

The Markers of Quality for Summer Learning

These markers originated in standards published by the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA), which provides research on effective summer learning strategies and promotes best practices across the US. The NSLA standards have been expanded and adapted based upon the experience of SAIL in Alabama; they are fully “field tested”.

Overall Markers of Quality

These six markers are essential, and may not be obvious to those who approach summer learning from a traditional mindset.

- First and foremost, programs must combine the best elements of summer camp and school. Students should be enjoying their time at camp even as they grow academically. This means that summer learning must nurture the whole child. The following chart illustrates a common format for a “school within a camp”:

Weekly Schedule For a Typical SAIL Program					
Each week will repeat the same basic format					
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
7:45 - 8:15	Students Arrive				
8:15- 9:00	Breakfast & Community-building Time				Field Trips: Service Day, McWane Center, Zoo, Railroad Park, Museum of Art, Civil Rights Institute, College Campus Visit
9:00 - 12:00	Reading & Literacy Instruction Math Instruction				
12:00 - 1:00	Lunch & Community-building Time				
1:00 - 4:00	Enrichment, Sports and Physical Activity, Character-Building Lessons, Gardening & Nutrition, Reading, Storytelling, Music, Arts & Crafts, Playground Time -Fun Activities Reinforcing the Morning Academic Work-				
4:00 – 4:30	Students Depart				

- Programs must operate within a community which assembles the different expertise and skills for both school and camp. The community must pool its financial, intellectual, and social capital to maximize investment.
- A system of assessment and continuous improvement is essential. Program metrics must be collected and used to develop strategies for improvement. Peer learning has proven especially effective for SAIL in disseminating key knowledge throughout the community.
- Stable, predictable funding is essential for programs to plan and execute smoothly over time. Program excellence is a learning curve.
- Programs must carefully plan and prepare for the coming summer. Program planning should occur in the fall, funding arrangements should be completed by the beginning of the year, and recruiting of staff and families should begin in the first quarter.
- Student academic growth is a primary target of summer learning programs. This can and should be measured each summer, but longer-term assessment of the impact of summer learning on school-year outcomes is needed. This requires a longitudinal data base merging data from summer programs and school systems. Because it takes several years to draw conclusions from such data, data collection must begin as soon as possible. SAIL has contracted with PARCA (Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama) to begin building such a data set for its programs.

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Academic Programming Markers of Quality

- An academic assessment tool which is both nationally normed and formative, that is, provides information on the concepts the student has not yet mastered so that lesson plans can be developed to close the gaps. Renaissance Learning Systems STAR Assessment Suite has become a de facto standard for summer programs, and is used by SAIL. PARCA (Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama), who conducts SAIL's annual assessment, selected STAR in an evaluation of available products. Tests should be administered at the beginning (pre-test) and end (post-test) of the program.
- Curriculum that is research-based, designed for summer, aligned with Alabama standards, relevant to student interest, and based in project-based, experiential learning.
- Certified teachers (not necessarily all, but some), high ratio of staff to students (1:12 or better), and rigorous staff training/development. Summer is an opportune time for teachers to learn and practice innovative classroom techniques.
- 72 (or more) hours of combined instruction in reading and math.

General Programming Markers of Quality

- Total programming of 150-180 hours (or more) spread over five to six weeks.
- Curriculum for social-emotional learning, character development, service learning, etc.
- Curriculum for physical activity, ranging from sports instruction and PT to unstructured play.
- Healthful meals, ideally breakfast, lunch, and an afternoon snack.
- A unifying annual theme which ties the activities together.
- Accessibility for target families (affordability is essential, and transportation must often be provided).
- Mature practices for managing enrollment, attrition, and attendance. Family engagement is an essential component because attendance is not required during the summer; if the students and their families do not enjoy the program and perceive benefit, attendance will lag.

System (or Community) Level Markers of Quality

As discussed earlier, the community-based approach to summer learning requires activities that bind individual programs together for their collective benefit.

- Formal and informal education where programs in the community convene, with emphasis on peer-to-peer learning.
- Formal approach to continuous improvement, including:
 - Collection of comprehensive metrics on student and program performance,
 - Publishing the metrics within the community,
 - Structured exercises to review performance and plan improvement in a peer setting, and
 - Using single-year results (for near-term adjustments) in combination with three-year results (for overall assessments) to smooth out year-to-year variations.
- Collaborative approach to solving common problems and developing common resources
- Proactive approach to engaging families in the design and operation of the programs in the community
- An organization to conduct these system-level activities and support the network. In collective impact terminology, this is called the backbone organization.

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One marker of quality listed above bears additional discussion: stable, predictable funding. Excellent programs begin planning for the next summer in the fall and begin recruiting the families who will attend and the staff who will conduct the program in January. These activities will not flow smoothly if funding levels are not known around the first of the year. In addition, year-to-year retention of families and especially of staff is crucial to program quality and improvement over time. This requires relatively stable funding levels from year to year. For these reasons, SAIL advises the programs of funding levels for the next summer in December.