

Effective Summer Learning Programs: Case Studies

SUMMER LEARNING SERIES

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This is the fourth in a series of articles focusing on strategies to promote student learning and wellness during summer break from school. This issue presents case studies illustrating how three communities have succeeded in providing and expanding summer learning programs.

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There's no doubt that budget cuts have had a tremendous impact on the availability of summer learning programs throughout California. But with a little creativity and a lot of dedication, some communities have managed to overcome the obstacles and create effective programs that are engaging students, expanding in size and scope, and demonstrating positive outcomes.

Glenn County

Glenn County sits halfway between the cities of Sacramento and Redding in Northern California, roughly 1,300 square miles of mostly rich farmland—rice, almonds, prunes, livestock – bounded by coastal range mountains to the west and the Sacramento River on the east.

Summers here tend to be pastoral and bucolic, a scene that can easily hide some harder truths from the casual eye. In relative terms, this is a poor county. There are more than 1,000 farms in the region, but little industry. Unemployment hovers at around 16 percent. The median income – \$43,074 – is less than half of the richest counties in the state. In some local schools, all of the students are on subsidized meal programs.

Resources are limited, and so too are summertime options for the county's students, making them more vulnerable to "summer learning loss" (decline in academic skills between school years) than their higher income peers elsewhere.



But local educators and activists are fighting back. Last year, Glenn County was chosen as one of 10 programs in the state – and the only rural program – to receive funding from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. With hands-on support from the Partnership for Children and Youth, they are creating a working model of a high-quality summer learning program that might be emulated by other communities.

The program is called Expect Success, a four-week partnership of the Willows Unified School District, Orland Unified School District, Butte County Office of Education, and Glenn County's Supporting Participation in Academics and Recreation for Kids (SPARK) after-school program. It is open to low-income students, kindergarten through eighth grade, at two elementary campus sites.

Expect Success was designed by Mary Davis, SPARK coordinator, based on data about the effects of summer learning loss, particularly for disadvantaged students. Researchers have found that the academic degradation of summer learning loss is cumulative, often putting low-income students years behind their peers by the time they enter high school.

"I think a lot of parents would send their children to summer school, but there's not a real understanding of its significance, especially with low-income students," said Davis. "I'm really working hard to educate the community, writing articles for the Office of Education's newspaper, going to community meetings, and giving presentations to local groups.

"When I talk to people about summer learning loss, the general reaction is surprise. I often start by walking out the progress students make during the school year, taking a step back for every summer when they aren't learning. People see the gap. I get a lot of 'wows.' They never realized."





Davis said the situation has been exacerbated by years of budget cutbacks.

“Like all schools in the state,” she said, “we’ve suffered significant funding cuts, with tremendous effect. Athletics, art, music have all been scaled way back. Class sizes have grown. It’s been a struggle.”

Summer programs were among the programs hardest hit. When funding was available, she said, local districts provided as much as six hours a day of summer programs: academic classes in the mornings, crafts and recreation in the afternoons. When state money disappeared, the districts could no longer afford the academic element “and it didn’t really make sense to just do crafts in the afternoons.”

The pinch was felt elsewhere as well. The regional 4H operation had run an extensive summer camp, said Davis, but has trimmed it back substantially. Community parks and recreation departments oversee some activities, but they have been reduced as well.

“Really it’s a funding issue,” said Davis. “Unless it’s a pay-to-attend program, there aren’t a lot of choices.”

Expect Success is modeled after the traditional notion of away-from-home summer camp. Each day begins at the elementary school site’s flagpole with the Pledge of Allegiance, the camp song and announcements.

Then the “campers” hike off to their respective “cabins,” classrooms that have been converted into woodsy scenes where students may spend time reading around a campfire composed of cardboard logs and tissue paper flames, play math games, or conduct hands-on science experiments. Each Friday, there is a field trip to a local museum, park, nature center, or site of interest.



The inaugural programs in 2012 attracted 300 students and provided 36 summer jobs for program staff and certified teachers. Davis was aiming for a slightly larger program in 2013.

It's too early to know whether Expect Success is making a measurable dent in summer learning loss among Glenn County students, but Davis said a couple of measures suggest a positive effect.

First, an English language fluency test given on the second and last days of the 2012 camp found that of 145 students tested, the vast majority either remained at the same level of fluency or improved. Only three or four students, she said, performed more poorly on the second test.

"That's a positive. No slide."

Second, a youth development survey assessed 40 "development assets" among camp participants, such as how they valued education. The more assets a student had, the greater the chance he or she would be successful in school and life. The survey was conducted twice, before summer camp and after.

"What we saw was that post-camp, there were measurable improvements in perspective. The kids felt better about themselves and their futures."

Response from the participating school districts, parents, and students after the first year was good, according to Davis. Now, she's trying to improve and strengthen the program, asking teachers what sorts of things the summer program should emphasize. "We want them to give us some targets. Let us know what skills the students need to work on."





Not surprisingly, the biggest issue is funding. The Packard Foundation has promised financial support for five years, but the level of funding (\$110,000 per year) will begin to decrease after the third year, which means Davis will need to find other means of support.

That will be a challenge, she said. Glenn County doesn't enjoy easy access to large corporations or other entities with the resources and inclination to donate substantial sums to worthy causes. Instead, she says she'll have to build a more grassroots kind of campaign, tapping local franchises and businesses, community groups, and ordinary folks.

"We'll truly need community support, lots of small donors," she said.

Oakland Unified School District

Not so long ago, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) was in crisis. Student enrollment was declining; educational quality under serious scrutiny and doubt. The district was deep in the red with a budget deficit estimated by some to exceed \$100 million, prompting the state to take over operations in 2004.

Things are better now. Local control was returned in 2010. Enrollment appears to have stabilized at approximately 36,200 students, prekindergarten through high school. Test scores are up in some areas and in at least one notable way, OUSD has become a kind of educational exemplar for the rest of the state.



While many California school districts have responded to the ailing economy and years of financial/political crises in Sacramento by slashing programs like summer school, OUSD has been among a handful that have actually expanded their summertime offerings. In 2012, the district provided 17 summer programs at 50 sites serving 6,500 students, prekindergarten to young adult, at a total cost of \$2.7 million. (Total district budget in 2011-12: \$641 million.) The turning point came in 2008, said Julie McCalmont, OUSD's coordinator of summer learning programs, when district leaders identified summer learning as a high priority program worthy of targeted, specific funding. OUSD officials knew the statistics about summer learning loss and wanted to make a difference.

"From the highest level, from the superintendent on down, a decision was made that expanding summer learning was important," McCalmont said. "That was a big moment."

The key, according to McCalmont, was a change in how summer education was funded. The district decided it would use some of its federal Title I funding to pay for the infrastructure costs of summer education, such as administration and custodial services, if participating school sites agreed to use some of their individual Title I funds for summer staffing and program costs.

OUSD employs a "results-based" budgeting system. Funding is largely decentralized with each school site able to allocate monies to its identified needs and particular ambitions. If the administration of an elementary school, for example, thinks summer education would be especially helpful for its student population, it can designate some of its overall budget to that end.





“By setting aside a certain amount of money to cover basic infrastructure, the district has tried to encourage schools to create summer programs,” McCalmont said. “If you just asked school principals to run summer programs, they’d say, ‘No way, we can’t afford it.’ But we’ve incentivized things. We’ve said we’ll cover this if you’ll pay for the costs of teaching 100 children. It’s a kind of matching program that’s really hard to resist.”

That said, McCalmont noted that the system requires a lot of maintenance and forethought. School sites must make a firm, early commitment to running a summer program and plan accordingly.

“It’s pretty complicated. Every site has to run through a bunch of approvals. There is lots of paperwork. And they have to make hard decisions. Different schools use their Title I funds for different reasons – for salaries, specific intervention programs, professional development. The focus tends to be on how to achieve the highest quality programs during the regular school year. Spending on summer means pulling some of those funds away.”

But the result, so far, has been heartening and diverse. Some elementary schools operate prekindergarten camps for students with no preschool experience. There are middle school programs offering academic support, enrichment and performing arts programs. There are transition programs for rising sixth- and ninth-graders. And academic recovery programs for high school students, particularly ninth- and tenth-graders “so that they’ll stay on track to stay in school and graduate,” said McCalmont.



All of these programs are half-day sessions for four weeks, which McCalmont says isn't ideal. "The research says best practice is six weeks long, all day long."

To achieve that kind of expansion, McCalmont hopes the district's current efforts will serve as fundamental first steps, something to build on with new collaborators and additional funding. For example, the district has launched the Summer Engineering Experience for Kids (SEEK) program, sponsored by the National Society of Black Engineers. Also, the WalMart Foundation has provided new monies to fund full-day summer programs for roughly 800 middle school students for two years.

"They saw what we were doing and invited us to apply for a grant," she said.

Other summer programs have involved partners like the East Bay Asian Youth Center and the Elev8 Oakland Initiative, a five-year program funded by Atlantic Philanthropies to assist students transitioning into middle and high school.

Such successes aside, McCalmont foresees no lazy days of summer ahead. OUSD hasn't been alone in pursuing outside grants and support. There's plenty of competition. Moreover, Title I funding is down, which means participating OUSD schools will be even harder pressed to decide how best to spend diminished dollars.

"I think you always try to look forward," said McCalmont. "We've built a good foundation of programs that makes it easier to attract new partners and funding. They can see what we've achieved already. We've got momentum."





Whittier City School District

In 2009, the Whittier City School District, an urban 6,500-student K-8 district located about 12 miles southeast of Los Angeles, launched a new summer learning program called Jumpstart.

Jumpstart was a pilot project intended to revive summer schooling, which years before had fallen victim to budget cuts. It wasn't meant to be traditional, said Becky Shultz, director of the district's extended learning programs. It would be "disguised education," she said. "You wouldn't know there was so much learning going on because there would be so much fun."

The inaugural summer program, using 21st Century Community Learning Centers federal funding, was relatively modest: 400 students attending for half a day at a couple of elementary school sites.

Then summers really got hot.

The catalyst was a five-year grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation to develop, operate and promote summer learning, with \$110,000 in funding in the early years, declining gradually. It was a major jumpstart for Jumpstart.

"It hasn't been difficult to persuade school leaders here that summer learning programs are important," said Shultz. "They understand the idea and the realities. And while there hasn't been any district money in recent years for a traditional summer school program, all of our leaders—the board, the superintendent—have been very supportive of a program with alternative funding."



The Packard money has allowed Shultz and colleagues to expand and deepen their concept of summer learning, particularly the popular summer camp sensibility, which more readily attracts students looking for a “non-educational experience.” In recent years, Jumpstart themes have been based on popular memes like “A Night at the Museum” and “The Hunger Games.”

“We’ve always been hands-on, with lots of activities, but we’ve added more outdoor experiences,” said Shultz, including abundant day trips to local attractions and overnight camps in the nearby desert and mountains.

The program targets students who might not otherwise have the opportunity to participate in these activities. “Each year, beginning in January, we ask principals and teachers to recommend students,” said Shultz. “The basic criteria are kids would benefit most from summer learning. We’re looking for students who don’t have access to enrichment experiences, who wouldn’t likely go to the library, museums, cultural events, or a private summer camp.”

Shultz has no problem filling slots for the 20-day, five hours a day, Monday through Thursday summer program. Attendance in 2012 easily hit maximum enrollment, now doubled to 800 students in all nine elementary and two middle school campuses. Attendance in 2013 is expected to be the same. Shultz said she doesn’t have to actively recruit attendees. “Word is getting around. We hold an annual summer learning day where speakers talk about summer learning loss. We invite parents, local community members, and politicians. We have parents whose children have been in the program share stories.”

The district partners with community groups and organizations to boost its offerings. The local YMCA, for example, provides staffing. Other groups supply coaches and dance instructors.

Shultz said that while everyone broadly concurs that the program benefits continued learning and fends off the cognitive lag effects of summer, the district is also making an effort to take quantitative measurements. Students are given pre- and post-reading tests, with the goal of improving their fluency by at least 10 words per minute. There are pre- and post-tests on cooking and nutrition knowledge based upon what they’ve learned about healthy eating during the summer. And they are surveyed about their outdoor experiences to assess how these might be improved. It all culminates with a kind of public display in which students show off their summer-acquired skills, from burnished math abilities to dance steps.

These testing efforts, said Shultz, initially began as a way to assess the program and tweak it for the better. Now, she said, the findings are being collected to present a more formal sustainability plan to the school board. With Packard funding scheduled to expire in another year, and with no certainty about the fate of other grants, Shultz is reaching out to local businesses, booster clubs, agencies, and organizations to find new advocates, supporters and benefactors.

The need is there, she said. “I would love to expand to a few thousand students each summer. We can grow.”

For further information, contact Becky Shultz at 562-789-3000 or bshultz@whittiercity.net or read an article about the program at www.dailybreeze.com/news/ci_23506221/whittier-schools-work-close-gap-low-income-students.

For further information

To find out more about the programs highlighted in this article, click the links for **Glenn County, Oakland USD** and **Whittier City SD**. For more on Whittier City SD, contact Becky Shultz at 562-789-3000 or bshultz@whittiercity.net.

See earlier articles in this series (“Why Do Summer Learning and Wellness Programs Matter?” “What Constitutes an Effective Summer Program?” and “How Can Boards Provide Leadership and Funding for Summer Programs?”) on CSBA’s website at www.csba.org/PNB.

Also see CSBA’s policy brief, *School’s Out, Now What? How Summer Programs Are Improving Student Learning and Wellness*, available at www.csba.org/PNB. This policy brief focuses on the role of the governing board in encouraging and facilitating summer learning and wellness opportunities.

CSBA sample board policy *BP 6177 – Summer Learning Programs* was retitled and updated in April 2013 to address summer learning opportunities in addition to summer school. *BP/AR 3552 – Summer Meal Program* describes requirements for districts participating in federally funded summer meal programs and encourages the provision of summer meal programs in conjunction with educational enrichment or recreational activities.

For information and resources from the statewide Summer Matters campaign, including examples of successful summer programs, see <http://ummmatters2you.net>.