In Arkansas, National Summer Learning Day has become a weeklong affair, with events held in several communities to emphasize the need for more and better summer learning opportunities for children and youth. In 2015, the official day is June 19.

“We were really inspired by the Grade-Level Reading Campaign to do more to raise public awareness about the importance of summer learning,” says Laveta Wills-Hale, coordinator of the Arkansas Out of School Network (AOSN), which works to expand access to quality after-school and summer learning programs statewide.

“We have a long way to go to ensure that every child who needs and wants to participate in a quality summer learning program has access to one in their community,” she adds. Only 17 percent, or 82,701, of Arkansas’s school-age children and youth participate in a summer learning program, according to a 2010 report. “It’s a public policy emergency when it comes to funding.”

AOSN is among 48 Statewide Afterschool Networks (SAN) supported by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. SAN and the GLR Campaign illustrate the power of networks connecting to better help struggling students move successfully from kindergarten through third grade. Started in 2005, as a sponsored initiative of Arkansas State University, AOSN has become intentional about addressing summer learning, connecting with both the National Summer Learning Association and the GLR Campaign.

“We’re very good partners,” says Angela Duran, campaign director of the Arkansas GLR Campaign, which is supported by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, based in Little Rock. “AOSN has been the lead on the legislative piece, seeking summer and after-school program funding and setting quality standards.”

At the state policy level, AOSN helped successfully advocate for legislation, signed in 2011, to create state-funded after-school and summer programs based at or linked to schools, building on 2008 recommendations from a governor’s task force. Funding the law remains the unfinished business of the task force and others, including AOSN.
At the community level, AOSN and its partners advocate for using existing revenue for quality summer learning, including nearly $200 million in state education funds through the National School Lunch Act (NSLA). “Only about $5 million supported summer learning, 2012 data show,” says Wills-Hale. “School districts decide how their NSLA funds are used. We encourage them to offer engaging summer learning experiences that build skills kids need to succeed in school and in 21st century jobs. Many districts provide programs focused solely on remediation.”

AOSN also works to improve program quality by providing professional development to providers on how to prevent summer learning loss. To strengthen public awareness, AOSN shares educational materials with policymakers, educators and parents.

National Summer Learning Day provides another strategic messaging opportunity, says Wills-Hale. In 2014, AOSN sponsored events in two communities during the week leading up to the official day, when the third and largest event was held in Little Rock — the state’s largest media market — attracting 250 children plus parents and policymakers.

A year later, AOSN is planning to add an event in one more community and broaden the message to emphasize how quality summer programs can help produce citizens who are better prepared to enter fields involving science, technology, engineering and math (aka STEM).

“We want to highlight not only the importance of summer learning to literacy and reading but also the connection to STEM because we have a huge emphasis on STEM now,” says Wills-Hale. “It is difficult to take advantage of STEM-related content and coding if you are not a strong reader.”

She predicts a “tipping point” for interest in summer learning as communities and schools wrestle with the reality of implementing new education standards and how to support students. “Parents are going to be looking for more support for their children, particularly around language arts, science and mathematics,” she says. “Some of that must come from summer learning as well as after-school programs.”

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