

## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT:

# Experiences in Summer Learning Programs



## OVERVIEW OF THE STATE SUMMER LEARNING NETWORK

In 2021, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) launched a network of nine states to promote system-based strategies to transform and improve summer learning. Participating states were Alabama, Arizona, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah and Virginia.<sup>1</sup> The effort was coordinated with the U.S. Department of Education's Summer Learning and Enrichment Collaborative and funded by The Wallace Foundation and MetaMetrics.

The collaboration focuses on assisting state education agencies and partners in using data for more impactful summer programs, advancing summer program quality, promoting exemplars of summer learning practices and identifying and disseminating model policies and regulatory conditions.

<sup>1</sup> Virginia is no longer part of the network.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, states and districts across the country mobilized to expand access to summer learning and enrichment programs for K-12 students. Seventy percent of districts **reported** offering new or expanded summer programming in 2022, reaching hundreds of thousands of students.

CCSSO recently caught up with a few students who attended a summer program, including several in states that participated in the **State Summer Learning Network**. They were asked to share what they did this summer, what they liked and didn't and how it impacted them and their plans for the future.

These anecdotes provide a glimpse into the diverse range of summer programs available, the positive impact they have on students and the profound ways in which summer learning experiences are shaping the future of education.



**Gabriella Bicknell**

AGE

8



**HOMETOWN**  
Dayton, OH

**SUMMER PROGRAM**

**Aullwood Audubon Summer Earth Adventures Camp**

This summer, Gabi Bicknell’s classroom was the great outdoors. A typical day at the Aullwood Audubon day camp in Dayton, Ohio, was spent outside exploring the world of nature and sustainable farming. It’s the type of idyllic summer experience many long for: days spent going on nature walks, searching the creek for fish and minnows and taking field trips to see animals at a local farm.

“I loved it,” Gabi said of her experience in the program. “It’s really, really fun.”

Summer Earth Adventures is a day camp at Aullwood Audubon. Through outdoor adventures, children develop awareness and care for the Earth.

Each day featured hands-on learning experiences, team-building games and activities and arts and crafts. In one memorable activity, Gabi and her fellow campers learned the importance of clean water by testing the water in the creek. They also used binoculars to look for birds. When one camp counselor promised a pizza party if they could find a pileated woodpecker, that bird became known as the “pizza bird.”

Now in the third grade, Gabi had such a good time at the camp that she is already looking forward to participating again next year. The camp clearly made an impression: When she grows up, Gabi hopes to be an ornithologist – though she hasn’t yet given up on becoming a black belt in martial arts.



**Saleah Bruinton**

AGE

16



**HOMETOWN**  
Tuscaloosa, AL

**SUMMER PROGRAM**

**NSLA National Youth Leadership Institute**

Saleah Bruinton’s summer learning experience may have been short, but its impact was great. A native of Tuscaloosa, Ala., Saleah joined dozens of high school students from across the country who met in the nation’s capital for the NSLA National Youth Leadership Institute. Students who were nominated and accepted into this unique program enjoyed a week of group activities, site visits and leadership development opportunities.

For Saleah, it’s clear that the experience made a lasting impression. Her first visit to Washington, D.C., included a tour of the U.S. Capitol, visits to iconic memorials and monuments (the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial and Lincoln Memorial were her favorites) and the experience of staying on a college campus for a week.

But the confidence she gained and the friendships she developed are what will stay with her most. “It really helped me become more open and able to speak in public, because I wasn’t the best public speaker,” she said. “It helped me come out of my comfort zone.”

Saleah said she relished the chance to meet other people, hear their stories and gain new ideas for being a leader in her own community.

Now in her junior year of high school, Saleah continues to stay in touch with some of the friends she made during the program. This school year, she is focused on competitive cheerleading and continuing to excel academically.



**Galilea Santiago**

AGE 9



HOMETOWN Eugene, OR

**SUMMER PROGRAM**  
Eugene School District 4J, SEAL:  
Summer Enrichment and Academic Learning

This summer, Galilea Santiago attended her school district’s summer learning program – an experience that she enjoyed so much she wishes it had lasted longer. That’s because the program included an exciting mix of academic and enrichment activities. A typical day included math and reading activities, as well as music class and plenty of opportunities to play outside with new friends.

Eugene’s SEAL program began in 2022 with the goal of helping students in grades one through eight get on track to succeed following the COVID-19 pandemic. The program blends teacher instruction and student projects in English language arts, math and science.

In one of the most memorable learning experiences, Galilea and her classmates made pet robots. First they learned the internal mechanisms of the robot and discussed what made it work. Then they each decorated their own. (Galilea decorated hers with cheetah print stickers.)

One of her favorite parts of the program was the teachers. She said they made her feel welcome and comfortable even though the program was not held at her neighborhood school. To other students considering attending the program, Galilea says, “It’s a very good summer school and you’ll have lots of fun!”

When she’s not at school, Galilea enjoys playing the guitar. She aspires to be a dermatologist when she grows up.



**Aditi Senthilkumar**

AGE 15



HOMETOWN Frederick, MD

**SUMMER PROGRAM**  
Million Girls Moonshot

Aditi Senthilkumar had been interested in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) long before attending the Million Girls Moonshot summer program. But besides her own mother, she hadn’t met many women who had careers in the field. That changed when she joined Million Girls Moonshot and had the chance to meet women leaders who showed her all the pathways she might follow toward a rewarding career in STEM.

Million Girls Moonshot aims to engage 1 million girls in STEM learning opportunities through after-school and summer programs over the next five years. Through the program, students attend sessions on Zoom, hearing from STEM leaders and learning how to network and build connections in the field. At Girls Build Solutions, the program’s culminating in-person event in Atlanta, students came together to mingle with and hear from women leaders who work at NASA, Intel, Boeing and other leading STEM companies and organizations.

Through the program, Aditi gained more confidence in continuing to take STEM classes and opened her eyes to opportunities to use math and science in her future career. It was particularly meaningful to see and speak with women who have built the careers in STEM that she hopes to build for herself.

The opportunity to meet other girls her age interested in STEM topics she was passionate about, such as robotics and biotech, also motivated Aditi to enroll in the program. She is still in regular contact with the girls she met through the program and she hopes to return next year to serve as a mentor to support first-time attendees.






**Ethan Romero**

AGE **12**



HOMETOWN  
Norwalk, CT

**SUMMER PROGRAM**  
Horizons at CT State Norwalk

For the last seven years, Ethan Romero has spent his summers on a community college campus, a rare experience for a 12-year-old. Through the Horizons at CT State Norwalk summer program, Ethan took reading, math, science and enrichment classes along with enjoying recreational activities such as swimming, basketball and field trips.

“When people ask me about the program,” Ethan said, “I tell them, ‘I don’t like it – I LOVE it!’” His favorite parts have been the sports activities and field trips – including a trip to a nearby adventure park where he conquered his fear of zip lining. He also appreciated that his math class helped prepare him for the upcoming school year and said he took away valuable life lessons from the books he read in reading class. In his STEM class, Ethan learned about density by combining oil and water and by making slime.

Ethan was particularly proud of the opportunity to show his artistic talent to the entire camp by winning a contest to design the back of the camp T-shirts that all the students and teachers wore.

Ethan previously attended the program virtually during the pandemic. During that time, he learned he had an interest in and talent for technology, helping his teachers troubleshoot tech issues in real time. He hopes to pursue a career in tech and work for a big company such as Google or Microsoft.

Ethan’s love for Horizons runs in his family; his older sister is in the Horizons high school program and also works as a teacher’s aide in one of the kindergarten classes. Ethan looks forward to following a similar path in his future with Horizons – but for now, he’s already guessing what the theme for next year’s program will be.



**Hannah Barrientos**

AGE **9**



HOMETOWN  
Cookeville, TN

**SUMMER PROGRAM**  
Putnam County School System Summer Learning and Bridge Camp

Hannah Barrientos was in kindergarten when schools began shifting to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. She is one in a set of triplets, and she and her brothers were fortunate to have their mother support their learning at home during remote learning. As an extra measure to ensure they were academically on track, their mother was excited to enroll them in Putnam County School System’s Summer Learning and Bridge Camp during the last two summers. The four-week program focuses on math, reading, physical activity and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art and math).

“If I didn’t do it, I would forget lots of stuff,” Hannah said of what she gained from the program to prepare her for the upcoming school year.

She particularly enjoyed physical activities such as using a zip line during P.E. and doing a maze made from hula hoops laid on the floor. She also enjoyed an activity where she used math to decipher codes to solve a mystery.

If Hannah could make the program even better, she would include more games, field trips, time outside, a library with “an absurd amount of books” – and s’mores!



To learn more about the State Summer Learning Network, including individual states’ experiences, check out the SSLN webpage [here](#).