

Evidence-based Considerations for COVID-19 Reopening and Recovery Planning: Summer Learning with Academic and Non-Academic Activities

Summer learning can play a meaningful and important role in helping young people recover from the damaging impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and in promoting educational equity. In this document, we share evidence-based guidance focused on a comprehensive approach to summer learning. It is important to note that a robust research base exists for other approaches; these recommendations are not the only pathway to achieve outcomes. Some of these findings may need to be adapted to hybrid and post-COVID contexts. *An annotated bibliography of research on summer learning and research-based implementation tools funded by The Wallace Foundation is included at the end of this document.* All of the resources mentioned can be downloaded for free at www.wallacefoundation.org.

Summer programs have been demonstrated to produce a wide range of benefits for young people, including safety, physical and mental health, social and emotional development, and academic learning, according to a National Academies study.¹ However, not all summer programs are equal, and not all children have equal or equitable access to summer programs.² Summer is a time when disparities are perpetuated or exacerbated,³ underscoring the importance of leveraging community assets in planning, development, design, and evaluation of programs. Some, but not all, summer programs are specifically designed to achieve both academic and non-academic outcomes. Our research shows that such programs must be targeted to the needs of participants, have programming linked to desired outcomes, be of sufficient duration, and promote strong attendance.⁴ There is research-based guidance into how these kinds of programs, combining academics and non-academics, can be implemented.⁵

One approach to summer programming is The Wallace Foundation's [National Summer Learning Project \(NSLP\)](#) combining academics and enrichment, and designed to reflect the most compelling research about what contributes to a strong summer learning program. The more than 5,600 students in five districts participating in this project were predominantly from low-income households (89 percent) and included large percentages of students of color (47 percent Black, 40 percent Hispanic).⁶

An evaluation by RAND found that students who attended these summer programs *for at least 20 days* benefited in math in the following fall – and those effects persisted through spring. After a second summer, high attenders outperformed the comparison group in math and language arts in both fall and spring (the advantage was equivalent to 20-25 percent of a year's learning in math and English Language Arts); academic benefits persisted three years after the second summer, albeit not at statistically significant levels.⁷ High-attending students also reaped social and emotional learning benefits after the second summer.⁸ The evidence suggests the following key elements are linked to benefits for young people attending such programs combining academics and enrichment. (Tools to help districts carry out these recommendations can be found at summerlearningtoolkit.org).

Program design with sufficient time for academics and enrichment

Voluntary summer programs that have academic outcomes as a goal should occur over at least five weeks and offer at least three hours of academics per day to provide sufficient instructional time to demonstrably improve student achievement.⁹ This length allows a typical student who attends 75 percent of program days to obtain the 25 hours of math and 34 hours of English Language Arts instruction that research has shown correlated with improved achievement on subsequent state exams.¹⁰ No summer program lasting less than three weeks has been shown to result in academic benefits as measured by achievement scores.¹¹ Also providing enrichment opportunities (such as theater, visual arts, or swimming) as part of a full-day program can contribute to closing the opportunity gap for children from low-income families, confer social and emotional benefits, and appeal to student interests, thereby encouraging consistent attendance.

Implementation Options

- For programs seeking academic gains, ensure sufficient “time on task” for instruction
- Districts should consider partnering with community-based organizations to provide high-quality enrichment experiences

Early, robust planning

Because launching a summer program targeting both academic and non-academic outcomes is akin to starting a new school year, but with less time for planning and execution, “a good planning process might be the most important characteristic of a strong program,” according to the RAND study.¹²

Implementation Options

- Dedicate a director to manage summer program planning who has influence, authority, and committed time, and can work with all relevant departments including curriculum, transportation, facilities, human resources, procurement for enrichment partners, information technology for attendance-taking, and communications for recruitment
- Include site-level leads in decisions, especially in areas such as schedules and site-specific professional development
- Consider engaging both community-level and site-level staff in the planning process
- Consider coordinating summer learning provision citywide, including a needs assessment, plans, process indicators, and a quality improvement process¹³

Recruitment and consistent attendance

Voluntary programs require effective recruitment strategies. Once young people are enrolled, benefits in math, English Language Arts and SEL are strongly associated with consistent high attendance totaling at least 20 days.¹⁴ High attendance can be achieved both with programs that mirror the school day and with those designed more like camps.¹⁵ In addition to offering enrichment activities, accurate recruitment materials and incentives can help maintain good attendance.¹⁶ Greater benefits accrue across multiple summers of participation.¹⁷

Implementation Options

- The most effective recruitment processes pair recruitment materials with a personalized element, such as letters from teachers to students encouraging them to sign up¹⁸

- Consider working with community organizations, churches, and other family-facing organizations to build awareness about summer programs and their benefits
- Provide free meals, transportation, and (funds permitting) field trips and other incentives
- Be aware of factors that may influence attendance and possible mitigations, including: Parent and student mindsets that consistent attendance is not important; students' need to care for younger siblings at home; changes to family vacation plans; student dislike of the program; and competing alternatives¹⁹

Staffing and professional development

Research on summer programs targeting academic and non-academic outcomes has found that teachers with relevant content knowledge and grade-level experience were associated with better student outcomes in math and reading.²⁰

Implementation Options

- When hiring for academic instruction, if feasible look to recruit effective, experienced teachers, ideally with relevant grade-level experience
- Provide teachers with sufficient professional development prior to the program and familiarize them with the summer curriculum
- For enrichment instruction, consider others who can play a role, such as non-profit partners, youth development workers, AmeriCorps members, and community members
- Consider hiring staff, such as social workers, to address bullying and facilitate positive peer interactions

Positive site climate and culturally responsive approaches

A warm and welcoming environment is one that helps students feel safe, appreciated and bonded with staff and peers. This can help to enhance student daily experiences and program enjoyment and is correlated with higher attendance. RAND researchers found that the quality of staff-to-student interactions was the item most strongly and consistently related to whether students appeared to enjoy the day.²¹ Culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy have been shown to be important for connecting to youths' lives in meaningful ways.²²

Implementation Options

- To support a positive culture, consider the full experience (both people and situations) a student will encounter and how to make that experience productive and enjoyable
- Train all staff on the importance of positive adult engagement with students throughout the day – not only in classes. This should include working with other departments such as transportation, professional development, food service, training, and curriculum to create a consistent culture across instructional, informal and social environments
- In their interactions with young people, staff should consider supporting opportunities for them to explore their cultural identity²³
- Develop a clear, positive message about summer site culture and convey it to students
- Consider strategies focused on social and emotional learning

About The Wallace Foundation

Based in New York City, The Wallace Foundation is a non-partisan independent endowed philanthropy working nationally to answer important questions that, if solved, could help strengthen practices and policies within a field. Our mission is to foster equity and improvements in learning and enrichment for young people, and in the arts for everyone.

We hope this document will be helpful to states, districts, schools, out-of-school time programs, community leaders and others as they reopen and recover from the pandemic. We believe this to be a critical moment for evidence-based guidance in order to support students, teachers, principals, out-of-school-time providers, education systems, and youth development organizations in creating and supporting high-quality learning and development opportunities for young people, and particularly for those who are most marginalized and face the greatest adversity.

More information can be found at www.wallacefoundation.org.

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- ¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Shaping Summertime Experiences: Opportunities to Promote Healthy Development and Well-Being for Children and Youth*, The National Academies Press, 2019.
- ² National Academies, 2019.
- ³ National Academies, 2019.
- ⁴ National Academies, 2019.
- ⁵ Heather L. Schwartz, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, *et al.*, *Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success, 2nd Edition*, RAND Corporation, 2018.
- ⁶ Augustine, *et al.*, *Learning from Summer: Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Urban Youth*, RAND Corporation, 2016.
- ⁷ Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Catherine H. Augustine, John F. Pane, Jonathan Schweig, *Every Summer Counts: A Longitudinal Analysis of Outcomes from The National Summer Learning Program*, RAND Corporation, 2020.
- ⁸ Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Catherine H. Augustine, John F. Pane, Jonathan Schweig, *Every Summer Counts: A Longitudinal Analysis of Outcomes from The National Summer Learning Program*, RAND Corporation, 2020.
- ⁹ Schwartz, *et al.*, 2018.
- ¹⁰ Schwartz, *et al.*, 2018.
- ¹¹ Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Catherine H. Augustine, Fatih Unlu, Kathleen M. Zioli-Guest, Scott Naftel, Celia J. Gomez, Terry Marsh, Goke Akinniranye and Ivy Todd, *Investing in Successful Summer Programs: A Review of Evidence Under the Every Student Succeeds Act*, RAND Corporation, 2019.
- ¹² Schwartz, *et al.*, 2018.
- ¹³ National Academies, 2019.
- ¹⁴ Augustine, *et al.*, 2016.
- ¹⁵ Schwartz, *et al.*, 2018.
- ¹⁶ Schwartz, *et al.*, 2018.
- ¹⁷ Augustine, *et al.*, 2016.
- ¹⁸ Crosby Marketing Communications, *Marketing Summer Learning to Parents and Students: Lessons from the National Summer Learning Project*, Crosby Marketing Communications, 2018.
- ¹⁹ Schwartz, *et al.*, 2018.
- ²⁰ Schwartz, *et al.*, 2018.
- ²¹ Schwartz, *et al.*, 2018.
- ²² National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019.
- ²³ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019.

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Summer Learning:

Annotated Bibliography of Selected Knowledge Products

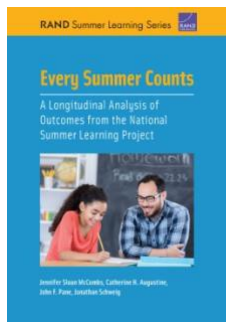
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All publications are available without charge at www.wallacefoundation.org



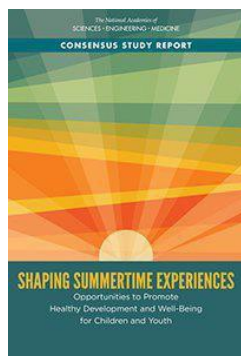
= Evidence-based Tool

Evidence of Benefits of Summer Programs



[Every Summer Counts: A Longitudinal Analysis of Outcomes from the National Summer Learning Project](#) by Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Catherine H. Augustine, John F. Pane, Jonathan Schweig, RAND Corporation, 2020

The largest and longest study of its kind on summer learning programs reveals short- and long-term benefits among students who consistently attended voluntary, five- to six-week summer learning programs. The advantage after the second summer was equivalent to 20-25 percent of a year’s learning in math and English Language Arts. The findings suggest that these programs can be an important component of how school districts support learning and skill development among children, especially those from low-income communities. The study, conducted by the RAND Corporation, followed nearly 6,000 students in five urban school districts from the end of 3rd grade through the spring of 7th grade, comparing students selected to attend the summer programs prior to 4th and 5th grade to those who applied but were not selected.



[Shaping Summertime Experiences](#) by Martín-José Sepúlveda, Rebekah Hutton, The National Academies Press, 2019

This report by the National Academies of Science’s Committee on Summertime Experiences and Child and Adolescent Education, Health and Safety—funded by Wallace and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—examines the state of the evidence on summer learning in America, with a focus on the availability, accessibility, equity and effectiveness of summer learning experiences. It looks at summer in relation to four domains of well-being: academic learning; social and emotional development; physical and mental health; and safety, risk- taking, and pro- and anti-social behavior. A key conclusion is that young people, especially those with fewer resources, face many obstacles in accessing positive summertime experiences. Programs should address basic safety and nutritional needs.



[Investing in Successful Summer Programs: A Review of Evidence Under the Every Student Succeeds Act](#) by Catherine H. Augustine, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, et al., RAND Corporation, 2019

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) encourages—and in some cases requires—that programs be backed by research indicating their effectiveness. ESSA categorizes research into four tiers of progressively greater rigor, with the top three being either necessary or desirable for certain types of Title I and other funding. RAND found 43 programs with evidence of effectiveness meeting evidence standards for ESSA tiers I-III. The programs range from elementary- to high-school-age with evidence of benefits for academics, SEL and college and career readiness. Detailed program descriptions of the 43 and associated evidence are included.



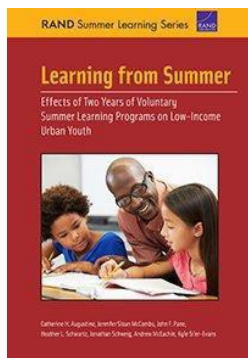
[READS: Helping Children Become Summer Bookworms](#) by Jennifer Gill, The Wallace Foundation, 2018

This research summary explores the READS program and the rigorous research behind its development over the years, as well as its outcomes and key components. READS provides 10 free, carefully matched books to third through fifth graders over the summer, along with three key supports: a reading comprehension routine taught to the students at school before their summer vacation begins; the engagement of the students’ families in the program; and keep-up-the-reading nudges from teachers through texts or other communications during the summer. The largest in a series of randomized controlled trials examining the program found that READS participants made average gains equivalent to nearly one month of reading skills. For students in the highest poverty schools, the average gains were nearly 1.5 months.



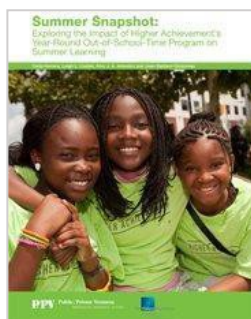
[The Value of Out-of-School Time Programs](#) by Jennifer McCombs, Anamarie Whitaker, et al., RAND Corporation, 2017

This RAND publication suggests that funders and others consider programs as falling into three categories: specialty programs that aim to help children and youth develop specific skills like soccer or coding; multipurpose programs that often include a mix of homework help, games and enrichment; and programs focused on academics. Programs tend to produce the type of outcomes that would be expected based on their content and design—for example, programs need to have a component that focuses on developing social-emotional skills in order to achieve that goal. The authors examine the literature with a particular focus on studies of academic and multipurpose programs. They find that including academics in out-of-school- time programs can demonstrably improve academic outcomes and does not necessarily reduce program attendance at the elementary school level, but youth need to attend programs regularly to see measurable benefits.



[Learning from Summer: Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Urban Youth](#) by Catherine H. Augustine, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, *et al.*, RAND Corporation, 2016

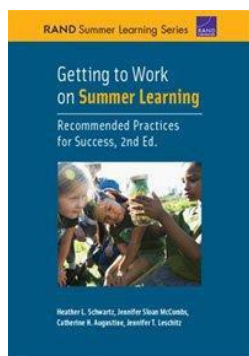
The largest-ever study of summer learning finds that students with high attendance in free, five-to-six-week, voluntary summer learning programs experienced educationally meaningful benefits in math and reading. Starting in 2013, the RAND Corporation conducted a study in five districts—Boston; Dallas; Duval County, Florida; Pittsburgh; and Rochester—to evaluate educational outcomes, focusing on children who were in 3rd grade in spring of that year. RAND found that those who attended a five-to-six-week summer program for 20 or more days in 2013 did better on state math tests than similar students who did not attend a program. This advantage was statistically significant and lasted through the following school year. The results are even more striking for high attenders in 2014: They outperformed students who did not attend in both math and English Language Arts, on fall tests and in the spring. The advantage after the second summer was equivalent to 20-25 percent of a year’s learning in math and English Language Arts.



[Summer Snapshot: Exploring the Impact of Higher Achievement's Year-Round Out-of-School-Time Program on Summer Learning](#) by Carla Herrera, Leigh L. Linden, *et al.*, Public/Private Ventures, 2011

This look at the summer portion of Higher Achievement, a year-round program for middle school youngsters, finds that participants experienced benefits, including greater interest in attending competitive high schools. They did not experience higher academic gains than a comparison group, however.

Guidance on Starting, Running and Sustaining a Summer Program



[Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success, 2nd edition](#) by Heather L. Schwartz, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, *et al.*, RAND Corporation, 2018

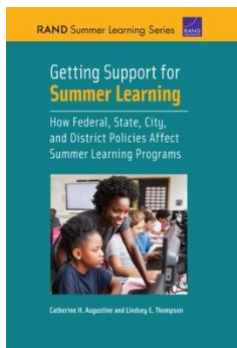
This report offers evidence-based guidance to school district leaders interested in launching summer learning programs or improving established ones. It addresses such questions as when districts should begin work on their summer learning program, how they should hire and train teachers, what they should consider in choosing or developing a curriculum, which actions can help boost attendance and keep students on task, how to create a warm and welcoming environment, and how to provide engaging enrichment experiences. It also discusses the costs associated with offering a voluntary summer program and provides suggestions for lowering them, such as working with community-based organizations and consolidating program sites into as few buildings as possible.



[Summer Learning Toolkit: Evidence-Based Tools and Guidance for Delivering Effective Programs](#) by The Learning Agenda, Hillary Oravec, Katie Willse, Sarah Pitcock, The Wallace Foundation, 2018

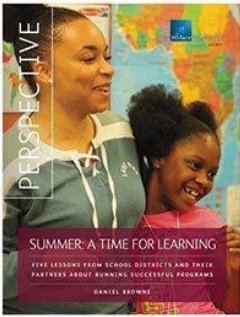


Wallace’s Online Summer Learning Toolkit was designed to help districts and others create or enhance their summer learning programs. Practitioners can browse and download more than 50 practical, adaptable tools and sample planning resources from the five urban districts that participated in the National Summer Learning Project, as well as new resources created by field experts. The toolkit is aligned with recommendations from the RAND Corporation’s *Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success*, 2nd Edition. Organized into five planning areas, it includes both comprehensive planning and management tools, such as the robust Summer Planning Calendar and Budget Tool, and more specialized resources, such as tip sheets on promoting participation and planning professional development.



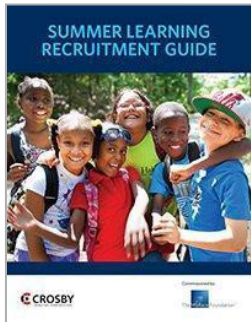
[Getting Support for Summer Learning: How Federal, State, City, and District Policies Impact Summer Learning Programs](#) by Catherine H. Augustine, Lindsey E. Thompson, RAND Corporation, 2020

Drawing from interviews with more than 60 district staff members in Dallas, Pittsburgh, and Rochester and 20 policy experts, this report finds that policies at every level—from federal to district—can affect the sustainability, scale and quality of district-provided summer learning programs. Federal, state and local policies make it possible to carry out summer learning but do not necessarily promote it. With this in mind, the authors recommend that summer program leaders cultivate relationships with policymakers, measure and communicate the impact of summer programs, and address district policies that create barriers to completing the tasks involved in planning and running a summer program.



[Summer—A Time for Learning: Five Lessons From School Districts and Their Partners About Running Successful Programs](#) by Daniel Browne, The Wallace Foundation, 2019

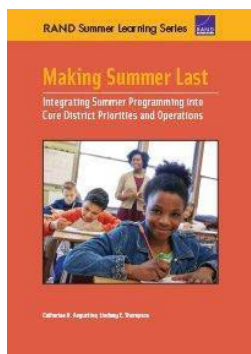
This Wallace Perspective summarizes takeaways from the National Summer Learning Project, Wallace’s multi-year initiative to support summer learning efforts of five school districts and their partner organizations. Drawing on insights from a wide-ranging, multi-volume study of the initiative by the RAND Corporation, as well as interviews with the summer organizers and participants themselves, the Perspective details the characteristics of a high-quality program, including staffing by teachers prepared for the unique challenges of summer and enrichment instructors adept at classroom management. It emphasizes that ample time is an essential ingredient of sound summer programs. A full day of academics and enrichment five days a week for five to six weeks—with at least three hours for math and English Language Arts instruction—is one recommended practice.



[Summer Learning Recruitment Guide](#) by Crosby Marketing Communications, 2018



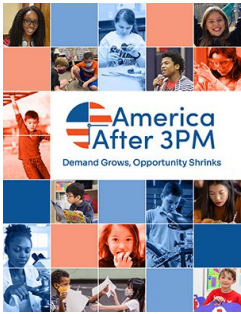
Based on the experience of the five districts in the National Summer Learning Project, this website and print publication offer guidance for successful recruitment for voluntary summer learning programs. Tactics— from texts and robocalls to “try-the-program” events and one-on-one outreach – are categorized as “required,” “recommended,” or “optional” along with level of effort. Templates and examples are included. The guidance— reflecting community-based social marketing—can be applied to other voluntary programs serving young people.



[Making Summer Last: Integrating Summer Programming into Core District Priorities and Operations](#) by Catherine H. Augustine, Lindsey E. Thompson, RAND Corporation, 2017

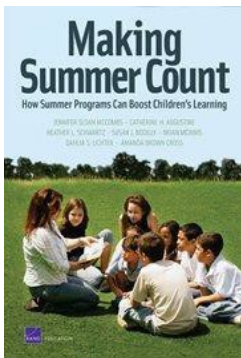
This report examines how three districts—Dallas, Pittsburgh and Rochester—worked to institutionalize summer programming, creating an expectation of continuation and routinized implementation. Leaders built awareness of summer programs, connected program goals to larger district goals, ensured relevant departments were part of the planning process, and linked to district systems.

Background on Summer Learning



[America After 3pm: Demand Grows, Opportunity Shrinks](#), by Afterschool Alliance/Edge Research, 2020

The Afterschool Alliance’s fourth edition of America After 3PM provides a detailed, updated accounting of the circumstances and conditions of U.S. children during the hours between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. Based on a survey with responses from more than 30,000 U.S. families, the report builds on similar surveys conducted in 2004, 2009 and 2014, offering a complete picture of afterschool programs, including the experiences and opportunities they provide, and who is missing out.



[Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning](#) by Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Catherine H. Augustine, *et al.*, RAND Corporation, 2011

This monograph finds evidence that a variety of summer learning programs—including voluntary, mandatory and reading-at-home programs—can help advance equitable outcomes for young people. It includes cost data on programs, and guidance on implementation, including high-quality staffing and early planning. RAND updated its recommendations for program implementation in *Getting to Work on Summer Learning, 2nd Edition*, published in 2018 based on data from the National Summer Learning Project.