

Summer Learning Program Quality Assessment Case Study







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This brief highlights the findings of a program quality assessment from a collaboration between the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) and Spring Forward, a nonprofit based in Rock Island, Illinois, that provides educational and enrichment opportunities at no cost to enhance the lives of families in the community. NSLA encourages organizations to use these findings as not only inspiration, but also practical examples for building program sustainability.

The National Summer Learning Association

The National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) is the only national nonprofit exclusively focused on closing the achievement and opportunity gaps by increasing access to high-quality summer learning opportunities for America's children and youth. NSLA recognizes and disseminates what works, offers expertise and support for programs and communities, and advocates for summer learning as a solution for equity and excellence in education. For more than 25 years, NSLA has worked with programs, foundations, networks, cities, and school districts across the country to offer tailored professional development opportunities, community landscape and program quality assessments, and technical assistance.

Spring Forward Summer Enrichment Camps Rock Island, Illinois

Spring Forward's mission is to provide educational programs at no cost to enhance the lives of families in the community. Their summer enrichment camps provide six weeks of organized learning experiences to help maintain and grow reading levels over the summer.



SPRING FORWARD SUMMER CAMPS AT A GLANCE

Summer Enrichment Camp: Grades K-4

6 Sites:

- 5 elementary schools — with targeted enrollment
- 1 community center — first come, first served

6
SITES

Schedule:

Monday – Thursday

- AM: Breakfast + Literacy Instruction
Lunch
- PM: Play, STEAM, SEL + Enrichment

Friday

Field Trips (16 locations were visited by campers in 2019)

Staff:

Each site has a site leader, 4 teachers, 4 counselors, 1 literacy captain, and 1 literacy assistant

Kids on Campus: Grades 5-6

1 Site:

Augustana College's campus

AUGUSTANA
COLLEGE

Schedule:

- AM: Activities led by faculty across departments
Lunch
- PM: Play + Reading Time

Methodology

NSLA's quality assessment began with a singular focus on identifying what Spring Forward was doing successfully to help students maintain or gain reading levels over the summer months, but it quickly became a more dynamic and ecological study.

In order to best capture the essence of Spring Forward, NSLA took a phenomenological approach, seeking to understand the experience of operating within a successful program and then analyzing findings against best practices put forth by NSLA's *Summer Starts in September Planning Guide* and The Wallace Foundation's *Summer Learning Toolkit*.

This approach illuminates *the how*, as opposed to just *the what*.

To do this, NSLA conducted eight semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, analyzed documents provided by Spring Forward leadership, and utilized a qualitative, open-coding approach to identify overarching themes. Analysis reveals that Spring Forward's success is rooted in three key factors of *program sustainability*.

- Staffing
- Partnerships
- Intentionality

16
FIELD TRIP
LOCATIONS
IN 2019



The Winning Strategy of Spring Forward? Program Sustainability

It would be a disservice to study the summer enrichment camps in isolation of the rest of Spring Forward's operations, because its success stems from consistently showing up (year-round) to serving many of the same kids (Rock Island – Milan School District) for a singular purpose: to have their children reading at grade level and prevent summer slide.

Due to the strength of these elements of sustainability, programming is of high quality (3.6/4 in a 2018 stakeholder survey), teacher retention in summer programming averages 80%, and over 90% of campers usually maintain or gain in reading levels.

Program sustainability:

Research recommends the following critical building blocks for program sustainability:

- Strong programs that document improved outcomes for participants
- Positive relationships with families, communities, collaborative partners, and political allies
- Supportive management and organizational systems
- Diversified human and financial resources

RAND found that districts that collected and used data to drive program reflection and planning with program and district leadership made changes that resulted in substantial improvement to the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of the program.¹

This entails engaging the right team:

- Build a year-round planning team
- Align focus
- Cultivate champions

Spring Forward's summer enrichment camps are able to document such impressive outcomes for participants because of the following practices, which exemplify high-quality summer learning in the field.

1. Augustine, Catherine H., et al. *Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success*. RAND Corporation, 2013.

“

WE KNOW THAT OUR COMMUNITY WANTS AND NEEDS TO BE PART OF OUR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION. WE SEE OUR ROLE AS COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS, BRINGING EVERYONE TOGETHER TO ENSURE THEIR SUCCESS.”

”

— DAN MCNEIL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SPRING FORWARD

90%
OF CAMPERS
MAINTAIN OR GAIN IN
READING LEVELS



The Right Staff

Research consistently shows that hiring the right staff can have the greatest impact on students' overall experience in the program. RAND found that teachers with strong content knowledge are more effective and engaging, as they are able to draw on their experience and expertise and meet students where they are with a variety of instructional practices.¹

Staffing is centered around those who already work with the students year-round.

At Spring Forward, staffing is all about the community in which the students reside and attend school. Many of the summer staff are Rock Island – Milan School District staff, but are employed by Spring Forward for out-of-school-time (OST) work. In addition, yearlong district partners such as the Rock Island Public Library and the Figge Art Museum, among others, bring their own staff to Spring Forward programming. Therefore, students and their families come into summer already familiar with the staff, which leads to greater community engagement and enrollment over time. In addition to familiarity, Spring Forward's high staff retention rate (85%) allows for greater program consistency from year to year, which builds trust and cohesion.

85%
STAFF
RETENTION
RATE

Partnerships have also been built with local universities and colleges to recruit and employ students from their respective teacher education programs. Many students begin as summer learning counselors and advance into teacher roles in subsequent summers. And Spring Forward is proud to report that many have gone on to work as classroom teachers in the district after graduation.

This reality allows for Spring Forward staff to keep resources focused on planning, problem solving, and serving students rather than diverting energy and other resources to figure out how to work together. This retention translates into additional time and energy. Spring Forward does not have to spend a lot of time going over policies, procedures, and systems. Rather, during training week, time and energy are spent on upskilling and professional development related to topics like SEL and diversity.

2. Augustine, Catherine H., et al. *Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success*. RAND Corporation, 2013.



Research shows that communicating with and engaging participants and their family members year-round is critical to retaining youth in the program year after year.³

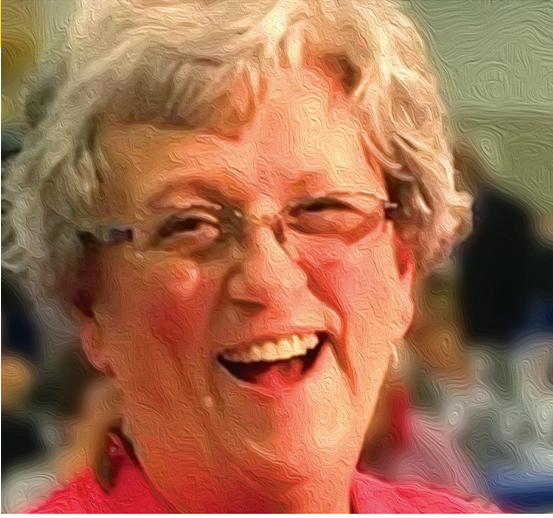
One of the ways Spring Forward maintains staff cohesion is through its afterschool program, which also accounts for the critical component of engaging year-round with students and their families.

By working with Rock Island – Milan School District teachers and students on a daily basis throughout the school year, Spring Forward's Board and full-time staff are able to keep an accurate picture of what students are learning, where students are struggling, and how to best support teachers in their work. When it comes time to plan for summer, student reading needs are well known, targeted recruitment is accurate, and programming is responsive to students and their families.

Teacher buy-in drives staffing, programming, and operational decision making.

Spring Forward cares about teachers. Teachers are encouraged to share ideas and try new methods without fear of punitive consequences, and they are trusted in their targeted recruitment work. The priority before all decision making is the creation and maintenance of relationships. And again, by being in the schools and working year-round with district partners, summer camp teachers and staff build trust with leadership and vice versa. When leadership and staff continually demonstrate mutual alignment to the mission – the maintenance or gain in student reading levels over the summer – an ecosystem of success and growth is created.

3. National Summer Learning Association. *Summer Starts in September Program Planning Guide*. NSLA, 2013.



A CHAMPION OF SPRING FORWARD: KAREN BESHEARS

Karen was part of the clergy that started Spring Forward as an afterschool program at Good Shepard Presbyterian Church in 1999. At the time, they served 20 children. She recognized the need for additional services and helped launch Spring Forward as a 501(c)(3) in 2007. In the time since, and under her guidance as a board member, the program has grown to serve more than 500 children annually in afterschool programs, soccer and basketball clubs, and summer enrichment camps. Her leadership has helped create an adult English Language instruction offering for immigrants and refugees. In addition to serving as a founding board member and as a board president, she’s personally tutored children in Spring Forward programs and volunteered thousands of hours. Despite her recent retirement from the board, Karen remains a tremendous advocate for kids and for social justice, and continues to be an amazing mentor to Spring Forward leadership.

Leadership matters.

This brief would be remiss to not mention a related recurring theme of the interviews: Spring Forward leadership is highly focused, communicative, and connected throughout the community, as well as being fantastic listeners. It is well versed in nonprofits and programming, and leaders are active members of the local community. There is a pronounced dedication to staying current with summer learning research and being involved in national and local summer learning organizations.

Empowering site-level coordinators with flexibility to meet the unique needs of their site directly influences the daily experiences and learning of students.

Decisions are made for each site to ensure that unique contextual needs are met.

Because of Spring Forward’s staffing approach and high retention, summer site leaders are most likely serving in those same schools during the school year. Throughout the year, starting in September, each afterschool site is individually planned because one-size-fits all programming doesn’t work. With over 30 schools in the Rock Island – Milan community, differentiation within the traditional school year and in summer programming is requisite for meeting students and their families where they are. This practice builds continuity and trust amongst the program, the district, and the community as a whole.



**“
SPRING FORWARD LEADERSHIP IS
HIGHLY FOCUSED, COMMUNICATIVE,
AND CONNECTED THROUGHOUT
THE COMMUNITY.
”**

Partnerships

Partnerships with other nonprofit and for-profit agencies and educational institutions are essential to summer program quality.

Spring Forward maintains partnerships across industries and corporate status.

In 2020, Spring Forward's partnerships included New Kingdom Trailriders, NEST Café, Quad City Symphony, Augustana College, Family Museum, Family Resources, Figge Art Museum, Girl Scouts, John Deere Lego League, Living Lands and Waters, Nahant Marsh Education Center, Niabi Zoo, Putnam Museum, Quad City Arts, Quad Cities Botanical Center, River Music Experience, Rock Island Art Guild, Two Rivers YMCA, WQPT-TV Public Television, and Youth Hope.

Research demonstrates that meaningful partnerships between out-of-school programs and schools are essential to supporting student learning. And because of the fast-paced, collaborative nature of programs, clear and regular communication is essential to a successful partnership.

Relationships are core to the operation of Spring Forward's partnerships.

Energy matters when working with students during the school year or in summer learning programs, as does the centering of what is best for the kids in communication with all partners and stakeholders. Spring Forward leadership credits a lot of their success to an ability to build communitywide support for summer learning. Through engaging school staff, city leaders, nonprofit partners, and others, the work is community-based and year-round.

Spring Forward leadership also models self-regulation. A staff member recalled a time that the Program Director called her up calmly and proceeded to first to ask how she was doing before asking about her availability to help with transportation because the van had broken down. He didn't transfer the stress, but rather positioned the staff member's well-being first and foremost.

Multiple interviewees mention the Executive Director's ability to treat all partners as equals and to make himself easily accessible, and the level of trust he's built because he listens and follows through. This type of environment leads people to say, "I want to be part of that."

Spring Forward leadership also organizes social events for all stakeholders in order to build community and foster relationships. The level to which these relationships have been nurtured and grown is visible in the current ask of school districts around Rock Island – Milan for Spring Forward to operate services in their communities as well.

And in typical Spring Forward fashion there is no mission creep amongst the partners and stakeholders: organized growth is conceivable only if staffing is appropriate for the number of students served and high quality is sustained at home. In other words, capacity and quality come first; there is no growth for growth's sake. What's best for Rock Island – Milan students is best for Spring Forward.

SPOTLIGHT EVENT

Spring Forward hosts Stepping Up for Summer Learning, the single largest summer learning day event in Iowa or Illinois. Every year at the TaxSlayer Center (local civic center), more than 1,000 children from 20 summer camps attend this summer learning pep rally with a rock band, enrichment activities, book giveaways, lunch, and more.



“
**GO AND CREATE
COMMUNITY AND
PARTNERSHIPS FIRST,
THEN GROW.**
”

— ALEX KOLKER, UNITED WAY OF
THE QUAD CITIES AREA

Research tells us that successful summer learning programs need diversified human and financial resources.

Spring Forward has a diverse portfolio of human and financial resources.

The majority of funding for Spring Forward comes from The Doris & Victor Day Foundation, The United Way, the Rock Island – Milan School District, and private donations. Its Board of Directors is made up of community leaders who have helped weave together a strong, yet nimble network to support out-of-school-time learning with a strong focus on summer learning.

Spring Forward is the recipient of trust-based philanthropy.

Trust-based philanthropy positions trust and relationships at the core of the funding model, thereby disrupting the traditional power imbalance between a grantor and grantee. The trust-based model utilizes dialogue, creativity, and partnership to help solve problems at their root.

One of Spring Forward's major funders is The Day Foundation. This private foundation located in Rock Island began investing in summer learning in 2011 and has become one of Spring Forward's major funders for summer learning. With overall investments of \$1 million, it has accelerated the growth of Spring Forward by investing in multiyear unrestricted funding toward the initiative. But this support consists of more than writing a check. The Day Foundation's Executive Director is actively involved in the program and its overall vision, regularly meeting with the Executive Director, participating in regional memberships, and co-presenting. The trust-based model accelerates growth for Spring Forward because it allows for meaningful and contextualized conversation, as well as critical and diverse brainstorming. It also provides the physical, emotional, and mental space to iterate and get better. This model knows that growth requires trial and error, and it acknowledges and respects areas of expertise.

And the model is appealing to teachers as well. One former Rock Island – Milan School District teacher who moved to a new district comes back to work in Spring Forward summer camps because she knows she will be given the support and freedom to try out new things. This is a direct outcome of trust-based philanthropy: *staff who want to be there and who care deeply about their craft.*

“

ONE CORE PRINCIPLE I'VE LEARNED IN MY WORK AS A FUNDER IS THAT I AM NOT THE EXPERT IN SUMMER LEARNING OR SPRING FORWARD. MY ROLE IS JUST ONE OF MANY PLAYERS AROUND THE TABLE TO STRIVE TO ADVANCE THE ABILITY FOR EVERY CHILD TO SUCCEED IN LIFE. WITH SUMMER LEARNING, OUR RELATIONSHIP GOES BEYOND THE TRANSACTIONAL – WITH UNRESTRICTED SUPPORT AND A SHARED VISION OF BRIDGING SUMMER LEARNING LOSS, THE FOUNDATION'S RELATIONSHIP WITH SPRING FORWARD BEGINS WITH TRUST AND A DISMANTLING OF A POWER DYNAMIC BETWEEN FUNDER AND GRANTEE.

”

— DAVE GEENEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
THE DORIS & VICTOR DAY FOUNDATION



Intentionality

Rand found that the durability of a program is tied to three overarching strategies:⁴

- Building awareness of the program and connecting program goals to larger district goals
- Ensuring that all relevant departments are represented in the planning process
- Involving expert staff members and existing district systems in supporting the programs

The Rock Island – Milan School District is a key partner.

While Spring Forward is neither legally nor organizationally housed within the Rock Island – Milan School District, its office is physically housed within district administrative offices. It wasn't always like this. Previously Spring Forward was headquartered in a local church. Spring Forward recognized the benefit of proximity and alignment to the district and made this move as part of its growth plan. Soon after, a district leader and current Spring Forward board member asked Spring Forward to come into the district building and occupy space that had been recently vacated.

This wave of change brought with it an increase in communication amongst stakeholders, a collaboration with finances, and a greater ease in focusing on reading proficiency due to proximity of expertise, data, and experience with the same students. Spring Forward uses the curriculum used in classrooms. This provides continuity for teachers, staff, and students. Spring Forward leadership are able to have informal communications – in person – at the drop of a hat, and their regularly scheduled monthly meetings are more about content than logistics. In terms of resources, the school district and Spring Forward share materials – and the cost of those materials – and all professional development opportunities are open to both staffs.

Most importantly, this location within the community allows for the district to be the pacesetter for Spring Forward programming. The Rock Island – Milan School District is rigorous in its assessments of student learning outcomes and thus is essential in summer planning. The district is also instrumental in disseminating Spring Forward programming information to administrators, teachers, counselors, and families. This is a coordinated effort among the district Communications Department, the Teaching and Learning Department, principals, and teachers. It's been a game changer for the achievable outcomes of Spring Forward summer camps.

Spring Forward operates in multiple ways to connect and support families.

The mission of Spring Forward is to provide out-of-school-time learning programs, sports clubs, and classes for adult English learners. Spring Forward leadership understands that learning does not happen in a vacuum, but rather is deeply connected to community, language, and a sense of belonging.

4. Augustine, Catherine H. and Lindsey E. Thompson. *Making Summer Last: Integrating Summer Programming Into Core District Priorities and Operations*. (2017).

In Conclusion

Laser focused on mission with an intentionally built ecosystem.

Spring Forward represents what can be built when program sustainability is ensured through intentional, mission-based design. This model generates a compounding effect. Through trust-based philanthropy and its methods for building and supporting staff, collaborating with partners to grow a communitywide network, and remaining laser focused on helping the students and families of Rock Island, Spring Forward is walking the talk of community-based summer learning.

The success of Spring Forward results from an unwavering focus on program quality over quantity. When the program started, many partners wanted to reach far and wide and it didn't work. Leadership reined in it and became intentional. As a result, Spring Forward is now well positioned to grow.

Spring Forward prides itself on continuous improvement. The program is evaluated every year, collaboratively, by Spring Forward staff, Rock Island – Milan District staff, The Day Foundation, and other partners to enhance programming every year.

“
WE STAY
TUNED IN!
”

SPRING FORWARD'S PILLARS OF SUCCESS:

- Capacity building through community organizing
- Community building through citywide and communitywide collaboration

Calendar with Key Planning Topics

SEP

Program Evaluation, Data Analysis, Reporting, Fundraising

MAR

Employee Interviews, Create Documents/ Website for Registration, Lesson Plan Integration into Schedule, Plan Training Week, Finalize Field Trips – Enrichment – Other Special Events, Continue Meeting with Key Staff

OCT

New Field Trip Exploration, Field Trip Planning, Fundraising

APR

Finalize Staffing, Finalize Daily Schedule w/ Lesson Plans, Start Registration, Plan Training Week/Update Training Manual, Van Schedule

NOV

New Enrichment Exploration, Field Trip Planning, Evaluate/Set Schedule for Summer

MAY

Finalize Staffing/Placement, Finalize Daily Schedule w/ Lessons, Monitor/Push Registration, Finalize Training Week Plan, Staff Communication, Continue Meeting w/ Key Staff, Supply Management Plan

DEC

Plan Field Trip & Enrichment

JUN

Staff Training, Program

JAN

Communicate with Key Summer Staff, Continue/Finalize Planning for Field Trips – Enrichment – Other Special Events

JUL

Program, Wrap-Up Meetings

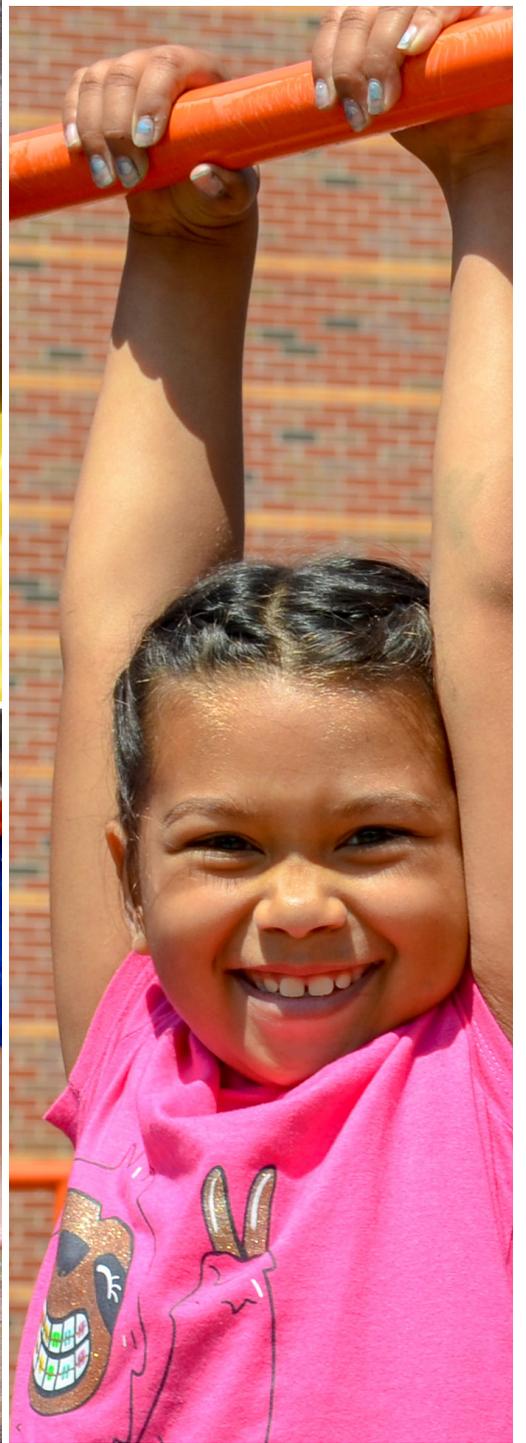
FEB

Contact Previous Summer Staff, Offer Positions, Begin Meeting with Summer Leaders/ Champions, Post Jobs to Colleges/Recruitment Sites, Registration Planning, Continue/Finalize Planning for Field Trips – Enrichment – Other Special Events

AUG

Wrap-Up Meetings, Program Evaluation, Data Collection, Data Analysis





springforwardqc.org



**national summer
learning association**

summerlearning.org

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