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National Summer Learning Association chooses Project Exploration and Pennsylvania Migrant Education as two of the best summer learning programs
Award-winning programs provide low-income students with quality STEM summer learning

Editor's Note: Sarah Pitcock, senior director of program quality at the National Summer Learning Association, is available for phone interviews about Excellence in Summer Learning Award winners. To interview Pitcock, reporters should contact Kate Shatzkin by phone at 410-856-1370 x208.

Baltimore—[The National Summer Learning Association](#) has chosen programs with strong science components—[the Pennsylvania Migrant Education Program](#) and Chicago-based [Project Exploration](#)—as two recipients of the 2011 Excellence in Summer Learning Awards.

This annual award recognizes summer programs demonstrating excellence in accelerating academic achievement and promoting healthy development for young people, as measured by the Association's Comprehensive Assessment of Summer Programs. Winning programs also demonstrate exemplary practices in overall programming, including supporting staff, schools and other program partners in fulfilling shared goals.

For the first time, the Association in 2011 specifically looked for models of excellence in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs. STEM learning has been a national focus since President Barack Obama launched the "Educate to Innovate" campaign for excellence in STEM education in 2009.

Research has established that low-income students are disproportionately at risk to lose academic skills during the summer. While most children lose up to two months worth of math skills during summer breaks, lower-income children also lose two months of reading skills. Excellence Award winning programs strive to curb these losses, but also employ other research-based practices to build 21st Century skills, confidence, parental engagement and future aspirations.

"This year's Excellence Award winners are nothing short of inspiring," said Sarah Pitcock, the Association's senior director of program quality. "This diverse crop of programs is evidence that regardless of subject matter or setting, young people thrive when summer learning programs build positive relationships, self-efficacy and knowledge in equal measure."

The Pennsylvania Department of Education started the free Pennsylvania Migrant Education Program in 1964. Each summer, it serves approximately 2,800 children of migratory farm workers from kindergarten to 12th grade each year at 22 different sites running for four to five weeks. During the school year, more than 5,300 students are served. The program's site in Erie, Pa., prefers to focus on STEAM (the added "A" stands for art) with a maritime theme. Older students get first-hand sailing experience on catamarans, row boats, and sailboats, and use the same radar simulation training equipment as the U.S. Coast Guard. Younger students create small wooden steam-powered sailboats.

Other Pennsylvania Migrant Education sites also use STEM learning, but within a broader curriculum. Students at the New Oxford, Pa., site performed a pop song using sign language and filmed and edited an anti-bullying video. They also designed a book filled with writing assignments like poems, memories, dreams, personal reflections, and more.

Children of migratory farm workers face obstacles such as poverty (100 percent of program participants qualify for free or reduced priced school meals), high mobility, language barriers, cultural adjustment, and limited access to health care. The Pennsylvania Migrant Education program has taken a holistic approach in providing educational and social support. The program gives its ever-mobile students personalized services and support, gets parents involved, and collaborates with school districts and community organizations. As a result, 76 to 94 percent of participants from kindergarten to sixth grade retained or improved their academic skills during the summer.

"The Pennsylvania Department of Education is honored to have been selected as a recipient of the National Summer Learning Association's award," said Carolyn Dumaresq, deputy secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Office of Elementary/Secondary Education, which houses the Migrant Education Program. "The department is committed to providing children of migratory farm workers access to quality educational programs throughout the summer months. It's important for these students to participate in academic programs during the summer in order to be successful throughout the school year. I want to thank all Migrant Education Program locations throughout Pennsylvania for their dedication and commitment to preparing students for a bright future."

Project Exploration has served more than 1,000 low-income Chicago public middle and high school students with free science education since its inception in 1999. The program was co-founded by paleontologist Paul Sereno and educator Gabrielle Lyon with a mission to change the face of science by providing minority youth and girls with personalized experiences. Project Exploration's mission is accomplished in part by serving approximately 100 students every summer through six different summer immersion programs, including Junior Paleontologists, a three-week program for new participants ages 12-17, and All Girls Expedition, a two-week program exclusively for middle and high school girls. Both programs start in classrooms at the University of Chicago and then move to the Mammoth Site in South Dakota and Yellowstone National Park, respectively, for a first-hand experience with field research, travel and leadership development. Summer programs like these launch multi-year relationships with Project Exploration's participants and ongoing opportunities to be involved with STEM through middle, high school and beyond.

Students gain a rich science vocabulary and an understanding of how science works by experiencing it firsthand—creating seismic waves, experimenting with bacteria cultures, identifying fossils and rocks—in small group settings alongside Project Exploration staff and scientists. The classroom component is direct preparation for the field experience, where participants work with scientists to observe the natural world, collect and analyze specimens. The program places a major emphasis on building communication and leadership skills through reading and writing. Students keep a journal to serve as both a scientific tool and a creative outlet. In it they record science concepts and personal reflections throughout the duration of the program.

A 10-year study of Project Exploration found that 95 percent of participants graduated or were on track to graduate from high school. This is double the overall rate of Chicago Public Schools. Evaluators from the Center for Research, Evaluation, and Assessment at the Lawrence Hall of Science at the University of California, Berkeley, also found that 60 percent of Project Exploration high school graduates are enrolled in a four-year college and are pursuing STEM-related degrees. Project Exploration's relationship-based model not only inspires participants to pursue a science-related education and career, but also successfully connects them with post-secondary opportunities.

"We know that science in school is necessary, but not sufficient, to engage students in a lifetime relationship with the wonders of science. Summer experiences where students can work with scientists and be part of a community that is interested in what they are curious about is proving to be a game changer – particularly for students most at risk of being left behind in traditional STEM education efforts," said Gabrielle Lyon, Project Exploration cofounder and Executive Director.

The Association has joined the Afterschool Alliance and the National AfterSchool Association to make 2011 the Year of Science in Afterschool with generous support from the Noyce Foundation. The latest paper from the three organizations, *Seizing Opportunity: Developing Quality STEM learning for Summer and Afterschool*, and other resources on STEM and out-of-school time can be found at summerlearning.org/stemresources.

The other three winners of the 2011 Excellence in Summer Learning Award are the Fiver Children's Foundation and Global Kids, Inc., both based in New York City; and Phillips Brooks House Association in Cambridge, Mass.

Twitter version: STEM-related programs @ProjExplore and PA Migrant Ed. are two of the Excellence in #summerlearning Award winners: <http://bit.ly/bURh3S>

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The mission of the National Summer Learning Association is to connect and equip schools and community organizations to deliver quality summer learning programs to our nation's youth to help close the achievement gap. The organization serves as a network hub for thousands of summer learning program providers and stakeholders across the country, providing tools, resources, and expertise to improve program quality, generate support, and increase youth access and participation. *For more information, visit www.summerlearning.org.*