounded summer learning." We've received a lot of attention from this tagline, honestly, which surprised us. Our guide was released during a time when there was much uncertainty with the pandemic, messages about a dying planet and global warming, the murder of George Floyd, lack of civil discourse from our leaders. And, oh, by the way, if that wasn't enough, 'your learning has been lost and you might not ever make that up.' So, the messages that we're sending our kids and that they're hearing from us in countless ways are saying the world that we live in today might be worse tomorrow. And that is the exact definition of anxiety.

So we knew we needed some balance. We needed to tap into hope and build life-giving programs where students can connect, foster relationships, spark joy, and deepen natural curiosity. If we're going to be able to tackle these problems, we need to lead from a place of hope and not fear, which can be paralyzing. So, what we know to be true is that learning happens everywhere, and our schools are bursting with talent. The unique assets and gifts that each child brings -- we need to tap into that for the collective benefit of our country. So, you know, this space, this expanded learning, that's what we call it here in Oregon, which includes summer, before school, and after school, this space, is so rich and has so much to offer.

And we're also really lucky here in Oregon to have just such quality leadership. Under the direction of our agency director, Colt Gill, and our assistant superintendent, Jennifer Patterson, we already had a deep vision, and it is grounded in equity. It's our strategic plan. Everything we do is grounded in equity. All we needed to do really was connect with our school and district and our community partners to make sure we were on the right path. So, our vision here in Oregon is based on four pillars. The first pillar is connection is the foundation of learning. Connection in the way that we learn and make meaning through hands on inquiry-based learning, but also in relationships. And we've been saying relationships a lot lately, and we're feeling that it's almost glossed over, and the word almost isn't large enough to capture how important relationships are.

It really takes only one significant adult to change the trajectory of a student's life, one significant adult. So, in our minds, let's stack the deck here and let's get as many adults in front of kids to extend a hand as possible. The second pillar is strength-based student voice and choice. So, we know learning happens best when educators actively uplift and center a student's prior knowledge and view it as an asset for learning rather than a problem to overcome. So, when we tap into student interests by providing enriching youth development opportunities, like music and art and wood shop and robotics and hiking, and give them choices in these activities, we know it's really powerful.

Oh, we're also really excited about a new survey that we just released - a statewide student voice survey. So, we do that during the school day, and then we're also doing it... it's called our summer seed survey. So, we're eager to see those results from this summer to help us inform and improve and really create these programs that are meaningful for students.

The third pillar is co-creation and innovation. So, co-creation, and co-learning with students, families, and communities. We know that when we do that together as a community, it ensures that the specific context of the community, its history and cultures, assets, and challenges, needs, and dreams are integrated within the program.

And the fourth is purposeful outreach and engagement. Summer programs are voluntary, right? You can build it, but they might not come. So, if you don't have purposeful outreach and engagement, the program will not be as successful as it needs to be. So, our summer learning best practice guide and toolkit incorporates the work of every office in ODE. That sounds easy, hard to do, right? It really is. It's hard to do. So, with our community partners and then a purposeful focus on the integration within our agency, we've been able to create these resources and guides and our hope is that we'll be able to iterate upon them year after year. And as we learn more, we'll build more and create these supports to best serve our students and families. And like I said before, the work has just begun.

POLLY SINGH

Oh, absolutely. And I hear you about the continuous improvement that you have to build in, as you think about these systems and really being responsive to the needs of children and families. As we wrap up Kathleen, if someone isn't involved in this network, but would like to learn from it, where can they go?

**KATHLEEN
AIRHART**

Thanks Polly. Some examples of how states are utilizing resources can be found on one of our CCSSO websites. Go to ccsso.org/blog. And in that post, you'll find a link to the summer learning network page. There you can view state examples of approaches to summer learning access resources mentioned today, view past webinars on various topics. Things that we've done so far include approaches to programming, staffing, funding, data collection, just to name a few. Our webinars are open to all states and information about attending future events can be found at that website.

POLLY SINGH

Wonderful. Thank you all so much. I want to thank each of the four speakers for joining me today. And thank you to our listeners for joining us as well. If you want to learn more about research or summer learning that Wallace has commissioned, you can go to our website at www.wallacefoundation.org.