In the summer of 2013, young people from across Chicago took part in an innovative experiment. Answering a call from Mayor Rahm Emanuel, 125 organizations—city departments, the school district, neighborhood nonprofits, and cultural institutions that prioritized learning as a critical piece of summer programming.

The city issued more than 100,000 badges to students who had successfully completed Summer of Learning activities, tasks, and projects and became the first to issue badges for learning on a citywide basis. In addition to many badges issued for participation, learners also earned badges for demonstrating they had learned or perfected a new skill.

Badges for Learning

Digital badges can hold much more information about what a learner has accomplished and what competencies they’ve developed than a letter grade can convey.

At a macro level, program designers can see which programs are most popular. On a more granular level, a future employer or teacher can click on the badge and see what skills or knowledge a child gained in earning the badge. This helps educators, summer program administrators, and parents, better understand the learning path that youth are on.

For example, the Summer of Learning featured a badge created by the Game Changer Chicago Design Lab at the University of Chicago for developing an alternative reality game, in which a fictional 17-year-old girl tries to find her father. The 150 students who took part earned badges for photography, game design, audio production, and web design, as well as collaboration and critical thinking.

“In doing this work over five years, one of the challenges has been helping kids understand what’s possible, what’s doable and the pathways for getting there,” said Nichole Pinkard, founder of Chicago’s Digital Youth Network (DYN), a digital literacy program for youth based at DePaul University.

With badges, teens are able to “see the work of others and learn from the work of others and then be inspired and have a pathway of how to get there myself,” she said.

The Mozilla Foundation developed the Open Badges Infrastructure to issue badges and document students’ progress. Staff at Mozilla created a website and “digital backpacks” for students to collect and display the badges they earned.

Mozilla and Summer of Learning organizers held “how-to” sessions to introduce participating organizations to the process of issuing badges. The process of creating badges helped them to better understand what youth were learning in their programs.
By summer’s end, students had earned badges in forensics, photography, fashion design, foundations of ecology, magazine design, collaboration, critical thinking, game design, computer programming, conflict resolution, and hundreds more.

“During Chicago Summer of Learning, more than half (56%) of the badges were earned by African American youth, 29% to Latino youth, 7% to white youth, and 6% to Asian youth.

This summer, I visited Summer of Learning sites across our city where I witnessed the energy and enthusiasm of our students as they challenged themselves creatively, intellectually, and socially,” Mayor Emanuel said.

“This year’s high participation level confirmed that by turning our entire city into a classroom during the summer, we can make learning fun and accessible for every child in Chicago. We look forward to continuing this tradition next year.”

With leadership from Pinkard and the Digital Youth Network and funding support from the MacArthur Foundation, the city will expand learning opportunities year round and serve an increasing number of the Chicago’s students.

**Lessons Learned**

**Do not assume everyone has computer skills.** Many participating organizations faced a steep learning curve. Leveraging larger organizations’ skill sets to train the smaller organizations was a helpful strategy.

**Show badges’ value.** Make the currency of badges clear to teachers, parents, and youth. Ideally, students should be able to convert badges into school credit or link them to future employment.

**Simplify the process of claiming badges.** Students will lose passwords and forget instructions.

**Don’t reinvent the wheel to award a badge.** Badges are meant to supplement existing programming by documenting learning that is already underway, not add extra work for learners.

**Establish guidelines for how badge data is stored and who owns it.** Planners should determine how the data collected via badges will be used, where it will reside, as well as who owns it. Planners should also create clear guidelines on privacy issues as they relate to data sharing and storage, particularly for those under age 13. For that group, COPPA issues will be in force.

**BADGES ARE FLEXIBLE, ALLOWING EARNERS TO PURSUE THEIR INTERESTS AND COMPLEMENT HARD-SKILLS WITH SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE, TEAMWORK, AND COMMUNICATION.**

Learn more about how Open Badges can unlock opportunities for all and enable Connected Learning experiences at reconnectlearning.org.