

# THINK

## EARLY PLANNING, TEACHER SUPPORT BOOST SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAMS

By Daniel Browne

There's a chill in the air. Teachers are hanging snowflakes in their classrooms. It's time to start thinking about your summer learning program, according to a recent RAND Corporation report, *Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success* (Augustine, McCombs, Schwartz, & Zakaras, 2013).

The publication is the second report in what is expected to be a series culling lessons from a project in six school districts to determine whether district summer programs can boost student achievement. The report — which, like the project, was funded by The Wallace Foundation — offers guidance on how to start a districtwide summer program from scratch or improve an existing program as well as lessons on professional learning unique to summer.

That guidance should come in handy for harried districts officials, for whom launching and sustaining a summer program — and tailoring professional learning to the summer, in particular — is no easy task. “They find it difficult for a number of reasons,” says report co-author Catherine Augustine, not least because of the competing demands on their time, especially during the hectic end of the school year.

The report includes tips to help districts get past obstacles and move toward successful teacher hiring and professional learning. First and foremost, the authors emphasize the need to start planning early. That means committing to a summer program by December and beginning the

process by January. It also means sharp thinking about what professional learning and support the district will need to offer teachers and others who will staff the programs in June or July.

### WHY SUMMER LEARNING?

A fundamental problem that continues to plague educators is the achievement gap between low-income and higher-income students.

In the ongoing search for solutions, one of the more promising approaches is expanding opportunities for learning, particularly in the summer.

It's typical for students of all incomes to either learn at a slower pace in the summer or actually lose knowledge and skills. But the effect on low-income students is much greater — and evidence suggests it's cumulative.

The idea is relatively simple: Increase access to summer learning for low-income students, put the brakes on summer learning loss, and, in turn, shrink the achievement gap. The question is how to make that happen.

The report's recommendations come from an examination of summer programs offered by six districts: Boston, Mass.; Cincinnati, Ohio; Dallas, Texas; Duval County (Jacksonville), Fla.; Pittsburgh, Pa.; and Rochester, N.Y. The researchers visited the districts in 2011, the first summer of the Wallace-funded demonstration project, which is expected to last five years.

Based on what they saw, the researchers advise dis-



Catherine Augustine

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tricts to not only offer instruction aligned with state and local standards, provided by certified teachers, just as they would during the regular school year, but also to set lower student-to-teacher ratios than they can in fall and spring. Academic instruction should last at least three hours a day, five days a week, for five to six weeks and be balanced with enrichment activities such as music, art, sports, and community service. For students to reap the benefits, they must attend regularly.

Programs that meet these criteria demand time, attention, and resources. Summer is like a second school year — only with less time to get the details right. One benefit of committing early is that districts can start hiring staff and involving them in planning from the outset. The report notes that in districts that got a late start, some teachers hired at the last minute missed out on professional learning.

## BE SELECTIVE

Summer programs have a limited amount of time in which to make a difference. To have the greatest impact, districts need to hire the best teachers they can find.

Districts in Wallace's demonstration project that are most successful in recruiting talented teachers use a rigorous selection process to ensure that candidates are highly motivated. Strategies include asking teachers to write an essay explaining why they want to work in the summer program, soliciting recommendations from principals, and conducting classroom observations before making an offer. One district even factors school-year performance metrics — the amount of improvement on state tests that a candidate's students achieve — into its determinations.

This district's decision to consider school-year performance in its hiring process paid dividends once the sum-

mer program was underway. The RAND report noted that teachers in the program used instructional time effectively, and students attended at a relatively high rate and made substantial gains on pre- and post-assessments.

The report also noted that most districts hired teachers specifically to teach math or reading rather than hiring first and then assigning a subject area later. This allowed districts to engage teachers in professional learning only in the parts of the curriculum that were relevant to them, making the process more efficient.

## PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Once they are selected, teachers need professional learning in how best to work in the summer classroom. Some district officials may wonder why highly qualified teachers might need professional learning or how teaching in a summer program differs from what teachers already know.

There are marked differences, the report explains. During the school year, teachers may take as long as five weeks to get to know their students. In the summer, though, five weeks is the length of a program, or close to it, so teachers are expected to hit the ground running.

Most of the Wallace districts expect summer teachers to regularly break classes into smaller groups or differentiate lessons for lower- and higher-achieving students, which can be difficult with a roster of unfamiliar faces. The report says that teachers who were not adequately supported struggled to execute these strategies successfully. In some



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cases, they simply didn't do as much small-group instruction as specified.

To ensure teachers are thoroughly prepared to assume the task, the RAND report recommends districts take the following steps.

- **Familiarize teachers with the curriculum and how to teach it.**

The most important goal of professional learning is to make sure teachers understand the summer curriculum and how to teach it.

In the Wallace district where the highest proportion of teachers reported feeling well-prepared, they received three hours of instruction on the math curriculum and three hours on English language arts.

When it comes to picking up an unfamiliar curriculum, teachers say that reading the packet at home is not enough. They need to practice it, preferably with guidance from a coach. As one teacher said, "If you just give [the curriculum] to us and expect [us] to teach it, it's going to get taught in many different ways. ... If they show it to us, then we can get a better sense of what/how they want us to teach."

This kind of guided walk-through is easily crowded out by discussions of logistics, such as classroom assignments and rosters, if districts don't make time for it. Augustine, the RAND report co-author, points out that districts with the most effective professional learning start working with summer teachers in the spring and spread the learning over several months.

In order to take this approach, however, districts also need to have their summer curriculum in place by spring. That's one reason the RAND report recommends that districts anchor their programs in a commercially available and tested curriculum.

"We don't think published curricula are by their nature necessarily better than a curriculum that a district would produce," Augustine says. "We just have observed over and over again that districts are too busy to do this well. So we do recommend that they purchase a published curriculum but then augment it with additional activities that are aligned to the needs of the students."

- **Help teachers tailor the curriculum to individual students.**

Splitting students into groups based on their abilities — and then adjusting instruction for each group — is a challenge for many teachers during the regular school year. It can be even tougher in the summer, when they have less time to get to know their students and the curriculum may be less familiar.

Showing teachers how to differentiate instruction, and giving them time to practice it, should be a built-in part of professional learning, not an if-we-have-time extra. And when teachers need additional guidance during the summer session, a qualified instructional leader should be available to provide it.

- **Provide in-class support to teachers.**

Curriculum coaches can help teachers with a range of matters, but some approaches work better than others. One coach serving 10 schools, for instance, is not a recipe for success. By contrast, in the Wallace district with the best support system, coaches were a presence in the classroom, helping teachers put small-group instruction into practice and leading common planning meetings.

And just as students may benefit from spending the summer with a teacher who already knows them, coaches in this district are so effective in part because they have existing relationships with summer school principals and many teachers in the schools in which they work.

- **Don't leave out the other staff members.**

Curriculum coaches aren't the only personnel who can help teachers realize the summer program ideal of small groups and differentiated lessons.

Some Wallace districts place a support staff member, typically a paraprofessional or college student, in the classroom. In RAND's observations, these second adults were more likely to help distribute materials, escort students to the office, or administer assessments than to lead small-group instruction or work one-on-one with a struggling student.

Districts can encourage support staff members to get involved in teaching, the RAND report suggests, by including them in professional learning so they feel prepared to contribute.

Don't forget the principals, either, Augustine says. Just like during the school year, summer principals are expected to be instructional leaders as well as program managers, and if they aren't familiar with what the teachers are supposed to be teaching, they won't be in a position to evaluate classroom quality or offer help.

For example, Augustine says, "The teacher might say, 'Can you make sure I have everything I need for Day Three of Unit Two? It looks like some materials are missing,' and the principal will have to go investigate, 'Well, what is Unit Two? What's happening on Day Three?' So it's an instructional quality problem as well as an efficiency problem."

- **Give teachers time to get organized.**

There is one other element in addition to high-quality professional learning and support that a district can provide to put its summer teachers in the best position to succeed: time. That includes time to review materials, prepare flashcards and posters, locate all the technology they need, and test computer passwords.

### GET THE REPORT

*Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success* is available free for download at <http://bit.ly/19fpbDF>.

The RAND report stresses that when districts build time into the schedule (and extra pay into the budget) for teachers to set up their classrooms before the program begins, they are able to make better use of instructional time from the outset. And teachers themselves say they want to make sure they have all the resources they need ready to go when their students walk through the door.

Augustine and her colleagues saw the difference the extra time could make: “When we walk into a classroom where teachers have had a day or two to set it up, there is all sorts of big butcher block paper taped around the room that has reminders for students on math procedures or reading tips,” she says. “When teachers don’t have that time, the classroom certainly doesn’t look as visually appealing, but it also doesn’t have those visual cues for learning. ... Teachers tell us they want those visual cues.”

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Smith, 1994, pp. 268-269). The school may have a healthy culture otherwise, but a gap creates a hurdle that teams have trouble moving past.

For example, a team struggling to collaborate might be due to the fact that the group is still forming and not comfortable sharing instructional challenges and successes. The skillful team leader also considers the possibility of a “culture of alone together,” where people are teamed together but act alone. They are guarded in what they share and with whom, seeing collaboration as only necessary for people who need help and preferring to work in isolation.

Teams that are content to be pockets of success in a system where school culture gaps go unaddressed find themselves struggling to sustain the positive impact they have. It’s as if the team is working hard to knit a beautiful sweater while someone is on the other end unraveling the yarn. The skillful team leader not only works with her team to navigate around the hurdles that school culture gaps cause, but also works to close those gaps so all teams can succeed.

#### STILL EMERGING

Years of listening to team leaders’ dilemmas and reflecting on my own, of mulling over moments when my response succeeded in overcoming a hurdle to team learning or unintentionally created another, and of searching for practical solutions grounded in theory and research have led me to believe that although hurdles can seem impossible to move past, they can, in fact, be catalysts for greater learning when approached skillfully.

With each hurdle I encounter, I better understand the complexity of leading. I learn how to anticipate and avoid; I learn

#### READY, SET, SUMMER

By making the decision to start early, recruit the best teachers available, and give them the professional learning, support, and time they need to do their job well, districts can set the stage for a fruitful summer. And keeping students on task between school years can begin to bridge the achievement gap.

Look out your window. Is that snow on the ground? Time to get to work on summer learning.

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Turn obstacles into opportunities

how to effectively respond. And although I suppose my years of experience might categorize me beyond an emerging leader, I know I still have a lot to learn.

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