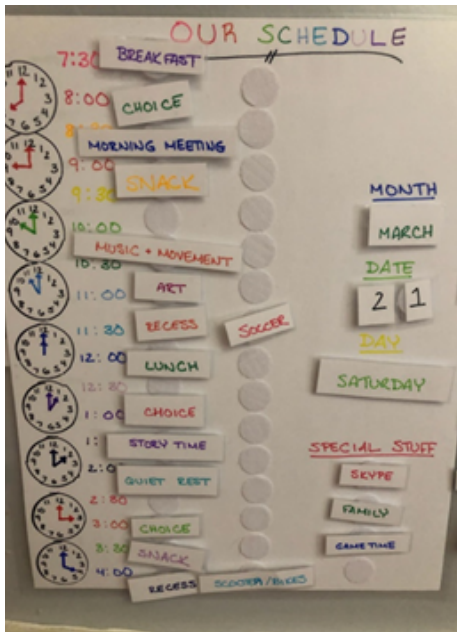


What Happens When Out-of-School Time is All the Time?



by Karen Pittman



The photo below gives a glimpse into how the St. Louis-based Pittman-Johnson household is answering this question. My husband Russ and I have a camera-wide view of my daughter, her husband and their two- and five-year-olds. We enjoy the extra Skype calls, video clips, and emoji-filled texts. We delight in the brilliance and stamina of my daughter as she taps into her experience as a pediatrician and founding member of a child development center. We're appreciative of the treasure trove of learning resources in their home. But we are concerned about the mounting exhaustion and stress. No amount of privilege can remove these from a two child, two doctor family.

Families that considered themselves economically and socially secure are now wondering how to manage securing things they take for granted: schooling, child care, health care, meals. The stress on those for whom these basics were never givens almost unimaginable.

These are the adults who work multiple jobs and can't work at home. Who have neither the resources, the space nor the flexibility to create **learning environments** in their homes for children and youth who are suddenly not in school. These families live in neighborhoods whose schools were not prepared to offer online learning. Where afterschool and community programs operate on shoestring budgets.

I spent time this past week listening to nonprofit colleagues across the country who are sharing stories about how they are helping and learning from their national staff, their affiliates, local partners or schools, and the local staff, youth, and families they serve as they all adjust to this new normal. The stress on this sector is real, but the responses are incredible as many of these organizations scramble to help families and schools figure out what happens **when out-of-school time is all the time**.

These staff and organizations justifiably are focused on the present. The rules for them are not as clear as those for schools. And there are few if any stopgap resources. In this blog, however, I want to look ahead a bit towards the future.

Summer is coming. A time when schools usually scale back and families, youth organizations, and employers step up. A time when the lack of public funding for summer learning exacerbates differences in school, family, and neighborhood resources. A time when growth in the gap between poor and affluent students' math and reading is so expected that it has a name – summer learning loss. A time, also, when many students look for jobs and internships and the ones who could benefit the most are least likely to find them.

Lessons from COVID-19

What will happen this year? Will mayors and school systems call dibs on summer if the hiatus lasts through the spring? Will families desperate for relief find summer options diminished because of nonprofit staff layoffs and closures? I hope not. We have an opportunity to plan for and invest in summertime learning activities that reflect true partnerships between families, schools, and community organizations and respond to the very diverse and very real needs our children and youth will have based on their experiences.

We have an opportunity to call out some of the lessons about learning that COVID-19 is making more visible:

The coronavirus reminds us that we are all learners.

Children and adults are being asked to absorb new knowledge and to quickly use it to adapt, respond, and contribute in new, authentic ways. The rapid learning going on in homes across the country goes well beyond learning tips on how to “school” our children. Good or bad, children and adults are jointly processing experiences, testing and building skills, and, hopefully, gaining confidence in their ability to thrive in times of uncertainty.

It reminds us that learning and schooling are different

Learning is a continuous, self-initiated act of social, emotional, and cognitive processing. Humans’ ability to learn and adapt, not just react, is what helps them thrive, not just survive. Schools help students build these skills and apply them to the mastery of academic content. But these skills, once mastered, contribute to young people’s ability to make decisions, manage adversity, and have a strong sense of identity in all areas of life.

It reminds us that schools do much more than support academic learning.

Good schools are, first and foremost, good relationship-rich communities. When schools closed, young people lost connection not just to sequenced academic instruction, but to a complex community comprised of norms, routines, relationships, and responsibilities and services. Current responses are focused on the first and last of these (online learning and healthy meals). Substitutes for community are equally important.

It reminds us that learning doesn’t just happen in schools.

The phrase anywhere/anytime learning is more than a reference to technology. It speaks to the enormous number of adults who share responsibility for the education and well-being of our children and teens. It is easy to forget this when the main message we get as parents and taxpayers is that our main contribution to education is to send our kids to school. But students annually spend only 1,000 of their 6,000 waking hours in school, and not all of those hours are in academic classes. Some are spent in cafeterias, libraries, nurse’s offices, playgrounds. Those fortunate enough to find and afford appropriate accommodations spend almost as much time in preschool, afterschool, and summer learning programs. One third of 16- to 19-year-olds have jobs. The bulk of the remaining time is spent informally with or near adults who are friends, family, neighborhoods, and informal caregivers; with peers; or alone.



Rapid school closings across the country have called for an “all hands on deck” approach to making sure children and youth have places to be, things to do, and adults to be with during the school day. But they have also led to a flurry of worksheets, online instruction packets and emailed lesson plans sent out by schools to help caretaking adults – parents, family members, older siblings – fill the void.

Why? Because fallback thinking to equate education with schooling, schooling with learning, learning with academics, and academics with certified teachers. In doing so we underestimate schools’ and certified teachers’ roles in children’s education while simultaneously also underestimating the roles of other settings and other competent, caring, committed adults in their lives.

Schools are structured for consistency and scale. Families and local youth-serving organizations are not. These settings provide different but equally valuable opportunities for engaged learning.

There is no doubt that the schools students return to will be different. School leaders are already thinking about the impacts of stress and social isolation will have on students. But there is no assurance that the adults and organizations that stepped up during the hiatus will be fully incorporated or, frankly, fully available (The child development center that my daughter helped start is running through its reserves in an effort to delay staff layoffs).

Learning happens everywhere. Educational equity, therefore, can’t stop at the schoolhouse doors. So let’s see this challenge as an opportunity to blur the lines and bolster the connections between formal and informal; academic and social and emotional; in school and out-of-school; certified teachers and school- and community-based professionals.

We have an opportunity to plan for and invest in summertime learning activities that reflect true partnerships between families, schools, and community organizations and respond to the very diverse and very real needs our children and youth will have based on their experiences.

Let’s use summer to imagine what a true partnership between schools, families and local organizations might look like. Let’s get certified teachers and build staff working alongside out of school time professionals, volunteers and families. Let’s increase the diversity not only of where and when learning activities happen (with a renewed emphasis on outdoors) but of who is involved and what is offered (balancing remediation with youth interests).

And, most importantly, let’s adopt universal definitions of learning setting quality that reflect the lessons learned during the hiatus: relationships matter, safety and belonging matter, attention to individual needs matters, rich, rigorous, relevant content matters, and last but not least, opportunities to act and reflect in ways that strengthen young people’s skills and abilities to be confident, competent advocates for themselves and their communities matter.