
Passport for Learning: A Family-School-Community Partnership That Combats Summer Slide

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Returning early in August for an administrators' meeting, we were greeted with a row of shiny yellow school buses parked outside. Following a two-hour meeting consisting of back-to-school policies and procedures, we climbed aboard the buses to visit the neighborhoods around the city and serve as a "welcome wagon" for back-to-school enthusiasm.

At each location, our presence seemed to be the big attraction. We chatted with parents, relatives, and children, sharing our motivation to start the new school year. Everyone was very welcoming and clearly looking forward to the starting date. The children seemed as pleased to see us as we were to see them, but the absence of activity spoke loudly, and this was where the genesis of the summer learning program really began.

Introduction

For many children in cities, activities offered through the community centers or schools provide the lion's share of summer happenings. Working parents, siblings, and faith-based organizations all play essential roles, but access to literacy-rich experiences remains a challenge. For the past decade, summer learning had been addressed through collaboration with the library. Students were sent off to summer vacation equipped with a summer reading list. Every iteration of the reading list was carefully developed, and various activities were attached, with the fervent and well-intended hope that children would continue to read over the summer months. The Governor's Summer Reading Challenge offered pizza parties for

the class with the highest total of books read; Barnes and Noble offered a free book for every 10 or 15 books read, and individual schools decide on additional incentives. Many students took part, but there was no indication—or data—that any of these processes was a home run. Our "summer slide" was more of a skydive.

What could we do that would engage children and involve families?

How could we increase summer learning for ALL students, not just the ones going to summer school or the ones attending camps? How could we work with children and families to encourage activities that reinforce the concept that learning continues throughout the summer? We opted for a three-way collaboration and created a partnership with families, community resources, and the school system.

We named it "Passport for Learning," and it involved collaborating with nineteen sites in the community. Every location listed in the passport received a stamp with that location's logo. Children would visit, do something/learn something, and receive a stamp in their passports. They would write about their experiences and return their passports to their school at the start of the new school year. They could visit with parents, siblings, scout troops, or friends. They simply had to complete a tour or task, write something about their experience, and then reap the reward of a passport stamp.

Literature Review

Popular literature weighs in on "summer slide," noting summer cannot be a vacation from learning.

Dell articulates this succinctly, asserting that "children who don't read over the summer lose two to three months of reading development, while children who do read gain a month." (2012, p. D.2.) In addition, Dell further establishes that "summer slide is the effect of the summer learning gap—the gap that exists between socioeconomically diverse groups due to imbalanced family and community influences and opportunities" (p. D.2.).

A *New York Times* article by Peg Tyre (2013), in offering mentoring as one solution, cited a Johns Hopkins University study that attributed two-thirds of the achievement gap between poor and middle-class students to summer slide. A different *New York Times* article by Tina Rosenberg (2014) focused on working with parents. Parents can further support their children's learning by knowing about the effects of specific activities that alleviate summer slide. The National Summer Learning Association's (2010) website lists several reader-friendly research briefs, including one that connects lack of academic achievement and high school dropout rate to summertime learning loss, and another that investigated the effect of summer reading to help students choose skill-appropriate books to read both independently and with guidance from family members. [Reading Is Fundamental's website](#) provides examples of strategies families can employ over the summer months to have active roles in their children's education.

While views and perspectives in popular media are not always supported in professional literature, summer slide is a topic on which

there is agreement. It is a clear and present danger. Smith (2011) and Allington and McGill-Franzen (2012) define and discuss how summer slide impacts the achievement gap. Others discuss possible interventions. For instance, in his opening statement to support funding for summer programs, Senator Dodd (Avoiding, 2002) asserts that without summer activities to keep their reading and math skills sharp, students start school in the fall about *a month behind where they finished in the spring*. He added that if you combine the achievement gap that exists when low-income children start kindergarten with the cumulative effect of summer slide over the years, you would account for virtually the entire achievement gap at the end of high school. In their study, Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007) also stress the importance of schooling and/or more formal learning opportunities for students during the summer to eliminate the slide, thus helping to bridge the gap.

In terms of how and what can be done, there is also general agreement. Solutions emphasize creative and engaging programs to increase motivation. Summer schools that offer creative learning experiences that extend beyond the familiar catch-up workbook montage help bring

disadvantaged students back to school ready to learn and move forward rather than having to backtrack. A decrease in required remediation pays for monies spent on summer school and narrows the achievement gap (Rich, 2013). Making connections with local librarians to establish clarity and encourage participation in offered summer reading programs is another strategy (Gordon, 2011). Facilitating summer mentor programs to provide students with enrichment learning experiences are still another (Tyre, 2013). Other initiatives create hands-on, project-based learning opportunities that reflect the students and their communities. The Summer Learning Passport is a literacy initiative that incorporates community resources to offer students engaging learning experiences within a local setting throughout the summer.

How It Works

The vision of the project and the actual creation of the passport had to be entrusted to a team. Fortunately, the Coalition for New Britain's Children, a school/community partnership, provided a forum for the discussion of the Summer Learning Passport, and the Early Learning Project Management Team became the center of the project. A work

group handled the job of enlisting the organizations and creating the physical passport. The individuals in the work group were dedicated to the project and met with community partners to help develop creative ways for organizations to participate. For example, at the Avery Soda Company, students were able to make soda in a flavor of their choice. A History Hunt was created for visitors to New Britain Industrial Museum. The project work group met with the project management team on a monthly basis to collaborate and discuss next steps. The Coalition for New Britain's Children streamlined the organized effort for providers and agencies, but a variety of local agencies acted as the hub to initiate the process.

The third step was to develop a plan at the school system level that would provide a means of getting children to understand that it is a necessity to do something every summer to maintain their "smarts." The brain as a muscle is a good analogy; students understand the use-it-or-lose-it concept from physical education. In each elementary school, media specialists collaborated with reading teachers to create a curriculum that resulted in the students creating a personal summer learning plan. This document became a call to action for each student to do something during the summer to maintain and strengthen their brain muscles. School media specialists interviewed parents/guardians about family plans for the summer months and administered a short questionnaire to students on multiple intelligences to help identify particular strengths that the students might like to pursue. During media class time, students completed a research project to create a summer learning plan that was an individual undertaking and goal.

Students received a list of some of the opportunities available in the community so that they could have the option of including those events in their plan. They were informed of



the upcoming Passport for Learning Program and how their action plans could include many of the sites listed in the passport. The media specialist collected each individual summer learning action plan. Although not required, the vast majority of plans included visits to passport sites. Incorporating the research project into the media curriculum and aligning it with the Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010, LA.5.SL.1c; LA.5.SL.3) was beneficial for schools and students.

While the curriculum was being developed and implemented, the project work group worked concurrently to canvass local businesses and agencies and invite them to be destinations for the students' passports. Two Connecticut State University locations participated: the observatory and the radio station. The local newspaper, *The New Britain Herald*, gave the children a tour of the newspaper that concluded with their picture on the cover of a paper and, believe it or not, lunch!

Passports were distributed to every student in grades K through 5, and the project work team developed a cost-effective passport that would be visually modeled after a travel document. Once businesses and museums began to actually see the mock-up of the passport, they all wanted to participate. Surprisingly, there was some friendly competition regarding what each site would do to encourage the students to visit. Organized to be both informative and interactive, each passport included basic information such as hours of operation and activity details, such as dates of the animal programs at the Hungerford Park or art classes at the New Britain Museum of American Art. There were also an additional two pages for other summer experiences, and some students related their trips to Quassy Amusement Park and Mystic Aquarium Park in these spaces. Lastly, to incorporate writing to learn, there was room on the page for the

students to describe their experiences, reactions, and suggestions at each location.

Passport promotion began on all fronts: a breakfast for all the participating organizations, local newspaper coverage, and phone calls to parents informing them that the passports would be coming home with the end-of-year report cards. A banner was hung outside the downtown board of education building; posters were created to place around town and inside each Passport for Learning site. Excitement mounted as principals and teachers saw the finished product: one teacher asked, "Can I still participate with my children even if we don't live here?"

Results

The passports were sent home with the report card, and by the end of the first week The Museum of Art had already stamped more than 45! Midway through the summer, we received an email from the New Britain Industrial Museum. They were thrilled to have so many visitors—229 students—to their museum. They even went a step further and created a History Hunt for the children to do when they visited. They shared that the children began to recognize that their town,

New Britain, CT, was where some of the familiar products that they use were created or took root.

With the help of New Britain's mayor, Erin Stewart, the town hall provided brochures for the children to read and learn about the town. They also got a kick out of sitting in the mayor's chair and were very excited to meet the mayor and pose for a picture with her. TD Bank gave each passport holder ten dollars. Amatos Hobby Store and New Britain Fire and Police Departments all tallied myriad visitors. A local Boy Scout Troop incorporated Passport for Learning locations into their troop's summer activities.

The reactions from participants reinforced that the time and effort were well spent. The superintendent of schools and the president of the board of education received positive feedback from parents and community partners. One parent remarked that it was one of the best things that the district did; another, "Please tell me we are doing this again next year!" The Industrial Museum reported that they have never had so many people visit.

September came, and with it, all of its back-to-school frenzy. Unfortunately, the passport collection process took a back seat to the usual

2014 SUMMER LEARNING PASSPORT	
<p>Sponsored By:</p>   <p>Coalition for New Britain's Children</p>	<p>Student Information</p> <p>LAST NAME: _____</p> <p>FIRST NAME: _____</p> <p>ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ATTENDED: _____</p> <p>GRADE ENTERING: _____</p> <p>PHONE NUMBER: _____</p>

minutiae of beginning each school year. We had put much of our energies into implementing the Passport for Learning, but we hadn't focused on how the culmination process would unfold. While we corrected this problem for Year Two, many Year One passports did not find their way to the central office. Passports that *were* collected indicated that the initiative was worth the effort, which was echoed by the participating organizations. While a few families visited all 19 locations, most visited between 6 and 9. All in all, there were 925 family visits documented from the returned passports. The visits tallied by organizations, however, indicated that many more families had taken advantage of these summer learning opportunities. Clearly, the passport collection process needed rethinking.

Lessons Learned

Like any new initiative, the first implementation provides opportunity to reflect and improve upon the process and product. We can already foresee some changes.

In terms of future planning with the community, we would

- Start earlier in the year to try to get some confirmation on the activities being planned around the town. This information could then be more actively integrated in students' summer learning plans.
- Include more parents and community members in the work group
- Increase publicity for the culminating breakfast, the purposes of which would be to thank community partners, acknowledge participants, crowdsource feedback, and function as a kickoff for future planning
- Create a brochure of all the available opportunities in the town for all residents

- Consider having students report on their experiences to the newspaper or participate in an interview on the CCSU radio station
- Review and troubleshoot how downsizing of library media specialists impacts the research project that introduces the Passport for Learning to students
- Create an effective workflow chart for reading specialists to collect the passports and compile the data
- Meet with the administrators, teachers, and secretaries to ensure that everyone can answer questions about the Passport to Learning Program and reinforce the message that learning happens all year long
- Compare June and September reading scores of participants
- Create a line item for the budget for the costs and research grant opportunities to cover the costs of printing passports
- Rent a billboard, send home flyers, make more ConnectEd calls in the summer, and make information available at parent-teacher conferences
- Meet with parents (PTO, PTA, Title 1) to promote the project and clarify the different offerings so that there is better understanding of site logistics
- Create space for siblings to sign the passports, which will help in determining all who participated
- Add space for the parents/family members to write responses
- Include a survey on the last page for parents and students to share their suggestions for future years

Our hope is to create a cadre of docents for each participating organization as the project grows

and the elementary students move to middle school, connecting the dots, once again, between home, school, and community in a way that builds citizenship with an expectation that students possess authentic life skills.

This has been an exciting project to implement, with great potential to change the way people view their community; the Summer Learning Passport creates a synergy for personal growth and community development. We've learned from the project that if you offer something that is inclusive and exciting, families will come and they *will* learn. What originated as a simple idea ultimately brought together myriad individuals, tapped into a multitude of family, school, and community resources, and created a high-quality, valuable literacy initiative. The Summer Learning Passport is a project that will continue to expand and develop and is worth replicating. Every new idea takes teamwork to implement. This project can be implemented successfully in many different ways, but it is replicable and possible for any district. Just be the "mind" and find a few like-"minded" people. ●

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Right and Wrong

Matt Blackstone, Great Neck North High School, new NCTE member in 2017

Every English teacher has a crusade. Comma splices, clichés, semicolon errors—they’ve all been slain with mighty red pens and a scowl. This year, I’ve decided to wage war with a new opponent. A phrase—“I’m not sure if this is right, but . . .”

At my school it’s as commonplace to begin speaking with *I’m not sure if this is right, but . . .* as it is to start with *um*. Or *well*. Or a throat-clear. *I’m not sure if this is right, but . . .*

“I’m not sure if this is right, but isn’t Romeo being dramatic?”

“I’m not sure if this is right, but I think that *elation* might mean ‘joy.’”

“I’m not sure if this is right, but Tom Robinson, I don’t know for sure, but it’s possible that—well, he kinda sorta seems innocent to me, but that’s just me.”

“I’m not sure if this is right, but I believe it’s snowing—and, again, not certain of my accuracy, but I believe an early dismissal could be in order, and it’s possible I’d be more comfortable on my couch.”

Okay, that last one’s made up—don’t they *always* know the second it snows or rains?—but why the need

to add a disclaimer that there *is* a statistical chance you aren’t accurate before every sentence? What are we so afraid of?

I don’t know if this is right, but . . .

It’s not that I don’t want students to sound unsure; I want them not to fret about failure. It’s not about the form; it’s about the culture, and the I-don’t-know-if-this-is-right formulation encourages a classroom of hesitancy and self-doubt. It’s the attitude that breeds rigid writing. It’s the mindset Teenage Me had in my own language classes when answering what I did over the weekend. *I played soccer and basketball*, I’d write, not because I actually did, but because

▼
To err is not only human,
it’s the only way to grow.
Through missteps, we
learn how to disagree, we
learn resilience, we learn
flexibility, we learn about
ourselves.

I knew how to write it correctly. I wouldn’t make a mistake that way.

Yes, trying new words on all assignments, especially major ones, isn’t the greatest idea. At times it doesn’t pay to reach for a new word, as I recently saw on a t-shirt that read, “Sometimes I use words I don’t understand so I can sound more photosynthesis.” But to err is not only human, it’s the only way to grow. Through missteps, we learn how to disagree, we learn resilience, we learn flexibility, we learn about ourselves.

I mean, even if you’re wrong, even if it’s the very first day of school and you aren’t 100 percent accurate, what’s the worst that can happen? Are we gonna sharpen a stick on both ends like Roger in *Lord of the Flies*? Are we gonna push a boulder on you? The only wrong thing you can say in a ninth-grade English classroom is: “Oh, you’re about to read *Lord of the Flies*? Piggy dies.” That’s wrong. That’s just mean.

Other than that, if you’re “wrong,” nothing happens. Well, something—our dialogue improves, the classroom becomes a respectful place for a fearless exchange of diverse opinions,