

ACTNOW

Afterschool for Children & Teens



national summer
learning association

SUMMER TOOLKIT

July 14-18

2025

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INTRODUCTION

What is National Summer Learning Week?

Initiated by the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA), National Summer Learning Week brings together diverse groups, including out-of-school time providers, educators, businesses, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), and policymakers, to celebrate and advocate for summer learning opportunities for youth and families. Summer learning opportunities are integral not only for fostering the academic success and curiosity of students but also to ensure their health, safety, and security.

Celebrate National Summer Learning Week (July 14-18th) with us!

Why Celebrate National Summer Learning Week?



Create **state-wide and national attention** for summer learning initiatives via events, social media, and action alerts



Educate yourself and others about the far-reaching benefits of summer learning!



Encourage **partnerships and community-building** in the Out-of-School-Time (OST) space



Help decrease disparities by promoting access to **safe, healthy, and joyful** spaces for youth

Summer Learning Week Themes



Literacy & Learning

Help youth around the country discover the joy of reading this summer! Research-backed, positive effects of reading include the development of advanced communication and vocabulary skills, patience, empathy, and literacy.¹

Arts

Encourage youth to participate in various forms of artistic expression, such as music, literature, dance, theater, visual arts, and more. An arts education can not only improve academic performance, but also allow youth to express emotions, form social and community bonds, and spark creativity in new ways.²



Wellness, Health & Sports

Summer Learning Programs promote both physical and mental wellbeing by providing access to physical activity and key nutrition and encouraging social relationships. Participation in summer learning programs decreases time spent engaging in unsupervised behaviors and exposure to risky or dangerous situations.³

STEM

An exposure to a STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) allows students to unlock connections between curriculum and the real world. It also fosters practical and critical thinking skills and prepares youth for success in higher education and the workforce.



Community & Leadership

The ability to form and rely on healthy relationships is vital for youth to overcome challenges and flourish. Bonds with peers and mentors and experience in leadership roles positively influences mental wellbeing and developing a strong sense of self.

Summer Learning Benefits



Reducing Disparities

Summer is a key, yet often underutilized, time to close gaps in achievement scores and health outcomes between high- and low-income children across the country. During the summer months, out-of-school time (OST) experiences are most concentrated,⁴ with students spending most of their time in highly variant home settings.

According to a study from Brown University, "a little more than half of students exhibit summer learning losses, while the other half exhibits summer learning gains."⁵ A key difference between these two groups is access to summer learning at home and through programs.

Summer slide, or summer learning loss, refers to the loss of academic skills and knowledge during summer months. The impact of summer learning loss can be devastating on all students, especially for students from low-income families or underrepresented communities. It has been shown that youth who have access to academic and enrichment activities like writing, attending a summer camp, visiting a zoo or aquarium, or visiting a museum or art gallery have a lower rate of summer learning loss.⁶ Summer is a great time to consider hosting activities to combat this summer slide!



Summer Learning Benefits

Health & Nutrition

Only 20% to 28% of 6- to 17-year olds meet the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity, and even less meet USDA recommendations for daily fruits and vegetables intake (7.1% and 2.0% of youth, respectively). Summer Learning Programs play a key role in facilitating reducing systemic barriers to meeting key health benchmarks.

Summer learning programs offer a wide range of programming, including opportunities for youth to garden, cook, and celebrate healthy habit building. Many children receive their majority of nutritious meals in school and afterschool settings, and when schools out for the summer, through summer programs. Additionally, programs generate excitement around physical activity through group sports and outdoor activities, helping combat rising rates of childhood obesity around the country.⁹ Incorporating cooking and gardening in lesson plans is a great way to keep youth healthy and learning!



Summer Learning Benefits



Addressing America's Literacy Problem

Literacy is essential for communication and engagement with the world. Yet, 54% of U.S. adults read below the equivalent of a sixth-grade level, and 64% of our country's fourth graders do not read proficiently.¹⁰

Low literacy rates impact economic growth, public health, community safety, and civic engagement. Participation in summer programs offered by city governments, nonprofits, community-based organizations, and schools can help offset the summer slide and lead to improved reading achievement scores, improved mathematics achievement scores, increased school year attendance, and increased enjoyment of learning. This illuminates the need for high-quality reading opportunities over the summer.

Summer learning programs can also help to address financial barriers by providing free or low-cost access to books to help combat the summer slide and improve literacy rates amongst youth.¹¹ It is important to note that summer can have negative impact on literacy for all youth if they are not adequately exposed to reading material and stimulation during summer months.



Summer Learning Benefits

Improved Mental Health

A report from Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago states that half of Illinois youth continue to experience worsening mental health.¹²



"While many children are excited to be out of school for the summer because of the freedom it brings from homework and school tasks, without the structure and social connection that school provides, some children are at higher risk for isolation, irregular sleep, and decreased engagement in fun activities," – Ariana Hoet, PhD, executive clinical director of The Kids Mental Health Foundation and pediatric psychologist at Nationwide Children's Hospital.¹³

Particularly, students who face loneliness and food insecurity over the summer are at risk of lower mental health. Summer learning programs help provide students with social interactions, an important sense of routine, healthy screen time habits, and structured routines.¹⁴

Safety and Gun Violence Prevention



Gun violence rates in the United States have increased following the pandemic, continuing to peak in summer months. Research from the University of Chicago's Education Lab shows that students disengaged from school, including during summer months, are the most vulnerable to gun violence and the resulting trauma.¹⁵ In Chicago, IL *"more than 90% of youth shooting victims are not enrolled in school at the time of victimization."*¹⁶

In a 2022 study, 1/3 of Chicago children were exposed to firearm violence and 1/5 children had adverse mental health effects associated with firearm violence.¹⁷ Gun violence and its adverse effects disproportionately impact Black and Latino children.

Supporting summer programming for youth is a critical aspect of gun violence prevention. As important as the academic and social benefits of summer learning are, many parents cite safety as their reasoning for signing their own children up. Summer programs offer a safe space for youth, adult supervision, and trauma-informed care.



Data to Consider

There are so many benefits to summer learning programs; research by Afterschool Alliance shows that parents, superintendents, and voters alike see these benefits but want **more** in their communities^{18, 19}. You can incorporate the following data into communication with legislators to highlight field impact and justify your ask(s).

More than 9 in 10 school superintendents surveyed (91%) said that summer programs are important for **achieving their district's goals**

86% of registered voters said that afterschool and summer programs are an **absolute necessity** for their community

More than 8 in 10 rural, suburban, and urban voters want their newly elected federal, state, and local leaders to provide **more funding** for afterschool programs

Nearly 9 in 10 voters (89%) said it is important to have access to quality, affordable afterschool and summer programs to **help parents work and strengthen the economy**.

A majority of superintendents said that their summer programs in 2024 were **at or over capacity** and half of superintendents don't think adequate summer learning program opportunities are available.



Advocacy Tools

Children spend an average of 80% of their days out of school, including in²⁰ afterschool and summer months. This summer, urge policymakers to be responsive to community need and support Illinois summer learning providers and programs.



01

SITE VISITS

Hosing elected officials allows them to see firsthand how summer programs benefit their constituents. For detailed instructions on how to coordinate a site visit with your legislator, we recommend checking out [this toolkit](#) from the American Camp Association.

02

PERSONALIZED COMMUNICATION

Express your thoughts, concerns, and even gratitude to elected officials via personalized correspondence. This can be done through letter writing, emailing, calling, or reaching out to the legislator via social media. Find your elected state and federal officials [here](#) (note: you must either use your complete address with a corresponding zip code or your county for the provided link to work)

03

ACTION ALERTS

Organizations release pre-written action alerts that constituents can send to elected officials regarding a particular issue, such as STEM education or SNAP. ACT Now's action alert urges elected officials to protect the future of our youth by investing in summer!

[Send ACT Now's Action Alert Here](#)

How Can I Effectively Communicate with Elected Officials?



MY ASK IS TIME SENSITIVE

MY ASK IS DETAILED

PHONE CALL


SOCIAL MEDIA

EMAIL

LETTER



Note: If an ask is both time sensitive and detailed, a phone call is the most effective form of communication. Descriptions of the benefits and drawbacks of each form of communication can be found in the following pages.



The Three C's: Best Practices for Personalizing Communication

Clarity

State your role, your ask, and when action is needed. Don't assume that a staffer will be familiar with jargon, acronyms, or your field's specific needs.

Consensus

Highlight why it's in a representative's best interest to support your cause. Tell your story and put it in alignment with their values, campaign promises, or past actions (this involves research!)

Conciseness

Keep your communication brief. Staffers have to sift through high volumes of communication and concise messages are more likely to be read in their entirety.

STRUCTURING A LETTER OR EMAIL

Letters and emails are the most utilized form of communication to legislators because they allow for more **detailed communication** and **less on-the-spot responding** than alternate forms.

Opening Paragraph:

- State the subject of your letter
- Use the bill number or budget line name
- Identify your role and organization

Body of Letter:

- Provide a brief overview of the issue, keeping the 3 C's in mind
 - Include relevant and impactful statistics or "on-the-ground" experience
- State your ask
 - Usually, this will look something like asking the legislator to visit a site and/or support or oppose a bill or policy

Conclusion:

- Thank them again for their time and support of the cause
- Reword your driving point and ask
- Ask for a reply from them!
 - This could look like any further questions they may have or updates regarding their stance on your cause



HELPFUL RESOURCES



Find your elected officials and their addresses on senate.gov, house.gov, and your state's respective legislative website (i.e. ilga.gov)



Learn how to properly address your letter to state and federal legislators with this helpful toolkit. Use this link for assistance sending your letter.



SAMPLE EMAIL/LETTER

Dear Senator/Representative Last Name,

I am writing to you with regard to **(summer learning opportunities in Illinois)**. I am the Program Facilitator/Director/Coordinator of **(organization's name)** which annually serves **(#/geographic location)** students, youth, and their families. OR provides **(#/type of activity)** programs at **(organization's name)**.

As your constituent, I want to encourage you to continue to support summer learning opportunities for Illinois youth and invite you to celebrate National Summer Learning Week 2024, from July 14 to July 18, 2025, with **(insert your program name)**.

Summer programs are often known for their beneficial academic effects, but they are also crucial in creating safe environments amidst rising crime, providing nutritious meals for youth facing food insecurity, initiating peer-to-peer and mentor-mentee relationships, and improving mental health outcomes!

I ask that you support a continued investment in summer learning programs. **(Insert a brief story about your program or how the services you offer combat summer learning losses and help keep kids healthy and safe)**. With your help, we can ensure all young people in our community and across our state have the tools they need to thrive as healthy, safe, and well-adjusted adults.

Sincerely,
(Your Full Name)

SAMPLE THANK YOU NOTE

Dear Senator/Representative **(Full Name)**:

Thank you for taking the time to converse with me on **(Date of conversation)** to talk about the importance of summer learning programs in Illinois and in your district **(Include district number/area)**. As we discussed, **summer programs play a key role in safety, health, and enrichment** throughout rural, urban, and suburban communities in our state.

Summer learning programs help to improve academic and social-emotional outcomes, keep youth safe and healthy, and support workforce development not only in underserved and historically marginalized communities but across the state of Illinois. **Many providers are ready to collaborate with state agencies and school districts** in order to support the diverse needs of young people as they relate to providing learning renewal opportunities and summer experiences.

I look forward to speaking with you again to discuss further the ways in which we can work together to ensure that young Illinoisans within our communities have the tools they need to successfully transition into educated, self-sufficient, accomplished, empathetic, and civically minded adults.

Sincerely,
(Your Full Name)



MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR PHONE CALL

Phone calls are an effective way to communicate with legislators – some staffers even claim that phone calls are more effective for advocacy than emails, letters, or social media because they are **hard to ignore**²¹. However, before picking up the phone, ensure that you are **adequately prepared**, including for **potential follow-up questions**. If you do not know the answer to a follow-up, let the staffer know that you will get back to them with the answer to the best contact for them

SAMPLE SCRIPT AND KEY COMPONENTS

Staff Member: Thank you for calling Representative/Senator (Last Name)'s office. How may I help you?

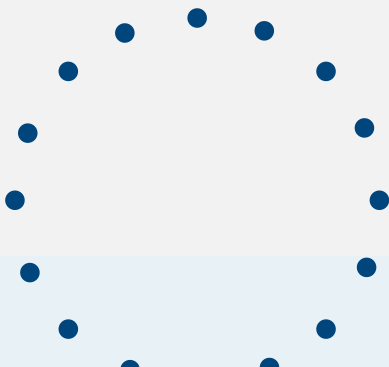
Caller: Hello, my name is (Your Full Name) from (City or Town), and I am calling on behalf of (Name of Afterschool Program or Organization).

Staff Member: Wonderful, what can I do for you?

Caller: As a constituent of Representative/Senator (Last Name)'s district, (Insert information on why you are calling, including specific bill/policy names. Include why summer programming is important to you, your program, and the youth and community your program serves. Quantifying impact to the best of your ability is helpful here. Remember, be brief!)

Staff Member: Thank you for sharing your concerns with us. I will relay your comments to the Representative/Senator (Last Name). Can you share your phone number or email address?

Caller: Yes, my phone number and email address are (Insert phone number and email address), thank you! Have a great day, and I look forward to hearing back from Representative/Senator (Last Name).



UTILIZING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR ADVOCACY



On social media, your message can be seen and shared widely, legislators have an incentive to reply quickly and thoughtfully to your ask.

Social Media Tips

The more engagement your post receives, the more attention it will likely garner from the legislator or staffer who reads it! This is because your issue will be perceived as salient for the legislators' constituency.

- Use hashtags in your caption
 - **#SummerLearningWeek**
 - **#SummerMatters**
 - **#SummerProgramsMatter**
 - **#ACTNow4Summer**
- Include dynamic images
 - Our image database can be found [here](#)
 - Canva is one free resource for creating graphics and photo frames

Picking Your Platform

Different social media platforms follow different conventions and reach different audiences. Consider who you are trying to reach and what your goals are when making a post!

- ACT Now IL primarily uses Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn to connect with partners and share information
- Detailed research on patterns and trends in social media can be found [here](#)
 - Facebook is typically used for longer form content, reaches broader ages, and skews majority female
 - Instagram is a place for shorter content and skews towards younger ages

Don't forget to tag your elected officials!

Follow ACT Now IL's social medias for education and events



SAMPLE INSTAGRAM POSTS

#SummerLearningWeek kicks off on July 14th! We encourage you to celebrate by visiting a summer provider in your district and see the numerous mental, physical, and community-wide effects of summer learning in action. Learn more about Summer Learning Week here: <https://www.summerlearning.org/summer-learning-week-2-2/> @(insert Legislator handle)

Summer programs play a critical role in providing youth & families with access to nutritional meals, safe spaces to renew learning/try new things & services to support mental well-being. 90% of parents recognize the positive impact of expanded learning opportunities! #SummerWorks

Summer is an opportunity to level the playing field via high-quality programs that produce measurable academic, physical, mental, and economic benefits in youth. #SummerMatters in Illinois! Leverage the @WallaceFdn #SummerLearning Knowledge Center: <http://bit.ly/2ABM5JI>

National #SummerLearningWeek kicks off on July 14th! Between July 14, 2025, and July 18, 2024, programs, youth, and families across the United States will be celebrating the out-of-school learning field! Join in on the fun by hosting your own event or facilitating activities for youth that build literacy skills, engage them in the arts and hands-on STEM learning, and focus on the mental and physical well-being of individuals!

Today, July 14th, marks the beginning of #SummerLearningWeek! @Insertlegislatornamehere we invite you to visit our summer program, located in district x, and see why #SummerMatters. Research shows that during the summer months, students in urban, rural, and suburban communities alike face diminishing mental health and academic outcomes. Summer programs play a critical role in helping alleviate these effects!

Feel free to
incorporate the
National Summer
Learning Week
logo into your
posts!



GENERAL PROGRAMMING



ACT Now has compiled a variety of high-quality and engaging summer learning activities and challenges that can be facilitated almost anywhere with household items or low-cost materials. These tools can help providers incorporate many Summer Learning Week themes into day-to-day activities.

ACT Now: The Summer Activity Guide

ACT Now, in collaboration with the Georgia AfterSchool Network (GSAN) and the 50 State Afterschool Network, developed fun and engaging activities and challenges designed specifically during the COVID-19 summer. This resource is based on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies and hands-on learning and is easily adaptable to a variety of settings. Click [here](#) to access this Guide.

Mott Mizzzen Education

Mizzzen Mott Education is a free app built with and for afterschool providers. It has easy-to-access **afterschool lessons, activities, tips, and articles!** In addition, it offers organizational tools, a range of topics from arts to zoology, and opportunities to read user reviews and add reviews. Each session has step-by-step guidance, including learning objectives. This makes the app super accessible and easy to use. Check it out!

GENERAL PROGRAMMING CONTINUED



LEGO Education

LEGO Education offers a **guide** for providers hoping to start or update their summer program! This resource was created in collaboration with Portland Public Schools, the largest school district in the state of Oregon and included both tips for kickstarting a program and a checklist for planning and executing initiatives.



Read on for specific resources and activities related to art, STEM, literacy, civic engagement and community leadership, and mental health.

ART ACTIVITIES

Deep Space Sparkle

Deep Space Sparkle offers art lessons and video tutorials customizable by subject, grade, and technique. They also offer practitioner facing resources, such as tips for organization, management, and curriculum planning.

Uncovering America

Help youth uncover the diverse history and peoples of the United States through this new compilation of resources. Uncovering America includes downloadable image sets featuring background information, guiding questions for students, and associated classroom activities.

Wheaton Arts

WheatonArts has created several arts and crafts video tutorials for families and youth to do each week. The activities use common household materials, plants, and low-cost resources. The tutorials are also great for children of all ages.

Milan Art Institute

Art doesn't have to be expensive! Milan Art Institute is a one stop shop for free art apps, reference photos, art classes, challenges, and more to inspire budding artists.



STEM ACTIVITIES

Afterschool Alliance

The Afterschool Alliance has a page full of curriculum, professional development, and evaluation tools specifically developed for teaching STEM in the out-of-school-time environment. Check it out [here](#)!

EiE Families

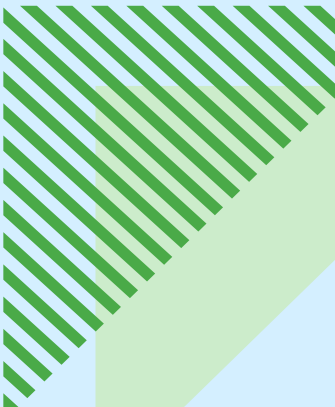
EiE Families, from the Museum of Science, Boston, has released several new activities and interactive introductions to at-home engineering and computer science activities. All resources—including the new online introductions, the hands-on activities, and the website itself—are available for free in both English and Spanish.

Vivfy. STEM

Need some quick ideas for summer camp that will be challenging and creative? Try out these 10 ideas from Vivfy STEM: build a musical instrument, make a bird's nest, amplify your voice, and much more!

Hour of CODE

Access hundreds of coding activities that can be catered to grade level, access to technology or materials, or based on students' interest in topics (art, artificial intelligence, etc.) All of these lessons are free and span between one to three hours!



LITERACY ACTIVITIES



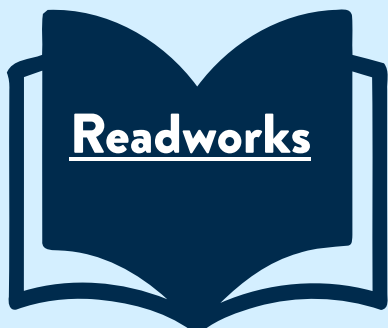
The Chicago Public Library has compiled a variety of resources to support students learning to read in informal settings and for different age groups. There are even resources available for families to support literacy at home and for children who may need additional support in their learning.



In 2024, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education in Washington D.C. developed a brief highlighting science-based literacy activities and curricula for students K-5. These activities connect exploring STEM competencies and build students' skills in reading and writing.



This program provides free news-based, non-fiction, reading passages at various reading levels. Sign up for a free account as an "educator", search a topic, and then choose a reading level (Grade 2-12)



This platform allows educators to access fiction and non-fiction reading passages with standardized test-like question sets, vocabulary, and writing prompts with answer keys. Create a free account, go to "find content", search by grades (K-12), topic, and question types



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP ACTIVITIES



Mikva Challenge

Mikva empowers middle and high school-aged youth to be leaders in democracy through programs that encourage public speaking, such as Project Soapbox. They also encourage skills related to policymaking and advocacy.



Generation Citizen

GC offers civics programming where students learn how to identify community issues and create real policy change. Their Student Leadership Board provides youth with the opportunity to advise and lead. Activities are suitable for high school and college students.



Documenters

Documenters offers activities and trainings available to youth aged 16+ who want to hold public officials accountable. City Bureau trains youth and adults to attend, record, and report on local government meetings.



Student Public Interest Research Groups

The Student Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) offer hands-on internships to organize campaigns around climate action, hunger, democracy, and more. This encourages youth to develop skills such as event planning and grassroots organizing.



YSA

YSA gives youth the tools to lead service projects in their own communities with a global vision. Their "Youth Changing the World" toolkit and Global Youth Service Day planning guide are free!

SUPPORTING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

During the summer, youth deal with a drastic change in routine, new commutes, hotter temperatures, and often less face-to-face connection with peers. To help address some of these challenges, providers can build in structure, social and emotional check ins, exercise, nutrition, and relationship building into day-to-day activities.



Crisis Text Line

Incorporate Crisis Text Line's free, age-appropriate toolkits for promoting positive mental health into your summer program! Crisis Text Line not only offers sample activities, but also provides empowering, informational posters about mental health and guides for having difficult conversations with youth.

Youth MHFA courses teach adult learners how to assist adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 by being able to identify and respond to mental health challenges. Find a course near you [here](#)

Mental Health First Aid

Healthy Children

Healthy Children has a detailed article based on information from the American Academy of Pediatrics on how to talk to kids about tragedies or traumatic news events. It includes guidelines for communicating with children of different ages and developmental needs, as well as how to notice that a child may not be coping well.

THANK YOU TO OUR
PARTNERS & SOURCES

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