

## The Power of Summer Learning Partnerships

**CLAUDIA DEMEGRET**

Welcome to the Wallace summer learning podcast series. I'm Claudia DeMegret, 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. In today's episode, we'll hear out-of-school time perspectives about the role partnerships play in coordinating and implementing after-school and summer learning programs.

I'm delighted to be joined by Sergio Garcia, director of learning systems at Big Thought in Dallas, Texas. Big Thought is a nonprofit that designs, curates, and delivers high-impact afterschool and summer learning programs that cultivate creativity, develop social-emotional learning skills and empower youth through an asset-based and trauma-informed methodology. I'm also joined by Jessica Gunderson who was newly named the co-director of Partnership for Children and Youth in California just last week. For over 20 years, PCY has helped people, organizations, and systems work together to educate and support children and under-resourced communities by training program providers, facilitating relationships between schools and community-based organizations and advocating for effective public policies and resources. Sergio and Jessica, thank you both for joining me today.

**JESSICA GUNDERSON**

Thank you so much for having us and being so forward-thinking and investing in summer, in children and communities.

**SERGIO GARCIA**

Yes. Thank you.

**CLAUDIA DEMEGRET**

So, before we delve into summer learning partnerships, let's start with the big picture. When I started running summer learning programs, more than 25 years ago, we had to do a lot of cajoling, convincing and cobbling together resources all over the place. The importance of summer as a time for learning has really solidified over the last few years. Can you both reflect on how it has played out in your communities, and Jessica, let's start with you.

**JESSICA  
GUNDERSON**

Sure. At the Partnership for Children and Youth, we've been working on increasing the quality and access of summer learning partnerships since 2009. And at that time, we were running a campaign where we had to approach school districts and give them money to do summer learning programs. And now we're seeing a major prioritization of summer learning across both education leaders and policymakers, both during and post-pandemic in terms of public investments increasing a lot, the terms we use and the kind of program elements we're uplifting and prioritizing. So in tracking summer programs in California, which you can find a lot more on our website, the majority of school districts—over 70% at least last year—are running summer learning programs versus a traditional summer school. Specifically, they are embedding enrichment and academics and wellness in their programming. So, we no longer have to explain what summer learning is or why it's important, but how to do it, how to do it well and how to do it for all kids.

**CLAUDIA DEMEGRET**

Wow, that's, that's really terrific. 70% ! I mean, that is really aspirational for I think for many of us in the rest of the country. But Sergio, what are you seeing? How is this playing out in Dallas?

**SERGIO GARCIA**

Summer is now being considered here as an extension of what's happening post-academic and the regular traditional academic year. And at Big Thought we have what's called the Dallas City Learning Initiative, and we're going on six years of this initiative. So prior to COVID, it was still kind of in that nascent stage, but building, and we were starting to see the importance of one summer is good, two summers is better for learners to actually maintain their academic standards. And so, when we're talking about marginalized communities, this is where we really start to see how summer is now an extension of what is happening in regular academic settings.

And then, we're taking this approach now at Big Thought—the whole child, the whole year, and really being mindful of what that means. And so a child is, yes, in school in fall and spring, but they're also in summer. And so making sure that not only they are being culturally relevant in the programming that is being provided, but that their voice is being centered in those decisions when programming is being provided to them. And in that being socially, emotionally aware and providing those skills and those tools necessary not only for youth, but I'm going to be honest with you, our providers are doing that, too. So starting from them with social-emotional foundations, and then bringing that to the youth in that same space. And

that's been an integral part of how Big Thought and Dallas City Learning has been moving forward through summer and summer learning and engaging the communities. And in making sure that not only, like I said, youth have a voice, but communities have a voice in how summer learning is being imagined and provided.

**CLAUDIA DEMEGRET** OST intermediaries are really a special breed of organizations and not necessarily easily understood and quite varied in your approaches. Let's just talk a little bit about the role that you play and how that looks in each of your communities.

**SERGIO GARCIA** Big Thought aims to close the opportunity gap. And too many young people grow up in environments that don't empower them or allow them to discover their own greatness. And so we recognize that income and community resources, race and even English proficiency can be barriers on how they imagine success and how they imagine their greatness. As I mentioned, we keep continuing to center youth in all that program delivery and the engagement that we do. And we aspire to give them the skills and the tools necessary to imagine and create their best lives. And we are creating creators. I'm wearing my 'I'm a creator' t-shirt today. And it's really about this creator economy that we've been hearing a lot about and how creativity is one of the top skills that is being looked at by employers and by higher education. And we can't do it all on our own, right? Big Thought can't be doing the only thing out there. So we recognize that we need community partners. And so we are creating creators through them. We are creating creativity and creative moments and opportunities for them all. And so that's what Big Thought is trying to do by closing the opportunity gap and giving the skills and the tools necessary for youth to imagine and create their best lives.

**CLAUDIA DEMEGRET** What I've always admired about Big Thought is how well you work with municipalities, with the school district and the parks department and all the actors and entities pulling it together, and brokering some of those partnerships. Jessica, can you share a little bit more about the Partnership for Children and Youth and how your work plays out in California?

**JESSICA GUNDERSON** At the Partnership, we believe to make positive change at scale, practice and policy must be interconnected and the voices of experts, namely students, families and staff, must drive both vision and implementation. So that's what you heard Sergio talking about. The voice of students shouldn't just be in daily program, that should be in the capital. That should be on the

desk of policymakers as they're making these investments. So we work both hand in hand with the field and we also are working in the state capital to be grounded in both worlds and translate and navigate between them. Being at the intersection of policy and practice gives us this unique ability to understand how the puzzle pieces fit together in really complex systems and act in strategic ways to make positive changes that benefit children and families across the state. And in real time what we're doing, we're driving and building a user feedback loop to build coherence at all levels, from developing and informing what a legislative proposal looks like to what is the nuance of funding regulations to what does a model school board policy look like around summer learning to what is a daily schedule? So, it's about building this coherence from the classroom experience, the outdoor education experience we want for our young people to how these programs are funded. And without coherence, students and staff can fall through the gaps. And too often particularly when there's not enough resources, we default to a low quality; all students deserve the highest level of opportunities to be creative, as Sergio said, and to thrive.

**CLAUDIA DEMEGRET**

Well, hold that because we'll get to quality shortly, but I want to step back because I'm hearing this through from the grassroots to the grass tops and it's all driven by student voice and choice, which you've spoken so well about. Let's just talk a little bit more about one of the main contributions of intermediaries, which is to facilitate partnerships for summer learning. It's what I call creative matchmaking. Those partnerships can then tackle common barriers and then elevate the quality of summer learning programs as well as focus on engagement, not only bringing young people and their families into programs, but the what and how you're designing programs to engage and excite young people. This is often perceived as daunting by folks that are starting out and are in their early days. And they're hungry, really hungry for examples. So let's break this down a little bit. Jessica and Sergio, what are some of the benefits of intermediaries and the partnerships they can broker and how is this playing out in both your respective communities?

**SERGIO GARCIA**

Wow. It is a daunting task when you're talking about building relationships and building collaboration. And so I do take a very grassroots approach to that. And a lot of that is 'let's break bread.' Let's come together, and I'm going to step back and let you talk. Because more often than not, the community partners and organizations that we collaborate with as part of the Dallas City Learning ecosystem is just this... what are the things that you need that I can hopefully bring to the table and being privileged enough

and recognizing the privilege that an organization like Big Thought has to be able to broker those relationships. And so building trust is an essential part of how we are doing that. And sometimes that is just really sitting down having a cup of coffee with somebody, listening to them and making sure that I'm shifting that power and that privilege in a way that is being mindful for them and being a way for them to have a voice. You know, we continue to hear that and say whose voice is at the table.

And so it's starting to reduce those barriers of entry just by being there and going to them, not having them come to you, but going to them and being mindful about that. And those are some of the ways that I specifically in Dallas have started to build this ecosystem of learning. I like to use the word ecosystems because they are living, they're breathing, they're ever changing. They're expanding, they're contracting. As we saw from COVID, they contracted and now we're ready to expand...we're blooming and we're blossoming. And so it takes a lot of that conversation and language understanding to be able to make sure that trust is happening and that they are still continuing to be heard.

**JESSICA  
GUNDERSON**

In California, I would say the starting place is how to leverage all the assets, environments and adults in the community to serve the most kids with the best programs. A big part of what Partnership for Children & Youth does is to help school districts realize they don't have to do summer alone. Just like we want our young people to understand you are not alone in this. There are a range of partnerships and adults and assets in your community that are ready and willing to help think about how we can provide the best summer experience. And so, we advocate for this at all levels, from the funding language and making sure that community-based organizations can be a part of that investment all the way to the classroom and how we staff it and do blended staffing with both school district and employees and community-based organizations. So, I think the starting place is building awareness among parents and students and targeting those students that wouldn't otherwise have access to summer learning programs because of the cost. So we see school districts being very intentional about outreach.

For example, in Davis Unified, they make sure the week before they open up registration, each school comes up with a list of students and they do direct outreach to all those students and all those families and open up registration several weeks earlier for specific families to make sure that they have that opportunity to get into programs. At Rio Elementary, which is a smaller elementary with a high population of Mixto-speaking families, they specifically partner with community organizations with deep

connections. And so, they're actually out in the community physically. What do we mean by that? They're at the bus stop talking about summer learning programs. They are running events in the evening talking about community programs.

What we saw last summer, too, was mental health services and counseling increase. And so how we facilitate that is you see either communities partnering specifically with community and regional health organizations, such as Klamath-Trinity Joint Unified. They partnered with their tribal mental health wellness organization who has cultural values that are embedded in the community and they didn't just serve the students and the families, they're also serving staff. So I want to highlight that what we saw last summer is, how are we providing wellness services also to our staff? And how do we build that out? We work specifically to show a range of different schedules that programs can use to ensure that staff are getting the breaks they need. They're getting the support and professional development they need as well. So those are just few examples. We see a lot more school districts investing in one-on-one outreach, and with a diverse set of different communities.

**CLAUDIA DEMEGRET**

I love those examples, and I'm just even reflecting, I know that Big Thought had a community provider that taught mariachi as part of the enrichment, right? So they're robust academics in the morning. And then mariachi is culturally relevant, responsive, activating your community elders to bring this incredible art form. So it's just— it's tackling so many different things and integrating so much.

We know in our field, and in many, many fields and many of the human service fields, we're facing a number of common challenges. Transportation is huge. And we're facing a lot of staffing challenges. Maybe you can kick us off, Sergio, and just share how summer learning partnerships and your communities are coming together to address these challenges this summer.

**SERGIO GARCIA**

Yes, thank you. Kind of to reference what Jessica was mentioning earlier about this blended staffing with community partners. And so saying to the schools, 'you don't have to do this by yourself.' We have skilled learning professionals here, but in that it's also recognizing that just because they don't have a 'bachelor's or master's in education,' they are still educators, they are still practitioners of education. And so when they recognize that the programs that they're providing is skills building, is giving the tools

necessary for success, then they are able to, you know, add capacity to their classroom, add capacity to their staff.

And then we are also encouraging, and I know that Jessica has said this, before, but how are the older youth playing a part in that and being part of an older youth mentorship in that experience. And that is one way we're centering youth in the voice of what we're doing and then making that a capacity build for not only us as Big Thought as an organization, because we do that, we're starting to do that more. Where we're like, 'You're 18, 19. You do have experiences. Let's leverage your experiences, let's leverage your knowledge and let's bring that to the table because a younger person can see success in that.' And the proximity in age is really a powerful thing that happens in their room when learning is happening. And so we're trying to do that through our partnerships for our community organizations, but also leveraging youth who have the desire or have the passion to be part of another child's learning experience as another way of how we're starting to lessen that gap when it comes to adding professionals in the room for learning.

**JESSICA  
GUNDERSON**

Before I jump into challenges, I would be remiss if I didn't talk about choice. We saw choice being the secret sauce of summer last year and that cuts across all. So what am I talking about? I'm talking about giving families a choice. Do I feel comfortable in virtual, or do I want something in person? That's giving students choice. We saw a lot of school districts letting kids pick which enrichment they wanted, and they got a different opportunity each week. How did they recruit teachers to be in their program? Choice. What do you want to teach? What are you passionate about? So for the first time I saw choice not just about an empowerment strategy for young people, but really for adults as well. How do we let the adults that are working in these programs or serving in these programs, also have choice and give families choice? So, I wanted to just start there because that was one of the silver bullets we saw last summer, was choice, and it cut across, again, operations to programming. I'll start with staffing because it's our number one challenge. And it's our responsibility as an intermediary to identify best practices and share them widely.

Administrators and staff are so hungry for ideas, but they don't have the bandwidth to seek them out and know what's going on. So that's really where we see our role is to share that and then even, you know, facilitate peer learning where needed. So this last summer we saw Los Angeles Unified, the city of LA, and a local intermediary co-host and advertise job fairs. They were collectively looking for staff across different agencies. It



wasn't just each program for themselves. In summer 2021, both in Sacramento and Elk Grove, they hired high school students to staff summer programs, and this was so well received that we see it's really growing, and we actually created a fact sheet on 'how do you pay students' because there is a lot of nuance to it. When you're working with school districts and community-based organizations, sometimes you need to break that step down one by one. And that's where we step in. In Monterey last summer, we saw unions and administrators coming to the table, working together to modify job descriptions so they could maximize all staff. So the bus driver could be serving in the classroom and vice versa because all these staff wanted to be there serving students. So we've seen people again, shift the rules about staffing just to make it work for students.

**CLAUDIA DEMEGRET**

I'm just loving this expansive view of staffing in the midst of this crisis, because there's really a lot of opportunity. There are dual benefit program approaches. And so it's leveraging the older youth who are creative and energized and energetic and need workforce development to come in and be providers and support, and in many cases linked and connected with credentialed teachers who might be doing the academic piece during the day. And just even thinking about what families need and being responsive to families.

We know that partnerships are beneficial, we've been talking about it, and you live and breathe it. This is something that you've both dedicated your careers to, but it's not that easy. And we know that it's a lot more than maybe signing a piece of paper on the dotted line. Can you just talk about what it really means to build effective partnerships and the concrete steps that you say you have seen communities take to manifest the best opportunities and benefits of partnership?

**JESSICA  
GUNDERSON**

I would say partnership takes time and energy. And so you need to staff that way. So what we've seen for far too often is that the partnership piece is just a footnote on your job rather than a core responsibility. And so we've seen many school districts, for the summer, specifically hire someone, sometimes it was a principal who was retired, who really had a lot of relationships in the community, serve as the liaison for all community partners. And so what I would say is you need to have a dedicated staff member and there needs to be someone with passion and interest in that area. We've also seen a regional approach. And these community foundations and other community partners can be the relationship and the glue between school districts that are sometimes overworked. So I think



they play a fundamental role. A lot of times you want these intermediaries that have relationships with both.

What's also really important to trust in this partnership building is reflection. So last summer, I knew people that brought in 20 different partners, and they said, 'that's too much, that's too much for the students. It's too much for coordinating. And so we're gonna go back to the drawing board and do something a little different this summer.' So, I would say just a fundamental piece of this partnership is also at the end of the summer, during the school year, let's reflect on together what worked and what didn't work. Like any relationship there, it can be bumpy. So it's more about keeping young people in the programs at the center, and then also providing that time and space to reflect on what's working. And what's not.

## **SERGIO GARCIA**

Yeah, I really love what you said there about that reflection, because you know, here at Big Thought that is a large part of what social and emotional learning is and practices are--is the reflection in this? And so if a partner doesn't know what they are needing to grow in, how can they become better or how can they really be mindful about the programming that they're delivering? That said, the way I approach it and the way we start to build relationships here is, as I mentioned earlier at the beginning of this, is breaking bread. Letting them have a voice and hearing from them and seeing how I can leverage the resources that Big Thought has and the relationships that Big Thought has, to bring to the table for them.

And another thing I also mentioned – the whole child the whole year. And so that is another relationship that we need to be mindful of when we're building these collaborations, these partnerships. Understanding that a one-and-done attitude is not the way we need to work, is not the way we need to build a relationship. How can we continue to cultivate that by going back to the communities, by going back to youth? Because, not for nothing, if we're going to have real talk here, there are a lot of abandonment issues in marginalized communities and so they're not going to build trust enough to be able to learn something and succeed if you're just going to be there one day and then gone the next and never come back again. And so making sure that you're being intentional about your longevity is another way of how we're starting to build and understand effective partnerships when it comes to this kind of community engagement, this ecosystem building. And so for me, that is how we've really started to expand and solidify what the Dallas City of Learning Initiative under Big Thought is. It's making sure that we are continuing to go back into these communities year after year, summer after summer, the whole year, the whole child and

being mindful of that because we don't want to go in and go out and not come back again, because that can be traumatizing to be perfectly honest.

**CLAUDIA DEMEGRET**

Right, and I know that each of your organizations have that convening role. So it's convening all of the partners, and your partners have been extremely stressed and stretched beyond humanly possible in the last few years. So it's also giving them tools in their hand, those reflection activities. What I've seen from interacting with you is you have codified systems where you have tools that support reflection and feedback and help partners improve. So that they're getting better year after year in terms of the kinds of services they're providing and how they're meeting young people where they are. I want to also go back and talk a little bit on how you make connections with small providers and medium size providers to different sources of funding, so you can bring them to the table.

**SERGIO GARCIA**

The work that I do within learning systems at Big Thought, we actually have, I don't want to say micro grant, but we have a pretty decent budget to give to our partners to be able to add capacity because we know they can't do the things without money, right? In that idea is trying to break down and reimagine what funding processes look like. In the same respect, in the same realm, letting them know what the tricks of the trade are, because a lot of the organizations that I work with and collaborate with, it's one person who's doing the fundraising. It's one person who's doing the marketing. So they don't have the capacity. So what we try to do is then as a partnership within Dallas City of Learning, they get data that they can use that they don't have to do their own, because that's also a lot to deal with.

And so giving them basic skills to understand what a grant could be like and introducing them to grants, introducing them to the processes of city grants that are out there for them. Because a lot of them don't know that there is money out there to be had. Big Thought is privileged enough to be able to say, 'Hey, this foundation is giving away small micro grants. You know, here's what Communities Foundation here in Texas is doing.' And we want to be able to set aside what we call lunch and learns, professional learning to fill out that application, to be able to do that for them. And so, making sure that we are giving them these professional learning opportunities so that they have success. But we are also in the same respect trying to reimagine what funding can be and then actually taking that to larger funding institutions and say, 'you know, just because they don't have X, Y data that we've always typically asked for doesn't mean that they're not doing good work. Let's look at the cultural relevancy of what

they're doing. That's what's the impact.' And so having that conversation with major funders is also part of how we're helping reimagine funding processes to allow a smaller organization to get a piece of that pie.

**JESSICA  
GUNDERSON**

Yes. I would just add at Partnership for Children & Youth, one is this translation of all the funding opportunities and what do they mean and what do they come with? And I think a trend that we've seen in California at least, and I think you see this with the federal stimulus dollars, is a lot more flexibility to really adapt to local communities. What we've seen is some of our system actors are so used to outcomes and outputs and this rigidity when it comes to funding that they're limited in what they can see and create for young people. So I think a big push here in California has been start with what young people and families and communities need and build from there. If you're doing the right thing, the funding will come and it will be okay. We will help you on the back end as needed as long as you're doing right by students. And so it's been really about facilitating learning opportunities between school districts and community partners to reimagine how we can use public resources that aren't just about increasing test scores. Particularly, a benefit of the pandemic has been getting students outside. And so we've seen huge expansion in outdoor education.

This year Los Angeles Unified is partnering with an intermediary and the city and they're going to bring one field trip to every single student. We're talking tens of thousands of field trips and young people. So they see that as a core value now: Having a field trip for every student. And so that, you know, that's the work that we're doing. And again, public funds are being used to do this and it's the right thing to do. And with this funding, that's what the money is there for—to expand the imagination and dreams of young people and bring them what we want for all of our children.

**CLAUDIA DEMEGRET**

Well, those are all fantastic. I mean, there's such a rich conversation and so many examples that you have shared. Sergio and Jessica, I'm wondering in the interest of providing even more concrete examples, if you can share some of those examples of collaborative learning models that you have supported that have produced really invigorating and intentional summer learning programming.

**SERGIO GARCIA**

There is a partner here that is really intentional about their summer internships, their youth internships. And so it's starting from the youths' strengths and assets space. What are they passionate about? They were able to create this DJ workshop where the kids, the student intern

collaborated with the adult educator to build this workshop out. And so at the very end, the youth that were taking the workshop from this youth leader created these sick beats for a dance party. At the end of it, it was more about this enjoyment of music, which is a community thing. It's a culturally relevant thing. The youth leader was able to learn how to structure something, was very passionate about the teaching that they were doing, because it was coming from their strengths space and from their knowledge base. And so this kind of intentional creation of programming and learning happening with youth leaders and adults is one of the examples of how we are moving in this summer learning space.

**JESSICA  
GUNDERSON**

I love that you asked about collaborative learning models because I would say not only are students feeling isolated, but far too often, we isolate teachers in their classroom. And so what we see in the summer, all the way from when we're designing the program, is we're bringing staff from a variety of different agencies and organizations under one umbrella and having shared training. So first it's just how we use shared language and shared understanding. And then that can trickle down to a site where a teacher might be mentoring a variety of youth workers and helping them create the schedule. So the teachers may not be in the classroom teaching, but they're mentoring and building the capacity of other workers.

And you know, going even deeper, we've seen places such as Gilroy Unified where they're partnering their certified teachers with the YMCA staff because they needed more adults serving kids and providing that one-on-one connection. And so they're co-creating in the classroom together. And the teacher is building capacity of the youth worker to do deep intervention work with small groups of students on literacy and other issues. And the youth worker is helping the teacher learn new games, new songs, bringing play into the classroom. And so at the end of the summer, when we interview these teachers, they talk about, 'this is why I got into teaching.' So, again, it's this joy that summer brings and that we're in it together. As Sergio was talking about, it's about community building that goes outside of any classroom time or physical classroom boundary.

**SERGIO GARCIA**

And if I could just quickly add also it's all about that trust building. If you're trusting what is being taught, you can trust to learn it and retain it. And so that is where we're really starting to see learning and retention happen.

**CLAUDIA MEDEGRET**

Wow. I think you've encapsulated the beauty of summer learning, really of that inspiration. I want to thank you, Sergio and Jessica, for your time, your

leadership, your vision and what you have done for your respective communities because it is powerful and transformative.

I also want to thank our listeners for joining us as well. And if you want to learn more about research on summer learning, and that includes more on Big Thought and Partnership for Children and Youth, you can go to Wallace's website and find reports on a variety of topics, a summer planning kit and other resources at [wallacefoundation.org](http://wallacefoundation.org). This has been a wonderful time, and we thank you and wish you the best of luck.

**SERGIO GARCIA**

Thank you. Happy summer.

**JESSICA  
GUNDERSON**

Thank you. Happy summer.