SUMMER LEARNING TOOLKIT

Evidence-based tools and guidance
for delivering effective programs

PLANNING & MANAGEMENT
ACADEMICS & ENRICHMENT
STAFFING & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
SITE CLIMATE
STUDENT RECRUITMENT & ATTENDANCE

summerlearningtoolkit.org

TIP SHEET

PROMOTING PARTICIPATION AND EXPERIENCE

For more information on the importance of student participation and positive experiences, review **Promoting Participation and Experience Guidance**.

This tip sheet summarizes and builds upon findings from RAND's **Getting to Work on Summer Learning 2nd Edition** and the **Summer Planning Recruitment Guide** developed by Crosby Marketing.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

RAND's research found that strong program attendance (at least 20 days per summer) produced ongoing benefits for students. After the first summer, high attenders benefited in mathematics in the fall and on spring assessments. After the second summer, students with high attendance benefited in math and English Language Arts (ELA) and those benefits persisted throughout the school year.[1] RAND recommends that programs last at least five weeks, preferably six or more, and provide at least 90 minutes per day per academic subject such as math or ELA to achieve positive outcomes in these subjects.

Districts face a number of challenges that they should keep in mind when recruiting youth and promoting regular attendance:

- o Many parents are not used to thinking of summer as a time for learning and may have negative perceptions of traditional summer school;

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[1] Learning from Summer page 75

- o Summer learning programs are voluntary and often seen as more relaxed than the school year, which can impact family perception of the importance of regular attendance;

- o Families may rely on children to care for younger siblings at home; and

- o Summer learning programs often compete with other programs, student interests, and family commitments, including travel or vacation.

In response to these barriers to attendance, this resource provides a number of research-based tips to address three pillars for participation: effectively recruit youth, plan a well-organized and welcoming program environment, and meet the needs of families.

WHO SHOULD USE THIS TIP SHEET?

These tips are applicable to programs run by both districts and community-based organizations. Program leaders responsible for student recruitment will find ideas in the first section. Site leaders responsible for creating a warm and welcoming environment can get tips in the second section. Finally, program leaders responsible for big-picture decisions around program schedule, transportation, and meals can find inspiration in the third section.

TIPS TO MAXIMIZE STUDENT PARTICIPATION

1. Learn about your audience and organize your recruitment effort

Because of the voluntary nature of summer programs, it's important to have an organized recruitment effort. Districts or community-based organizations that have previously established relationships with schools to serve their students during the summer can dive right in. Organizations launching new summer programs may need to first build consensus for summer learning with school/parent leaders before beginning program recruitment.

8 KEYS TO SUCCESS FOR SUMMER LEARNING RECRUITMENT

1. **Understand your audience.** The more you know about what parents think about summer and your summer learning program and what they want for their children, the more likely you are to be successful.

2. **Create engaging messages** that speak to the needs and interests of families and students.

3. **Create a written plan** that identifies your specific audience(s), goals, timeframe, and success measures.

4. **Be consistent and assertive**, ensuring multiple mechanisms to reach families.

5. **Use personalized outreach** and trusted messengers, including principals, teachers, and parent liaisons.

6. **Build relationships** between students and families and your program.

7. **Make registration as easy as possible** by offering multiple ways to register.

8. **Engage students directly** and keep in mind that students are your most important customers.

8 KEYS TO SUCCESS For Summer Learning Recruitment

1 Understand Your Audience
Learn what parents think about summer learning and your summer learning program. The more you know about what's important to them, the more successful you'll be getting them to register.

2 Create Engaging Messaging
Clearly and simply communicate the value of your summer learning program to parents and stakeholders. Parents will be more likely to register their children, stakeholders more likely to support your work.

3 Create a Written Plan
A written plan is a must-have guide for your team's recruitment work. It will define what steps you will take to implement your recruitment effort. It will also help you track progress.

4 Make Your Outreach Consistent and Assertive
Don't expect a single registration flyer to get enough parents to register their children for your summer learning program. Use more than one approach and try to reach parents at least three times.

5 Use Trusted Messengers
Principals, guidance counselors, and teachers are some of the most trusted messengers when it comes to engaging parents and students. Create an outreach program that helps them promote your program.

6 Build a Relationship with Parents and Students
Help parents and students feel they are part of something special—your summer learning "family." Engage with them throughout the school year, not just when it's time to register.

7 Make Registration as Easy as Possible
Give parents as many options as possible to register their child for your summer learning program. This can range from mailing in completed forms, to taking them to their child's school, to registering online.

8 Engage Directly with Students
Students are your most important "customers." Parents are more likely to sign their child up, if he or she wants to go. And, of course, students are more likely to attend regularly if they enjoy the experience.

CROSBY MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

The Wallace Foundation®

For more information on recruitment strategies, including a menu for selecting recruitment tactics, visit the **Summer Planning Recruitment Guide**.

2. Plan a welcoming and well-organized program

While an effective marketing and recruitment strategy gets students to the door on day one, it is a welcoming and well-organized program that keeps them there throughout the summer. RAND found that the summer site climate sets the foundation for youth experiences. Site climate refers to the quality and character of the program at a given site. It is based upon how students and staff at the site experience the program, and it reflects the site norms, goals, values, relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (National School Climate Center, undated).

RAND found that sites with consistently positive climates offered students an inclusive, friendly place where staff remained engaged with students throughout the day. In addition to promoting positive youth experiences, a positive climate also appeared to promote regular attendance. For example, in one district, average daily attendance in summer 2014 was 86 percent at sites where RAND observers consistently rated students as appearing to enjoy themselves, compared to a 79 percent at sites where RAND observers consistently rated students as not enjoying themselves.[2]

STAFF-TO-STUDENT INTERACTIONS

Of the items RAND observers rated at the end of each summer observation day, the quality of staff-to-student interactions was the item most strongly and consistently related to whether students appeared to enjoy the day.

Clarity, consistency, warmth, and engagement were the hallmarks of sites where RAND observers noted that students enjoyed their day.

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[2] The site observers did not know the attendance rates at the sites where they were observing.

Sites where students had outstanding days were almost all also rated as having consistent and appropriate behavioral management of students. Staff using similar words and concepts and engaging with students in similar (and often positive) behavior management was a sign of a coherent site culture.

TIPS FOR SITE LEADERS TO ESTABLISH A POSITIVE SITE CLIMATE AND CULTURE INCLUDE:

Early Planning

- ✓ Communicate a clear, positive message of the summer site culture to staff and students.

- ✓ Structure time daily for fun program rituals and celebrations.

- ✓ Develop and apply appropriate student behavior policies that are aligned with the climate you want to create at your site.

- ✓ Create a staffing plan that supports climate goals.

- ✓ Develop clear roles and responsibilities for staff, including who monitors meals, leads classes, and helps transition students to and from classes.

- ✓ Consider whether facilities identified for summer programs will provide a comfortable atmosphere for the desired culture and climate.

Staff Training

- ✓ Provide training prior to the program that clearly articulates the academic, social, emotional, and developmental goals of the program—and why they matter.

- ✓ Train all staff on the importance of positive adult engagement with students throughout the day.

- ✓ Facilitate intentional "getting to know you" activities to create bonds between staff during pre-service training.

- ✓ Facilitate intentional "getting to know you" activities beginning on the first day of the program to ensure all students have a meaningful personal relationship with at least one peer and one staff person.

Observation and Feedback

- ✓ Ensure that academic and enrichment teachers actively engage with students throughout the day, including during transitions and mealtimes, and provide real-time feedback.

- ✓ Periodically observe academic and enrichment instruction to understand which teachers may need additional support.

3. Meet the needs of families

While older youth may "vote with their feet" and decide themselves whether or not to attend a program regularly, younger students' participation is often more connected to broader family needs and realities. If the program is warm, welcoming, and engaging, it's likely that students will advocate to their parents to make sure they can participate each day. Still, common barriers prevent many families from fulfilling high attendance aspirations.

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFULLY MEETING THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES

While it's important to understand the specific needs and priorities of the families and children you'll serve, **research** that, in general, parents value certain program features. These features reduce barriers to participation and ensure a positive and enjoyable summer for their children.

- ✓ Offer a **full-day program** or an after-care option for working families.

- ✓ Secure partnerships to provide **high-quality enrichment activities**, led by staff who demonstrate content knowledge.

  - Provide a variety of experiences.
  - Ensure activities are age-appropriate and align to the interests of students.
  - Plan lessons to include sequenced activities that build over the course of the summer.

- ✓ Provide **reliable transportation** to and from the program.

  - Plan transportation early to prevent last-minute schedule or route conflicts.
  - Test bus routes or "walking school bus" routes prior to the first

day of the program to identify timing or route issues.

- Communicate transportation options with parents in advance of the program start and again immediately prior to the start of the program.

✓ Offer **meals and snacks** throughout the day.

- Start planning meals with food services months in advance of the summer program and review the program schedule with colleagues in this department to ensure that meal and snack time transition logistics are realistic and smooth.
- Visit the United States Department of Agriculture's **Summer Food Service Program Summer Meals Toolkit** for details on providing free breakfast, lunch, and snacks at your program.