

What constitutes an effective summer program?

SUMMER LEARNING SERIES

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This is the second in a series of articles focusing on strategies to promote student learning and wellness during summer break from school. This issue examines the characteristics of effective summer programs.

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What constitutes an effective summer program?

When summer school conjures up images of sullen students compelled to attend because they failed that same class during the school year or because they require course credits to graduate, it is arguably a picture of failure.

“If summer school is focused only on the remedial and lacks engagement,” said Gary Huggins, chief executive officer of the National Summer Learning Association, “it won’t likely work very well to address summer learning loss because kids won’t want to attend.”

And if children don’t attend, continued Huggins, the community doesn’t invest itself in the program and the summer program, scorned or ignored, becomes an easy target for elimination.

That’s bad news. Summer learning loss—the loss of knowledge that occurs when children’s minds aren’t actively engaged between school years—has a profound, cumulative impact upon their educational careers. Experts say it measurably contributes to the widening achievement gap between students who enjoy summers filled with educational or enrichment activities and those who do not. It is a problem growing in depth and complexity, but one that has largely been overlooked in the chaos of other educational crises.

There are, to be sure, excellent remedial summer school programs—well-designed and run by dedicated public school teachers, administrators and staff. These programs serve a necessary purpose and, in these days of reduced budgets, often



constitute a district's entire summer effort. A recent California School Boards Association survey found that, among responding districts that offer summer programs, 70 percent said their summer curriculum concentrates on remediation.

But increasingly, experts say remedial summer school is not enough because these programs only benefit students mandated to be there. Instead, advocates like Huggins espouse summer learning programs that involve a diversity of recreational and enrichment activities intended to attract and engage students and improve not just academic skills, but personal skills as well. California's Summer Matters campaign—the first statewide effort to expand and improve summer learning—promotes the integration of academic and enrichment programming to make sure children are engaged and excited about learning.

Different approaches

There are several types of summer learning programs:

- Educational/cognitive programs strive to increase academic motivation, improve skills and achievement in areas like math, reading and science, and promote high school completion and college preparation.
- Enrichment and recreation programs emphasize new experiences, positive relationships with staff and peers, and a sense of belonging. They often focus on fostering personal, social, emotional, physical and career-related abilities, such as interpersonal skills, character development, communication, conflict resolution and leadership.





- Career development programs—often for older youth—narrow in on career decision-making skills, interviewing and other job-related abilities. They boost employability and reduce the likelihood of requiring social assistance.
- Multi-element programs combine aspects of all of the above.

Regardless of the program focus, successful programs share common characteristics. The Summer Matters campaign has piloted summer learning programs in 13 districts across the state and, based on the National Summer Learning Association’s quality standards, has identified some core elements of a high-quality program:

- Children are engaged in learning activities that are active and meaningful, promote collaboration, expand their horizons and build mastery in a safe environment.
- Skilled staff have strong, positive relationships with students and are intentionally working to deliver engaging learning experiences that meet students’ emotional, social and academic needs and goals.
- The program is managed by visionary, knowledgeable leaders, including school board members and superintendents, committed to continuously improving program quality and securing the resources needed to deliver the learning experiences students need.
- The program is anchored in its community, with tangible support from families, community-based organizations and civic leaders partnering with schools to maximize resources and provide the best overall experience for youth.



- Five to six weeks of full-day programming address the needs of children and their families.

These elements are consistent with what researchers from the Rand Corp. found in their much-cited report, “Making Summer Count.”

Case studies

Here’s how four California districts with notable summer programs have met the challenge to provide high-quality summer programs, according to a 2012 report sponsored by the Learning in Afterschool & Summer Project:

- Three K-5 schools in the Alameda Unified School District offer a summer program that provides science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) project-based learning six hours a day for eight weeks. The program adds enrichment activities, such as dance, visits to museums, and a chance to make marble roller coasters and solar ovens for creating s’mores. The program is operated by Bay Area Community Resources, a regional nonprofit.
- Central Elementary School in San Bernardino County’s Banning Unified School District runs a weekly themed summer program. For example, during Wild West Week, students make sheriff badges, learn the history of “wanted” posters and visit a replica 1880s working homestead. Other weeks include Iron Chef Week, Ocean Commotion and Olympic Week. The program is run in conjunction with the local Boys & Girls Club.





- Elementary students at the Apple Valley Unified School District in the high desert of Southern California spend the summer in space. “Galactic Games” uses NASA resources to teach about the solar system, constellations and human space exploration. The summer program for middle school students is more “grounded”: They participate in community improvement projects of their choice, such as building school gardens or providing toiletry kits to the homeless.
- The Summer Bridge program at Valley High School in the Santa Ana Unified School District targets incoming freshmen, who spend five hours each day learning skills—lesson planning, relationship building, and time management—that will help them negotiate and succeed in their first year of high school. Participants often become teacher’s aides or mentors to other freshmen. The program is operated by Think Together, a nationwide education advocacy group.

Let’s take a deeper look at how one district has managed to successfully grow its summer programs. According to 2010 U.S. Census figures, Fresno is the poorest metropolitan area in California and the second poorest in the nation. Additionally, more than 40 percent of its residents do not speak English at home. These are just two of the challenges the 72,000-student Fresno Unified School District (FUSD) has to confront, which like most districts in California has also endured years of budget shortfalls and subsequent cuts.

And yet FUSD has consciously invested substantial resources to develop and grow its Expanded Learning Program, which includes programs for after school, summer, credit recovery and college preparation.

Perhaps the most novel aspect of Fresno’s summer program is that it is automatic: Targeted students and their families have to consciously opt out.

“We used to be like most places. Students chose whether to attend summer school,” said Glenn Starkweather, FUSD’s director of the Expanded Learning Program. “But the reality of summer learning loss and the nature of the students we serve forced us to rethink how we do things. So we shifted the paradigm. We took all of the transcript data about our students, identified deficiencies and then automatically registered students for expanded learning programs. Students are expected to attend unless a parent opts them out.”

As a result, the summer program has grown from 5,000 students to 17,000 in grades kindergarten through 12. Most of the classes focus on specific areas of concern, such as lagging language or math skills. High school programs emphasize college preparation and fulfilling the A-G course requirements of the California State University and University of California systems.

The goal of the program, to which the FUSD board has committed \$4 million, is to “make sure we are providing all of the appropriate interventions and opportunities so that every student is on track to graduate, regardless of their circumstances,” said Jorge Aguilar, associate director for equity and access.

So how’s it going? Starkweather and Aguilar say the district’s full commitment has earned community attention and support. Collaborations with local groups have increased. The graduation rate is up. School officials are even considering creating a Saturday school program.



The impact

Reinforcing FUSD's positive experience, the Summer Matters campaign recently received evaluation results from three of its pilot summer learning programs. The programs, run by Sacramento City Unified School District, LA's BEST (Better Educated Students for Tomorrow—a longstanding civic-school-business partnership) and the Fresno County Office of Education (at Central Unified School District), incorporated the best practices of quality programming including strong community partnerships, integrated academics and enrichment, and well-trained summer staff.

Highlights of the evaluation, which looked at academic as well as social/emotional impact, include:

- Students had statistically significant improvements in vocabulary, as measured by pre- and post-tests on the San Diego Quick Assessment. They ended the summer with vocabulary skills much closer to their grade level, increasing their instructional grade level by over one-third of a grade.
- English language learners across communities demonstrated statistically significant increases in their grade-level vocabulary skills, a gateway to English language fluency.



- In focus groups, parents reported the programs helped their children prepare for the challenge of transitioning from elementary to middle school, a period when many students begin to disengage from school.
- Nine out of 10 parents reported that the summer programs helped their children make new friends and get along better with other students. These social skills will help youth be more successful in school and beyond.

The report concludes that “high-quality summer learning programs are helping to sustain and improve academic skills, build strong connections to peers and adults, and reinforce positive work habits and attitudes.”

These positive results didn’t come out of thin air. All three pilot programs have worked to intentionally build programs that match the quality standards of the National Summer Learning Association. This work includes external assessments of program quality that have documented the programs’ steady improvements year after year.

Repeating these results requires people to act. Information about what constitutes a successful summer program and strategies for developing and implementing programs are becoming increasingly available to help school districts and county offices of education initiate or strengthen their summer programs.

