A photograph of a woman and a young girl smiling in a classroom. The woman is wearing a green and white hoodie with "LOVE PINK" written on it. The girl is wearing a pink shirt. A world map is visible in the background.

PERSPECTIVE

The Wallace Foundation<sup>®</sup>  
July 2019

# SUMMER: A TIME FOR LEARNING

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FIVE LESSONS FROM SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND THEIR  
PARTNERS ABOUT RUNNING SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

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DANIEL BROWNE

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This Wallace Perspective was produced as part of a commitment by The Wallace Foundation to develop and share information, ideas and insights about summer learning. Other publications and resources on summer learning are available free of charge from [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org)

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Photo credits: Boston photos by Samantha Carey. Pittsburgh photos by Jim Mendenhall. Tuscaloosa photo by C. W. Newell.

Cover and title page: Scenes from a Summer Dreamers Academy program in Pittsburgh

Back cover: Scene from a Boston summer learning program.

Design by José Moreno

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# SUMMER: A TIME FOR LEARNING

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FIVE LESSONS FROM SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND THEIR PARTNERS ABOUT RUNNING SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

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DANIEL BROWNE



A group of children and an adult are on a boat. In the foreground, a young girl in a purple hoodie looks over a green seat back. Behind her, a boy in a blue t-shirt with 'OLD NA...' and 'ST...' printed on it is laughing. To his right, another boy in a white t-shirt is looking towards the right. In the background, a woman in a maroon shirt and a red headband is smiling. The boat's interior has green seats and overhead lights.

*Children embark on a day of summer learning and fun on Thompson Island in the Boston Harbor.*

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For more than a century, researchers have known that students lose ground over the summer. Yet insights about solutions for the loss have been slower to emerge. That is beginning to change, owing in part to The Wallace Foundation's \$60 million National Summer Learning Project. Launched in 2011, it included five urban districts and their partners, and a wide-ranging study by the RAND Corporation that is the largest ever undertaken on summer learning. This Wallace Perspective distills key lessons from that work for district leaders, out-of-school time providers and intermediaries, and funders to consider. For more information, visit [wallacefoundation.org](http://wallacefoundation.org)



In a classroom in Pittsburgh during a recent summer, Peyton, a rising third grader, was stuck on a math problem displayed on the overhead projector. Her teacher, Mr. Yurcho, asked the class, “Who here has faith in Peyton?” From the back of the room a fellow student called out, “I believe in you, Peyton!” as Peyton applied herself to solving the problem.

About 15 miles outside Boston, a similar scene unfolded—this time in a forest. As part of a ropes course, rising fifth graders walked across a log suspended between two trees, but Natalia was scared to take her turn. Her entire class chanted, “You can do it!” and her instructor told her, “I will not let you fall.” With their encouragement, Natalia completed the course.

Active learning, new and exciting experiences, warm and supportive relationships: This is what summer can look like when cities and school dis-

tricts think outside the box of traditional summer school. Pittsburgh and Boston have done exactly that by offering voluntary-attendance summer programs that combine engaging academic instruction with a variety of fun, horizon-expanding enrichment activities.

Along with three other districts participating in the National Summer Learning Project (NSLP), sponsored by The Wallace Foundation, Pittsburgh and Boston have demonstrated that this approach to summer can provide meaningful benefits to children. Working to make their summer programs an enduring part of their local education systems and communities, they have also developed lessons useful to any district interested in the educational possibilities of June, July and August.

In these pages you’ll find out more about the importance of summer as a time for learning, how

*Summer learning also means outdoor activity in Boston.*



## Summer learning can play a role in helping districts face two big challenges: the opportunity gap and the achievement gap.

the NSLP set out to promote and study summer learning, what the research has to say about the benefits and what goes into an effective and long-lasting program. And you'll hear directly from the administrators, teachers, students and parents who led the way with their enthusiasm, commitment and hard work.

### Why Summer Matters

Traditionally, school districts have thought of summer as a time for remedial work only. There's ample evidence, however, that summer deserves to be considered an integral part of a child's education, a part that can play a role in helping districts face two of their biggest challenges: the opportunity and achievement gaps.

Children from low-income families do not have access to the same enriching activities and learning experiences as their more affluent peers. This is known as the opportunity gap. For example, 59 percent of school-age children from families earning less than \$30,000 a year participate in sports, compared to 84 percent of those from families earning \$75,000 or more. The same type of disparity exists for out-of-school lessons and participation in clubs.<sup>1</sup> There's also a persistent gap in academic achievement based on family income. Twenty-five percent of fourth-grade students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch scored at or above the proficient level in math on the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress, compared to 57 percent of those not eligible for the program. Twenty-two percent of fourth grad-

ers eligible for free or reduced-price lunch scored at or above proficient in reading, compared to 52 percent of those not eligible.<sup>2</sup>

Both the opportunity and achievement gaps get wider during the summer. According to an analysis by RAND, most studies of summer learning have found that students from low-income families "experience setbacks over the summer relative to their wealthier peers," either because they are losing knowledge and skills or gaining them at a slower pace. The same is true of students who live in neighborhoods and attend schools that have predominantly low-income populations.<sup>3</sup>

The good news is that summer programs can be part of the solution, helping students make up ground in core academic subjects and exposing them to sports, arts and other activities they might otherwise miss out on. Voluntary-attendance programs run by the school district are a promising option because they have the potential to reach more students than traditional summer school or programs run by nonprofits that typically serve fewer children.

### The National Summer Learning Project: An Overview

Until recently, research on the effectiveness of summer programs focused mostly on programs that were either mandatory for students or not

1 "Parenting in America: Outlook, worries, aspirations are strongly linked to financial situation," Pew Research Center, 2015, p. 11.

2 "2017 Mathematics & Reading Assessments," U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2018.

3 Catherine H. Augustine, et al., *Learning from Summer: Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Urban Youth*, RAND Corporation, 2016, p. 2.

run by the district. To fill in the blank, Wallace launched the NSLP in 2011, commissioning RAND to study five large-scale voluntary summer-learning programs led, with Wallace's support, by public school districts: Boston; Dallas; Duval County (Jacksonville), Fla.; Pittsburgh; and Rochester, N.Y. The goals of the project were to provide summer learning opportunities to thousands of children in low-income communities, help the districts improve their programs and understand what impact, if any, they had on participating students—as well as what factors influence results.

At the outset of the effort, RAND looked closely at each district's summer learning program, identifying strengths and weaknesses and helping get them ready to be tested for effectiveness. With two years of program improvements under the districts' belts, the researchers began an extensive study in 2013 to evaluate educational outcomes, focusing on children who were in third grade in spring of that year. That study has led to several reports, with several more to come.<sup>4</sup>

The programs created by the districts in the study had several elements in common:

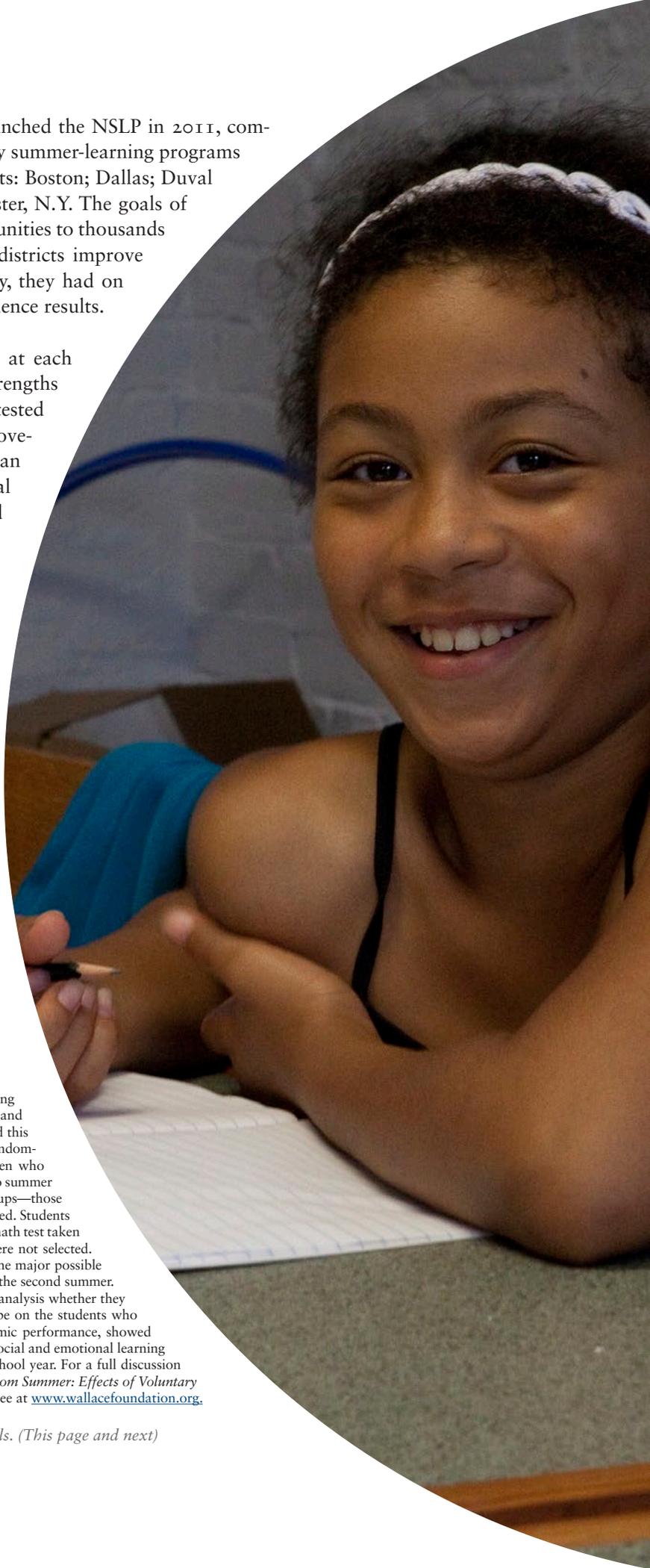
- A mix of academics and enrichment activities;
- Certified teachers providing academic instruction;
- Small classes (no more than 15 students);
- Full-day programming, provided five days a week, except holidays, for five to six weeks;
- At least three hours of instruction in math and English Language Arts (ELA) per day;
- No fee for participation; and
- Free transportation and meals.

These elements reflected what experts and evidence say makes for a successful summer program. They also helped remove barriers that could

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<sup>4</sup> The RAND research team gathered extensive data for the study, including information on individual students' achievement, attendance, demographic and educational background, and social and emotional learning. They analyzed this data using a number of methods, including, for parts of the research, a randomized controlled trial (RCT). The RCT began in 2013, focusing on children who were in third grade in spring of that year. The 5,600 students who applied to summer programs in the five districts were randomly assigned to one of two groups—those selected to take part in the programs for two summers and those not selected. Students who were selected to take part in a summer program scored higher on the math test taken in the fall of 2013, after the first summer, than those who applied but were not selected. This edge in math was statistically significant but faded out over time. (One major possible explanation for this is that nearly half of the students did not show up for the second summer. In an RCT, students selected to take part in a program are included in the analysis whether they show up or not. Therefore, no-shows would dilute any effect there may be on the students who do attend.) Additional correlational analyses, controlled for prior academic performance, showed meaningful benefits for high-attending students in math, reading, and social and emotional learning after the second summer, with benefits persisting through the following school year. For a full discussion of RAND's research methods and findings, see the 2016 report *Learning from Summer: Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Urban Youth*, available for free at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

*In a Boston summer program, children burnish their writing skills. (This page and next)*





have prevented families from participating, including cost and transportation. Districts did have the freedom to make a number of other decisions about program design. They chose from a list of established math and English Language Arts (ELA) curricula. They also varied significantly in how they approached enrichment. Some focused on the arts, while others offered a broader menu of options, including cooking, computer coding—and sailing.

## The Benefits of Summer Learning: What the Study Shows

One of the most noteworthy findings to come out of the study so far is a correlation the researchers discovered: Students who attended frequently saw benefits in math and reading. Specifically, those who attended a summer program for 20 or more days in 2013 did better on state math tests in the fall and again in the spring than similar students who were not assigned to a program. This bump was statistically significant. Frequent attenders in 2014 outperformed students not assigned to a program in both math and ELA on both fall tests and later in the spring. The difference in performance translates to 20 to 25 percent of the typical annual gain in math and 20 to 23 percent of the typical annual gain in ELA. Frequent attenders also received higher scores on social-emotional assessments.<sup>5</sup>

It needs to be emphasized that based on the experience of the National Summer Learning Project, not every student will attend frequently—and improving attendance is difficult and requires attention. About 60 percent of participating students were frequent attenders.<sup>6</sup> Despite sustained efforts by the districts to raise these rates, average daily attendance remained relatively flat from 2011 to 2014. RAND has identified five main reasons for low attendance: 1) a prevailing attitude on the part of both parents and students that summer should be more relaxed than the school year; 2) a need for care of younger siblings at home; 3) vacations and other family plans that conflict with the summer program schedule; 4) dislike of the program, possibly related to bullying or fighting; and 5) good old-fashioned FOMO, fear of missing out on what friends and neighbors are doing.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine et al., pp. 62-66.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 72-73.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 78.



*A number of school districts have introduced summer learning programs. In Tuscaloosa, Ala., where school administrators, enrichment providers and others gathered earlier this year for a summer workshop, district summer programming is entering its third year.*

## Five Lessons from the NSLP

For Wallace, RAND and the five districts participating in the NSLP, understanding the benefits of district-run voluntary programs was only half the story. Just as important was figuring out how best to launch, run and sustain them. Over the course of seven years, five central lessons emerged that could help other districts develop and maintain effective programs of their own.

### **LESSON NO. 1:** **Early planning is crucial.**

“Too often the assumption is you can’t start thinking about summer programs in January, February, March because it’s still cold out,” says James Doyle, former coordinator of out-of-school time for Pittsburgh Public Schools. The reality is districts need a long lead time to pull together a curriculum, staff and other essential elements of an effective program, as well as to work through institutional obstacles—anything from attendance systems that go offline in June to the end-

of-school-year work crunch that nurses and security personnel face just as their summer responsibilities begin.

RAND recommends committing to a summer program by December and starting to plan no later than January. One of the first steps is deciding on whom to serve. Districts may choose to focus on students with the greatest need, such as those at risk of grade retention or children attending high-poverty schools; or they may prefer to open up their program to students across a broader range of skill and income levels. Either way, the decision will have implications for the rest of the planning process. For example, it takes more time to develop curricular materials for a wide variety of student needs than for a specific subset of students.<sup>8</sup>

RAND observed that the NSLP districts where planning went most smoothly put a single staff member in charge of the process. This person—with a position title such as “director of summer learning” (Dallas) or “summer learning program manager” (Boston)—had a job name that explicitly referred to summer planning. The staff member also had time specifically set aside for the

<sup>8</sup> Heather L. Schwartz, et al., *Getting to Working on Summer Learning*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., RAND Corporation, 2018, p. 12.



## Summer is a whole school year that's pushed into five weeks.

work, experience with project management and enough authority or influence to effectively deal with leaders of various departments.<sup>9</sup>

That last qualification is vital because the success of a summer program depends on people in an array of departments, including curriculum, transportation, human resources, information technology, facilities, student-support services and special education. One of the main challenges of planning for summer is getting the attention and buy-in of all these players when they still have pressing school-year business to take care of. To overcome that challenge, two of the NSLP districts formed planning teams with representatives from the necessary departments. This led to some power struggles and complaints about time spent in meetings but also to greater efficiency and smoother sailing once the summer programs started.<sup>10</sup>

Regular meetings are, in fact, a feature of effective summer planning. To avoid burnout, planners would do well to use the time productively. Your harried head of transportation will appreciate skipping the trust exercises and getting straight to the bus schedule. And if the bus schedule isn't on the agenda, maybe she doesn't need to attend. A shared calendar that lays out deadlines and responsible parties for each task can be a handy tool for setting meeting agendas and invitation lists.<sup>11</sup> Decisions should be communicated clearly and quickly to everyone affected.<sup>12</sup>

"Everyone affected" includes not only the folks in the central office but also staff members at summer-program sites. While planning works best

with a single district staff member in the lead, site administrators and teachers can't be expected to successfully carry out the plan if they aren't consulted early and often. One NSLP district struck a balance between centralized decision-making and site-level input by creating a series of templates, including a sample class schedule and student-behavior policy, that each site could customize according to its own needs.<sup>13</sup>

There's one other group that isn't always included in the planning process but should be: enrichment providers. Some NSLP districts hired enrichment instructors themselves; others formed partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) that were in charge of hiring them. In the latter case especially, establishing clear-cut roles was key. Who is responsible for training instructors? For upholding quality standards for enrichment activities? The sooner summer program organizers can answer questions like these, the better.<sup>14</sup>

### **LESSON NO. 2:**

**Successful summer programs focus on quality...and what's special about summer.**

When it comes to planning and logistics, "summer is a whole school year that's pushed into five weeks," says David McCauley, former program director for Boston After School & Beyond, the nonprofit intermediary organization that oversees summer learning and afterschool programming in partnership with Boston Public Schools. If that sounds like a challenge to pull off, it is. But summer also represents an opportunity to create learning experiences that students will never have

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine H. Augustine and Lindsey E. Thompson, *Making Summer Last: Integrating Summer Programming into Core District Priorities and Operations*, RAND Corporation, 2017, pp. 25-27.

<sup>11</sup> Schwartz, et al., p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine and Thompson, 2017, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Schwartz, et al., p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15.

in any other setting. “We shout from the rooftops that we’re not school and we’re proud of that,” says Pittsburgh’s James Doyle.

The summer programs in the NSLP worked hard to establish continuity with the school year without simply replicating it. RAND tracked these efforts from 2011 through 2014, collecting more than 1,200 surveys of summer instructors and 10,000 surveys of elementary-grade students, conducting 900 interviews and observing more than 2,000 hours of classroom and enrichment activities. This research pinpointed the many ways districts can custom-build their programs to meet the unique challenges and seize the opportunities that summer presents—all in the service of a high-quality experience for children. Here are six highlights:

**CURRICULUM.** Voluntary programs need to keep kids engaged throughout the summer or they’ll find something else to do with their free time. A rehash of the school-year curriculum is unlikely to get the job done. Coming up with a fresh curriculum for summer can be an exciting prospect for educators who during the school year may not get a chance to experiment with approaches like experiential learning (building lessons around hands-on projects) and differentiation (tailoring instruction to each student’s ability and experience). Summer can also be a time to home in on a specific academic goal. Former superintendent of Boston Public Schools Tommy Chang gave this example: “We’re moving toward expeditionary learning organized into units of study. Most teachers can’t get through all the units [during the school year]. So we ask ourselves, is there a unit that can be pulled out and emphasized during the summer?”

To make the best use of resources and create a consistent experience for all students, RAND recommends adopting a single curriculum for all program sites. Districts have the option of purchasing one of the many packaged curricula on the market, or they can develop their own. Either way, it makes sense to involve district curriculum specialists with the expertise to adapt a commercial product as needed or develop a high-quality alternative in-house.<sup>15</sup>

For districts interested in developing their own summer curriculum, a word to the wise: Start early. If curricular materials aren’t ready in time for teacher training, all your hard work may be wasted. A long lead



*At a Summer Dreamers Academy program in Pittsburgh, dance is on the activities’ list.*

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 43-46.

## BEYOND ACADEMICS AND ENRICHMENT

RAND researcher Catherine Augustine points out that there was much more to the summer programs in the five National Summer Learning Project districts than what she and her colleagues were able to capture in the study. “Some programs provide clothing to students in need,” she says. “They send meals home with kids who they observe are getting second and third helpings at breakfast and lunch. They set up girls’ breakfasts and lunches for preteens starting to have interpersonal conflicts. They send social workers into the home when they suspect there’s an incident happening.”

time will make it possible to think through important issues, like how best to differentiate materials to match students’ varying skill levels and how to provide the necessary support for English-language learners and those with special needs.<sup>16</sup>

### TEACHER SELECTION AND TRAINING.

Let’s hear it for the summer teachers. They have to quickly acquaint themselves with an unfamiliar curriculum and policies; get to know a new group of students, many of whom may be struggling academically; and, in some cases, adapt to an unusual learning environment—such as the more than 1,000 acres of woodland belonging to Hale Reservation, a nonprofit that runs one of Boston’s summer programs. “We feed chipmunks every day. At first it was like seeing a mountain lion,” says Patrick Francois, former Hale Outdoor Learning Adventures administrator. It takes a special kind of teacher—nimble and highly motivated—to make the most of the opportunity. So how best to find and prepare teachers?

For many districts, the first step may be a conversation with the teachers’ union to negotiate a different hiring procedure for summer, one based on classroom performance and subject and grade-level experience rather than seniority. This may seem daunting, but one NSLP district was able to reach such an agreement.<sup>17</sup> The real trick is persuading top teachers to give up two precious months of time off.

The NSLP districts have found a number of creative ways to make their summer programs enticing to teachers. Dallas recruits only “distinguished” teachers—those who score at the high end of its evaluation system—by presenting summer

as a chance to further build the skills that lead to career advancement. “We’re giving them development around leadership, mentorship, coaching, giving effective feedback and working with peers to grow as a team,” says Tim Hise, former executive director of the Thomas Jefferson Feeder Pattern in the Dallas Independent School District. (A “feeder pattern” is the set of schools that students progress through as they graduate from elementary to middle to high school.)

Summer program leaders in Pittsburgh recognize that, to get the best teachers, they need to create a fun and enriching environment for them as well as the students. “We’ve got a strong group of folks who come back year after year,” says Christine Cray, director of student service reforms for Pittsburgh Public Schools. “They say things like, ‘This feels like family.’ They love to connect with colleagues from other schools, pick up new strategies, meet new students, take elements of the curriculum that we use over the summer and figure out how to implement that in their classrooms.”

Cray says that when it comes to wooing teachers, a reminder of how much their work means to students can go a long way. “We survey campers at the end of the summer. Any quotes that speak to how important their teacher has been, we use that as kind of a tug at the heartstrings.”

Even the most accomplished teachers need support before they dive into the unfamiliar world of summer learning. Training in the features of the summer curriculum and how to teach it is paramount. Teachers also benefit from guidance on how to protect instructional time from distractions—an even more press-

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 46-47.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 21.



## Time on task influenced academic performance, so summer programs should use every minute well.

ing concern in the summer than during the school year—and how to effectively check that students understand the lesson of the day. Support staff like paraprofessionals or college students who receive training side by side the teachers will be better equipped to work with students in need of extra attention, whether struggling or advanced.<sup>18</sup>

**TIME ON TASK.** Summer learning can seem like a paradox: On the one hand, five to six weeks is a tight window of time during which to prepare students, many of them already behind academically, for the upcoming school year; on the other, students and teachers alike often expect to chill out in the summer months. This attitude can lead to classes starting late, ending early or being interrupted for frequent bathroom breaks or off-topic conversations. RAND found that time on task was one of the factors that influenced academic performance, so it's essential that summer programs use every minute well.

No change in procedure or behavior will do the trick if programs don't provide enough instructional time to begin with. Offering 90 minutes of math and two hours of ELA a day can help ensure that the typical student, who attends three out of every four program days, will receive enough instruction in a five-week program to see gains in academic performance.<sup>19</sup>

How that time is organized can also make a difference. RAND researchers found that academic classes that were scheduled in one continuous block lost less instructional time than those that had to pause for another activity like lunch and then start back up again. Similarly, classes are more likely to begin and end on time if the daily

schedule builds in adequate breaks between activities.<sup>20</sup> Transition time may be especially important for programs in nontraditional settings like Hale Reservation, where getting from one location to the next is a literal hike.

Even a schedule that is a masterpiece of time management can be undermined by logistical problems like late-arriving buses and missing supplies. If students and teachers aren't able to hit the ground running on day one, they may get stuck playing catch up for the duration of the program. It's up to program and site administrators to set them up for success.<sup>21</sup>

But what to do about that tendency to chill out once the weather heats up? For starters, teachers may be interested to know that, in RAND's observations, students were more likely to enjoy themselves on days when teachers devoted more class time to instruction. Anthony, a rising fifth grader spending his second summer at Hale Reservation in 2017, confirmed this: "In the other camp I went to, we didn't learn. A break from fun is actually a good thing," he said. Coaching can help teachers establish efficient start-up and wind-down routines, boost students' energy during the post-lunch slump and keep them on track during independent study.<sup>22</sup>

**POSITIVE SITE CLIMATE.** Academically rigorous summer programs can serve as an additional term for the school year (Boston calls its effort the "5th Quarter of Learning") while offering students something unique: a chance to learn and build relationships in a new environment, one with a more intimate, camp-like atmosphere. The climate of a summer program site is essentially what

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18 Ibid., pp. 25-26.

19 Ibid., pp. 30-31.

20 Ibid., p. 31.

21 Ibid., p. 32.

22 Ibid., pp. 32-34.

## THE COST OF A HIGH-QUALITY VOLUNTARY SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAM

As part of its research for the National Summer Learning Project (NSLP), RAND collected cost and revenue data associated with the districts' programs in the summer of 2014. To make its analysis of program costs as pertinent as possible to other school districts, RAND focused on the three NSLP districts that served multiple grade levels and considered the cost of serving all students, as opposed to just the rising fifth graders who participated in the research. Because the NSLP programs were relatively mature by 2014, RAND's analysis reflects the cost of offering an ongoing program rather than launching a new one.

RAND found that the cost per student who attended an NSLP summer program ranged from \$1,070 to \$1,700. The average was \$1,340, or \$6.70 per hour. As a point of reference, school-year costs in these same districts ranged from \$7.65 to \$20.06 per hour for each student. The national average in 2015 was \$10.52.<sup>1</sup>

The three largest categories of expenses—academics, enrichment and district and site management—accounted for roughly 85 percent of the total. Personnel was by far the largest cost driver for the districts. Salaries for academic teachers and classroom support staff made up 35 percent of total costs, with district teachers' salaries accounting for the largest part. Salaries varied depending on the program's teaching schedule and the hourly rate offered by the district, which ranged from a flat \$20 in one to \$27 to \$50 in another, depending on seniority. Other personnel, including central-office positions, site leaders and nonteaching staff, made up 25 percent of total costs. Expenses related to enrichment—the vast majority of which covered contracts with community-based providers—made up 20 percent of the total. Other categories included transportation (7 percent), curriculum (4 percent), professional development (4 percent) and food (4 percent).<sup>2</sup>

To cash-strapped districts, that may look like a lot to spring for. Fortunately, a number of measures can help make summer programs cost-effective. One of the most basic is to centralize functions like transportation, planning, curriculum design, professional development and meal delivery. Districts should also bear in mind that because of the fixed costs associated with each program site, including full-time site leaders, it is less expensive to operate a few large sites than many small ones. That said, there may be benefits that outweigh the costs of maintaining a greater number of small sites, including shorter commute times, the continuity afforded by assigning principals and teachers to summer programs at their home schools, and the special learning opportunities available at community-based facilities.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of how many sites a district settles on, it may wind up paying for more space than it needs if it bases the decision on the number of students who enroll rather than the number likely to attend. The same goes for other matters, like how many students to admit and how many teachers to hire. Districts can avoid this mistake by referring to no-show and attendance rates from past summers. If they don't keep a record of that information, they can use RAND's findings as a rule of thumb—a 20 percent expected no-show rate and an average 75 percent daily attendance rate.<sup>4</sup>

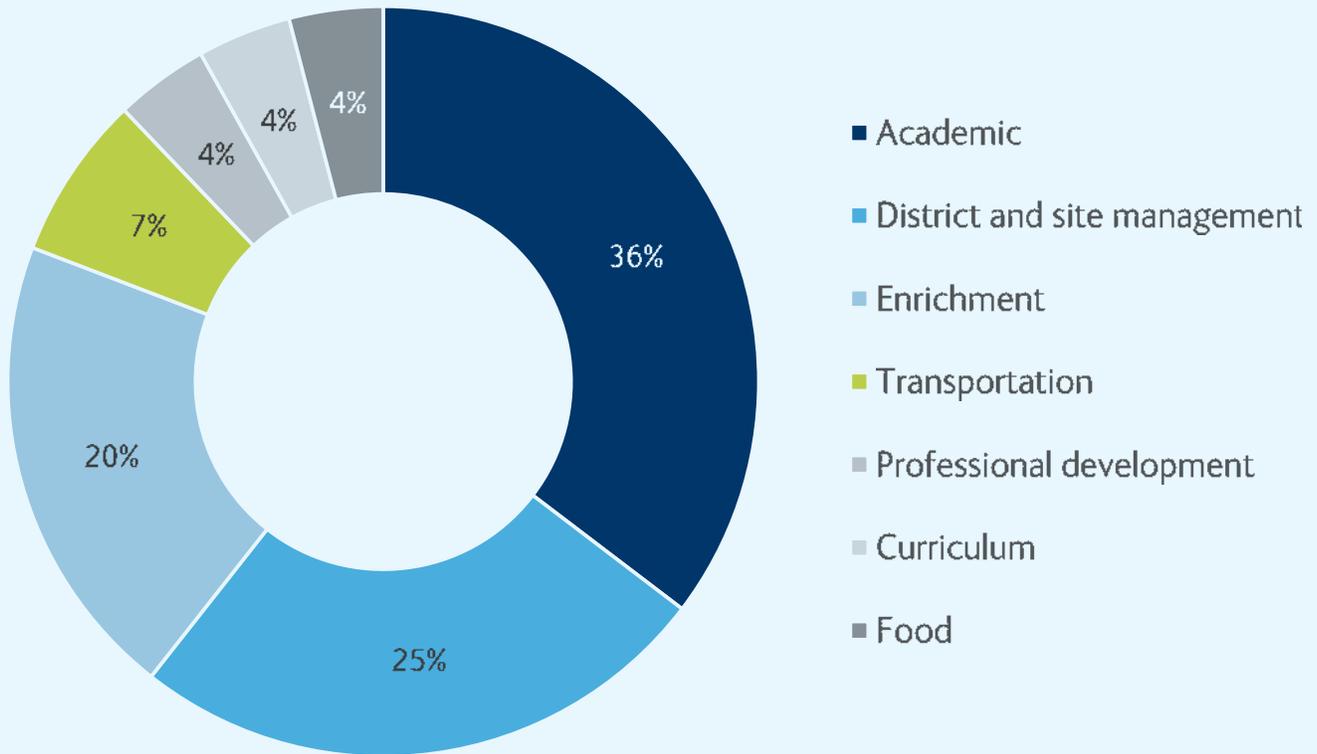
1 Catherine H. Augustine et al., *Learning from Summer: Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Urban Youth*, RAND Corporation, 2016, p. 33.

2 Ibid., p. 34.

3 Heather L. Schwartz et al., *Getting to Working on Summer Learning*, 2nd ed., RAND Corporation, 2018, p. 67.

4 Ibid., p. 66.

## 2014 Average Summer Learning Program Expenditures in Three Districts



From: *Learning From Summer*, p.35

Tracking no-show and attendance rates isn't the only type of record-keeping that can improve the bottom line. For example, districts that collect and store instructional materials in an organized way can reuse them the following summer rather than paying curriculum writers to start from scratch.<sup>5</sup>

One consideration that may seem counterintuitive is that partnerships with high-caliber enrichment providers actually have the potential to lower district costs. In one district, enrichment providers were able to pay for their own services using funding they received through the federal 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers initiative. In another, private businesses and local foundations stepped up with donations, enthused by the camp-like experience the district and its community partners were offering low-income students.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, districts can take heart knowing there is light at the end of the tunnel. Launching a summer program takes a substantial up-front investment. Designing a curriculum; developing policies, procedures and materials; selecting enrichment partners; writing job descriptions; planning for professional development—each task has a price tag attached. But once these tasks are done, the associated costs shrink if not disappear. Of course, there will always be a need for updates and improvements, but a well-managed program can expect to see its costs go down after the first year and become more cost-effective the longer it runs.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 68.



*Teaching and learning take many forms at a summer learning program on Boston's Thompson Island.*

it feels like to be there. When students enjoy being at their summer program, they're more likely to attend regularly.<sup>23</sup> "I can be myself here," says Alejandra, a rising seventh grader attending the Summer Dreamers Academy at Pittsburgh Carmalt (a pre-K-8 school) in 2017. "Nobody judges me for what gender or nationality I am. I walked in expecting it to be boring, but I'm having a lot of fun."

Students have positive experiences at program sites where teachers engage with them throughout the day, the schedule and behavior policy are consistently enforced, and the staff delivers a strong message about the program's goals and values. It all starts with warm interactions between students and adults, both in class and outside of it.<sup>24</sup> "There's no yelling at kids for running in the hall here," says Stephanie Byars, a former site leader for the Summer Dreamers Academy. That emphasis on kindness is pervasive, from the classroom to the lunchroom to the playground. "One stu-

dent calls me grandma," says camp coordinator Adriane Dudley. "He's my camp grandson."

To ensure that their entire team is on the same page and contributing to a positive site climate, some site leaders make a point of not only observing classes but also being present at lunch, recess, bus drop-off in the morning and pick-up in the afternoon. This sends the message that they care about the program. It also gives them an opportunity to model the program's values and keep an eye out for anyone, student or adult, who may need help living up to those values.

In response to chronic bullying and fighting, one NSLP district hired a social worker and behavior-management specialist for each site. The social workers did everything from visiting the families of students with frequent absences to purchasing bathing suits for students who might not have one. The behavior specialists made a list of students who had been suspended during the school year

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 57-61.



Many students are not the most successful in core academics, but they find their niche in an art or a culinary class. It changes how they are in all their classes.

and met with them before the summer even began, just to talk or play basketball. These efforts paid off: Bullying and fighting dropped dramatically.<sup>25</sup>

One-on-one relationships may be the cornerstone of site climate, but summer learning is, at its best, a communal experience. Morning meetings and other rituals—everything from chants and dances to discussion of a word of the day—can help reinforce positive messages.<sup>26</sup> Rising first graders at Summer Dreamers Academy at Camp Carmalt began every day by pledging to “work hard, be nice, and have fun.” Patrick Francois, former administrator at Hale Reservation, says, “We start each class with, ‘Where are you coming from? Did you take a risk today?’ If a student has forty-seven troubles, we celebrate the two good things.”

**ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES.** If there’s one thing that distinguishes summer learning from the regular school year in the minds of students and families, it’s that enrichment is a central part of the experience. By offering stimulating activities, particularly ones that students may not otherwise have access to, summer programs not only help close the opportunity gap but also give students a compelling reason to sign up and keep attending.<sup>27</sup> “Activities are the pull,” says Dave Siwa, camp coordinator at Summer Dreamers’ Carmalt location. “Our students might not [normally] get the chance to go golfing.”

Or the chance to uncover a hidden skill. Crystal Rentz, former director of summer learning for the Dallas Independent School District, says, “Many of these students are not the most successful in core academics, but they end up finding

their niche in an art class or a culinary class, and it changes how they are in all their classes. They didn’t know what they wanted to do because they hadn’t been exposed to enough different things they could do.”

In order to live up to their billing, however, enrichment classes need to be as well planned and executed as the academic portion of the day. There are three basic ways to go about it: Districts can 1) hire school-year teachers to lead enrichment classes; 2) contract directly with a variety of community-based providers and manage their work; or 3) form a partnership with a nonprofit intermediary organization in their community. Any of these approaches can be effective, depending on local resources.<sup>28</sup> In Boston, a city with a rich array of cultural offerings and CBOs, all three approaches are at play, with the school district and Boston After School & Beyond coordinating the entire effort. The providers then play the lead role in running the summer program, designing enrichment options, hosting program sites and even hiring academic teachers.

Regardless of whether they work for the district or an outside organization, enrichment instructors need to know their stuff, just as academic teachers do. A photography instructor who can’t find her way around a darkroom is little more than a glorified babysitter—and students can tell the difference. Subject-matter expertise alone, however, isn’t sufficient. Being a seasoned athlete or artist is one thing; being able to handle a large group of young children is something else. High school and college students for whom teaching is a summer gig can find it especially tricky to take on the role

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 61-62.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 60-61.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-51.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-52.

## A SUMMER LEARNING TOOLKIT AND MORE

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of authority figure. It's important, then, for districts, along with their nonprofit partners, to train enrichment instructors in classroom management techniques and for site leaders to observe them in action and offer support as needed.<sup>29</sup>

Along with experience and training, enrichment instructors need a solid plan for their classes. Even the most talented drama teacher can't be expected to improvise for a group of antsy students who've spent all morning in math and Eng-

lish classes. In RAND's observations, students got more out of structured activities that required everyone to be actively engaged the entire time than they did out of free play.<sup>30</sup> The word to keep in mind when planning enrichment classes is SAFE: Lessons should be sequenced, meaning that each activity builds on the one before; active, meaning students get a chance to practice what they're learning; focused on the development of specific skills; and explicit, meaning that those skills are named and defined.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 53-54.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-55.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph A. Durlak and Emily P. DuPre, "Implementation Matters: A Review of Research on the Influence of Implementation on Program Outcomes and the Factors Affecting Implementation," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 41, 2008, pp. 327-350.

A question that often comes up for summer-program organizers is whether to incorporate academic content into the enrichment part of the day. The answer is, it depends. In some cases the connection may be clear and compelling. At Hale Reservation, for example, students take a pontoon boat ride on one of the reservation's ponds every week, an activity overseen by Shirley Sutton, an educator, historical storyteller, wildlife conservationist and performance artist. Called the "floating classroom," these outings give children the thrill of a trip on the water but also teach them about the local flora and fauna and the area's Native American history. On the other hand, forcing a connection between academics and enrichment that isn't there can end up detracting from both.<sup>32</sup> Salsa dancing is fun and rewarding. An interpretative dance about the multiplication tables—not so much.

**CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT.** A good summer program does its best to avoid hiccups. A great summer program knows there's always room to get better. And the key to getting better is gathering intel on how the program is operating and what difference it's making for students. "When we started, we had organizations that stepped up to try something new," says Chris Smith, president and executive director of Boston After School & Beyond. "Now we're looking for organizations that can meet standards...Our guiding principles are flexibility in implementation, uniformity in measurement."

There are several types of data that add up to a full picture of program performance. Attendance rate and the intended-versus-actual number of students served are two of the most basic. In-person observations can give program leaders a sense of how sites are faring in terms of logistics (are the buses running on time?), instruction (are teachers devoting enough time to math and ELA?) and climate (is the behavior policy enforced?). Surveys and focus groups of students, parents and teachers can also speak to site climate and help leaders identify ways to encourage frequent attendance and maintain a first-class staff.

And then there are student outcomes data, which let programs know whether their work is translating into results. A good starting point for districts looking to collect outcomes data for their summer programs is to test students in math and ELA at the beginning of the program and then again at the end. Comparing test scores of students who attended the program to those who did not is also valuable but takes more time and resources. RAND suggests checking out published



32. Schwartz, et al., p. 55.

*Pittsburgh's effort strives for the positive interactions between children and adults that are a hallmark of strong summer programs.*



In a survey, more than half of respondents said they wanted their children to participate in a summer learning program.

evaluations of summer programs to get an idea of what kinds of tests and other data-collection instruments to use.<sup>33</sup>

When districts take full advantage of the data available to them, improvement can happen on many fronts.

### **LESSON NO. 3:**

**Districts can have success signing up families for voluntary programs—if they make an intensive effort to recruit them.**

Demand for summer programs is high. In a 2014 survey of more than 14,000 parents and guardians, more than half said they wanted their children to participate in a summer learning program.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, voluntary programs have to compete with a range of other summer activities for the attention of parents and students, many of whom may not be used to thinking of summer as a time for learning. Recognizing what they were up against, the NSLP districts each made a vigorous, sustained effort to entice families to enroll. To assist them, Wallace enlisted Crosby Marketing Communications, a firm with expertise in “social marketing” (which entails using the principles of marketing to promote the public good).

The marketing campaigns bore fruit: All of the districts exceeded their recruitment goals. One technique they each used was to set a clear cutoff date for enrollment and emphasize it in communications about the program. RAND notes that establishing a firm enrollment deadline contributed to higher attendance rates (because new stu-

dents weren’t straggling in midway through the program) and allowed the districts to hire the right number of staff members, inform parents of bus routes in advance and divide students equally among classrooms.<sup>35</sup>

The districts also succeeded in reducing no-show rates—the percentage of students who register but never attend—by improving their outreach to families between the time students were accepted into the program and the start of class. (In all three districts that had comparable data for the summers of 2012 and 2013, the no-show rates decreased.)<sup>36</sup> To help boost day-one attendance, the districts held “get ready for summer” events in the spring and scheduled robocalls to remind families of the program start date. “When parents register their children for your summer learning program, view that as the beginning of a relationship,” says Jeff Rosenberg, former executive vice president at Crosby who worked with the five cities.

(As mentioned above, the districts had a harder time raising attendance rates over the course of the summer, but those that placed a strong emphasis on creating a warm and welcoming culture and helping students form bonds with peers and program staff saw some improvements.<sup>37</sup> RAND found that the districts that clearly expressed expectations for attendance in their application and orientation materials had better luck getting through to parents who might otherwise see summer as a time to take it easy.<sup>38</sup> )

So how did the districts seal the deal with their intended customers? Before they could settle on the right tack to take, they had to get a better

33 Ibid., p. 16.

34 *America After 3PM: Afterschool Programs in Demand*, Afterschool Alliance, 2014, p. 11.

35 Schwartz, et al., pp. 37-38.

36 Jeff Rosenberg, *Summer Learning Recruitment Guide*, Crosby Marketing Communications, 2018, pp. 6-7.

37 Ibid., p. 7.

38 Schwartz, et al., p. 38.



*It's math time at a Summer Dreamers Academy program in Pittsburgh.*

sense of parental attitudes toward summer and summer learning. To that end, Crosby conducted focus groups with about 100 parents of third and fourth graders in three cities. From those, the districts learned that while parents are motivated by the idea of preparing their children for the next grade, they also believe summer should be a break from the rigors of the school year. Therefore, it was important to emphasize that summer programs offered a mix of academics and fun.<sup>39</sup> Iwona Brice, the mother of Polo, a rising fifth grader at Hale Reservation in 2017, sums up what many parents want out of a summer learning experience for their child: “He comes home covered in mud, and I love it. I wish I could go there with him for a day.”

The districts also learned that, while parents may be enthusiastic about the idea of enrolling their child in a summer program, the devil’s in the details. Parents mentioned transportation, hours of operation, proximity to home and perceived

safety of the program site as considerations that would go into the decision to sign up.<sup>40</sup>

Equipped with a better understanding of families’ needs and concerns, the districts went about developing messages that would resonate with parents and made plans for getting and keeping their attention. They found that a consistent, assertive approach was essential. A single mailing or phone call to the home wasn’t enough to make a connection. Neither was relying on a single type of outreach. “Sending a flier home by ‘backpack express’ can work, but as all parents know, those fliers don’t always make it to them, so you don’t want to rely on that one approach,” Rosenberg says. The districts made a minimum of three attempts to contact each parent on their list and used at least two forms of outreach—everything from text messages to recruitment events.<sup>41</sup>

While it’s reasonable for districts to view adults as the ultimate “deciders” when it comes to summer

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-9.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 16.



plans, the parents in Crosby’s focus groups made clear that it was important to them to give their child a say. This proved true even after the decision to participate in a summer program was made: Parents were less likely to be sticklers about attendance if their child wasn’t enjoying the experience. The reality, then, is that students are a program’s most important customers, and districts would be wise to engage with them directly. The NSLP districts came up with a number of creative ways to get students excited about their programs. Not surprisingly, pizza parties and ice cream socials were a big hit, but so were specially designed postcards addressed to the students rather than their parents. Children got a kick out of receiving mail just for them. They also responded well to a conversation with a trusted adult. In at least one district, teachers who were hired to work in the summer program set out to build relationships with eligible students during the school year. This assured the students that, if they signed up, they would enter the program knowing at least one adult.<sup>42</sup>

#### **LESSON NO. 4:** **Summer learning can and should be part of districts’ year-round operations.**

For summer program leaders, it can feel like *déjà vu*: Even if a program has been up and running for years, districts often approach funding and planning for the next summer as a blank slate. “I don’t know what next year holds,” says Crystal Rentz, formerly of the Dallas Independent School District. “In any district, leadership changes. I have my ideas and my thoughts, but I don’t know if that’s going to fit in whoever’s agenda...There are so many factors and voices in districts. That’s the hardest piece with any program, especially in the summer.”

Several years into the NSLP, summer program leaders turned their attention to the longterm question of how to embed their programs more deeply in the districts’ organizational structures and everyday practices so they wouldn’t have to reinvent the wheel every summer. RAND interviewed 60 staff members in three districts to find out what it takes to “institutionalize” summer learning—that is, to make funding and planning for summer a matter of routine. The researchers determined that program leaders used three main strategies to accomplish this goal, each with its own set of challenges:

**BUILDING AWARENESS OF THE PROGRAM AND CONNECTING IT TO LARGER DISTRICT GOALS.** “No one thinks summer learning is a stupid idea,” says David McCauley, formerly of Boston After School & Beyond. The

42 Ibid., p. 18.

*One of Pittsburgh’s “summer dreamers” gets a high five.*



## The reality is that students are a program’s most important customers, and districts would be wise to engage with them directly.

question, he says, is how to go from being considered “something nice” to “something necessary.” In the three districts that RAND studied for this part of its research, summer program leaders had to face decision-makers who were withholding judgment until they saw data showing that the programs made a difference in student outcomes. For others, evidence was not the issue. They saw summer learning as taking resources away from higher priorities.<sup>43</sup>

Summer program leaders knew that to overcome this skepticism, they would need to make a strong case—and have the numbers to back it up. They used outcomes data to prove that their programs were not only effective but that they were also helping the district achieve its main academic goals. To do this, they enlisted the help of colleagues in other departments. In one district, for example, the communications team developed a set of talking points and a brochure connecting data from an internal evaluation of the program, along with RAND’s findings, to overall student achievement.<sup>44</sup>

Graphs and charts are designed to appeal to the head, but even the toughest education officials have hearts, too. Program leaders brought the summer learning experience to life by inviting both central-office and school personnel to visit program sites and by presenting videos, photographs and student testimonials at district meetings.<sup>45</sup>

If improved test scores on the one hand and the faces of smiling children on the other aren’t persuasive enough, summer program leaders can point to a range of other valuable contributions.

Pittsburgh’s Summer Dreamers Academy, for instance, provides a service to the district because it acts as an incubator for innovative new ideas, like a “digital badge” system for middle school students. “We’re able to say, ‘Let’s get it going for 300 kids and then think about lessons learned and how we can expand it for 3,000 kids in the school year,’” says Christine Cray of Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Part of the value of Dallas’s summer program is that it fosters the next generation of teachers. At the time of writing, three of its sites were designated “learning labs” where Teach for America members served as apprentices in classrooms led by experienced educators. “Some of our distinguished teachers are really interested in being a part of something different, not just owning their classrooms but also supporting new teachers who are coming into the profession,” says Tim Hise, formerly of the Dallas Independent School District.

**ENSURING ALL RELEVANT DEPARTMENTS ARE REPRESENTED IN THE PLANNING PROCESS.** The NSLP districts that formed planning teams with representatives from the various departments that play a part in summer learning reaped a number of benefits, including fewer logistical headaches once summer rolled around, a year-round focus on summer throughout the central office—and the discovery of cost savings. In one district, for example, representatives from food services and transportation realized it would be more cost-effective to consolidate program sites into fewer buildings and then persuaded program leaders to do so.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Augustine and Thompson, 2017, p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine and Thompson, 2017, p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. xi.



## The question is how to take summer learning programs from being considered “something nice” to “something necessary.”

Still, as noted earlier, getting so many different players to cooperate isn't easy. In two districts, disagreements could drag on for several meetings because it was unclear who had the final authority to settle them. Taking decisions out of the hands of the summer program leader could occasionally backfire in other ways. After one program leader lost final say over some matters, including which facilities to use, the team assigned the summer program to a building that didn't have the right space for dance and other planned enrichment activities. In the face of such problems, one district ultimately decided to disband its team and make the invitation list for meetings more selective.<sup>47</sup>

The takeaway for districts is to be patient and understand the challenges that come with cross-departmental planning. It took the districts that went with this approach more than a single year to get the process right. In fact, they continued making changes every year to adapt to shifting dynamics within the central office and incorporate lessons learned.<sup>48</sup>

**INVOLVING EXPERT STAFF IN SUPPORTING THE PROGRAMS.** Getting other departments to participate in planning for summer is only half the battle. As those plans are made, summer program leaders still need a lot of help to set them in motion. Fortunately, district offices are full of know-how that program leaders can tap into, from grant writers and budget analysts to curriculum designers and human-resources specialists.

Not that these experts are always ready, willing or able to lend a hand. District offices are sometimes understaffed, and district personnel almost always feel overextended. Summer-related tasks can seem like extra work, especially when a summer

program is new, and extra work may not go over well with someone who's already scrambling to put out fires during the school year. The result can be missed deadlines and frustration on both sides. Even when district experts have the time and motivation to take on a summer-related assignment, they may not be up to speed on what makes a summer program distinct from the regular school year. For example, curriculum designers may not be used to incorporating project-based learning or enrichment activities into academics.<sup>49</sup>

The question, then, is how to take advantage of all that expertise without the experts feeling taken advantage of themselves. Two districts used extra pay as an incentive for curriculum designers and grant writers to take on summer-related work, but program leaders were concerned about what would happen if the money to compensate them dried up. One alternative is to offer extra pay that decreases from year to year as summer assignments come to be seen as an expected part of the job. Districts may also consider incentives that don't involve pay, such as flex time.

At the end of the day, however, the best way to get experts on board is to make summer a routine part of district operations so that no one thinks of it as an undue burden. Including summer responsibilities in job descriptions for new hires is one way to build that acceptance. Another is for summer program leaders to familiarize themselves with how other departments operate and then fit summer-related tasks into their slower times of the year.<sup>50</sup>

All three of these strategies take patience and persistence, but the districts that put in the work to garner institutional buy-in and support for their

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-40.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

## SUMMER PROGRAMS AND THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

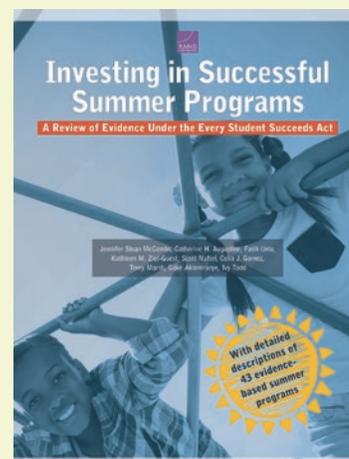
There are many types of summer programs, and a Wallace-commissioned report by the RAND Corporation finds that a range of them have evidence of effectiveness strong enough to qualify them for noteworthy sources of federal funding.

The report, which looks at studies of summer programs in light of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, identifies 43 summer programs with sufficient evidence of effectiveness to reach the law's top three of four tiers of research rigor. This means these programs are eligible for federal dollars under sections of the law including its Title I, which, at about \$16 billion for the 2019 fiscal year, is a significant funding source.

The 43 programs cross the K-12 spectrum and include pursuits ranging from academic learning to career assistance and social-emotional wellbeing. (Among them are three efforts that have received Wallace support: the National Summer Learning Project; Project READS, a district-run, at-home reading program for elementary school students; and Higher Achievement, a nonprofit multi-subject program for middle schoolers.)

“Summer is an opportune time to create programs that benefit children and youth, and we find evidence that many types of summer programs can be effective,” the authors say.

The report, *Investing in Successful Summer Programs: A Review of Evidence Under the Every Student Succeeds Act*, is available free of charge at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).



summer programs were rewarded in the form of better programs, efficiencies in cost and time, and greater continuity between summer and the school year. And there was one other important benefit: Going into summer 2017, none of them had to cut their summer program budget.<sup>51</sup>

### **LESSON NO. 5: There are opportunities to build lasting support for summer learning.**

That last sentence—“none had to cut their summer program budget”—will no doubt be music to the ears of program leaders everywhere. But if there’s one thing they know, it’s that the work of sustaining a summer program is never done. It’s been more than eight years since the start of the NSLP, and Wallace funding for the districts’ programs has drawn to a close. The districts knew this day was coming and for some time have been thinking about what they need to do to keep their programs afloat. “We have to raise more pre-

dictable funding that would make us more of a public utility that is part of a new public-private infrastructure,” says Chris Smith of Boston After School & Beyond. (For an idea of what it costs to run a high-quality summer program, see the centerfold on pages 16–17.)

Lesson No. 4 was all about one way to help make a summer program sustainable: tying it more closely to district priorities and operations. There are others, chief among them making allies wherever they can be found. Summer program leaders may not have direct access to all the different people who hold some sway over their program’s fortunes, but a few strong relationships can go a long way. It makes sense to start with district leaders like superintendents, chief academic officers and funding coordinators. Not only do they have a direct role in allocating revenue and setting policy, they can also advocate for summer learning in meetings with city, state and federal

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. xiv.



*Instructors and students in a Boston summer program enjoy an end-of-the-day moment.*

officials. A friendly rapport with someone at the state education agency can also come in handy when questions arise about the availability and permitted uses of state and federal funding for summer learning. And it never hurts to get to know mayors, legislators and other elected officials who may see summer learning as an issue worth championing.<sup>52</sup>

One-on-one relationship-building isn't the only means of putting summer learning on the public-policy radar. There are precedents for citywide advocacy campaigns leading to a new tax or budget line to support young people. In some cities a portion of the funding set aside has been used for summer learning. It's important to meet face-to-face with naysayers and highlight the problems the proposed funding would solve rather than how it would be spent. Strength in numbers also helps, so before launching a campaign of their own, summer program leaders may be well served

to seek out an existing coalition in their community or try to establish a new one.<sup>53</sup>

Giving young people themselves a voice in the campaign can be especially powerful.<sup>54</sup> Samirah Franklin, a youth organizer at the Baltimore (Md.) Youth Organizing Project who spoke at an NSLP conference in 2017, describes how, at age 19, she led a successful campaign to prevent a steep cut in the city's funding for youth programming: "We had an idea of what the community wanted because we're from the community, but we still went out and listened to over 400 young people about what their main concerns were...[Then] our organization quadrupled voter turnout in our neighborhoods, doing serious voter-registration drives. We had to show we have adults behind us and they will be voting," she says.

Even a well-funded summer program with support from the community is likely to face any

<sup>52</sup> Forthcoming report from RAND on public policy and summer learning programming.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

number of bureaucratic hurdles that may make it difficult to thrive and grow. Program leaders have to decide whether to jump over these hurdles or try to get them removed. In some cases, pushing for changes to how the district does business may be the way to go. In others, the path of least resistance may be to adapt to the status quo. Choosing the right battles takes a clear understanding of district policies and procedures—and what they mean for summer programming.<sup>55</sup>

Navigating the district office can keep summer program leaders so busy they aren't always aware of state and federal funding opportunities that could make their lives easier. Keeping track of every relevant shift in state and federal policy can be a daunting task, but there are organizations and resources that can help lighten the load. Advocacy groups like the National Summer Learning Association and the Afterschool Alliance serve as clearinghouses of information for the summer-learning field. That friend you made at the state education agency is likely to be up to date on the latest grant opportunities. Local councils or caucuses that focus on out-of-school time may be in the know as well. And just as bankers routinely peruse the financial pages, summer program leaders can stay up to date by browsing Education Week and other news services for educators.<sup>56</sup>

Research findings from the NSLP (available from [the Wallace Knowledge Center](#)) may also come in handy as districts seek to shore up their summer programs.

## Looking Ahead

Since the NSLP began, interest in summer learning has grown considerably. The New Vision for Summer School Network, which promotes a broad, innovative approach to school-based summer learning, has grown from 18 districts in 2011 to more than 50 today. National Summer Learning Week—sponsored by the National Summer Learning Association to build awareness of the importance of summer learning as well as its bearing on issues such as literacy, summer nutrition and STEM—has expanded from about 300 events nationwide in 2011 to about 1,000 today.<sup>57</sup> And several states—among them California, Massachusetts, New Mexico and

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Wallace e-mail exchange with Rachel Gwaltney, director of policy and partnerships, National Summer Learning Association, April 26, 2019.

*A student in Pittsburgh's Summer Dreamers program pays close attention to the lesson at hand.*





*Taking a ferry from mainland Boston is part of the summer learning experience on Thompson Island.*

New York—have opened up significant funding streams that rival federal sources in size.<sup>58</sup>

For Wallace, RAND, Crosby, the NSLP districts and their partners, it's been a rewarding journey—and one likely to continue for a long time. The students who participated in the study as rising fourth and fifth graders were in seventh grade in 2017. RAND checked in on them at that time to see if the effects of the two summers they had spent in their district's program had grown stronger, dwindled or disappeared altogether. Those findings are still to come, along with reports on public policies affecting summer learning, an analysis of citywide efforts to make summer learning programs an integral part of their communities, and an examination of the phenomenon of “summer slide” in one or more districts. All of this information will be available free of charge from the Wallace website as it is published.

As for the districts, they have made a lasting contribution to their communities and the broader field. “Before this project started, it wasn't assumed that part of learning would take place at a community site,” says Chris Smith of Boston After School & Beyond. “Joint professional development was a new way of doing business. Everyone put some skin in the game, took a risk and did it together.” That doesn't mean they're resting on their laurels. “For Boston, there's a tremendous amount that remains to be learned,” says Donna Muncey, deputy superintendent of school support for Boston Public Schools. With efforts to sustain their summer programs showing promising signs, the districts remain committed to getting better and facing whatever obstacles come their way. That's the spirit of summer learning that lives in Anthony, the Hale Reservation student summer learner, who says of the ropes course and other adventurous activities, “I like the challenges.”

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<sup>58</sup> Forthcoming report from RAND on public policy and summer learning programming.

# Reading and Resources on Summer Learning and the National Summer Learning Project

All of the following knowledge products—and many more—are available free of charge from Wallace's Knowledge Center at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

## [\*Getting to Work on Summer Learning, 2nd Ed.\*](#)

This updated report offers guidance to district leaders interested in launching or improving a summer learning program.

## [\*Summer Learning Toolkit\*](#)

This online resource provides more than 50 evidence-based tools and other materials for delivering an effective summer program.

## [\*Learning from Summer: Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Urban Youth\*](#)

A groundbreaking study finds that high-quality summer learning programs benefit high-attending students in math and reading.

## [\*Summer Learning Recruitment Guide\*](#)

A website and written guide offer eight keys to success to school districts that want to recruit students for voluntary summer learning programs.

## [\*Making Summer Last: Integrating Summer Programming into Core District Priorities and Operations\*](#)

This report offers ideas on how summer program leaders can garner buy-in for their programs to ensure they last beyond a handful of summers.

## [\*Investing in Successful Summer Programs: A Review of Evidence Under the Every Student Succeeds Act\*](#)

RAND describes in detail 43 summer programs backed by research strong enough to meet federal Every Student Succeeds Act requirements.

## [\*READS: Helping Children Become Summer Bookworms\*](#)

A research summary explores how READS—a school-run, summer read-at-home program that gives children free books coupled with key supports—can help disadvantaged students sharpen their reading skills.

## [\*Ready for Fall? Near-Term Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Students' Learning Opportunities\*](#)

The first set of student outcome findings from Wallace's National Summer Learning Project identifies near-term improvements in student performance on math assessments and no near-term effect on reading assessments.

## [\*American After 3PM: Afterschool Programs in Demand\*](#)

A survey finds that reported participation in afterschool and summer learning programs has jumped, but unmet demand for programming is also high.

## [\*Why Summer Learning Matters—to Boston and the Nation\*](#)

In this presentation, Wallace President Will Miller discusses Wallace's strategic partnership with government and nonprofits to strengthen and test summer learning programs—and reflects on what it takes to make such a partnership successful.

## [\*Stopping the Summer Slide: The Role That Networks and Policymakers Can Play in Reducing Summer Learning Loss\*](#)

This webinar looks at summer learning loss and possible remedies for it through the eyes of a RAND researcher and those working in the trenches to improve summer learning.

## [\*Summer Snapshot: Exploring the Impact of Higher Achievement's Year-Round Out-of-School-Time Program on Summer Learning\*](#)

A study finds that participation in the summer part of a program for middle-school-age youngsters is linked to improved attitudes toward school.

## [\*Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning\*](#)

Guidance for school district leaders interested in launching or improving summer learning programs includes early planning and sticking to enrollment deadlines.

## [\*Thinking About Summer Learning: Three Perspectives\*](#)

In three brief reports, experts share what they know about summer learning loss and possible solutions to this widespread problem.



The Wallace Foundation®

The Wallace Foundation is a national philanthropy that seeks to improve learning and enrichment for disadvantaged children and foster the vitality of the arts for everyone.

Wallace has major initiatives under way in:

- **School leadership.** Strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement.
- **Building audiences for the arts.** Making the arts a part of many more people's lives by working with arts organizations to broaden, deepen and diversify audiences.
- **Social and emotional learning.** Exploring whether and how children benefit if schools and afterschool programs work together to align and improve experiences and climate to build social and emotional skills.
- **Arts education.** Expanding arts learning opportunities for children and teens.
- **Summer learning.** Better understanding the impact of high-quality summer learning programs on disadvantaged children.
- **Afterschool.** Helping selected cities make good afterschool programs available to many more children.

Find out more at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

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