

## What We've Learned about Summer Learning

### ANN STONE

Welcome to the Wallace Summer Learning podcast series. I'm Ann Stone, senior research officer at The Wallace Foundation and the host for today's episode. In the series, we'll delve into an important area of our learning and enrichment portfolio at Wallace, summer learning. Over the next few episodes, we'll talk with field experts, researchers and practitioners who are involved in summer learning and enrichment on the national, state and local level. We'll hear how they are planning for these important programs, what it takes to make them effective and engaging for young people and what is being studied and learned along the way. Wallace's support for summer learning started more than a decade ago. Back in 2011, the foundation launched the National Summer Learning Project to better understand the implementation and the effectiveness of high-quality, voluntary summer learning programs. A six-year study of that project was conducted by the RAND Corporation and is the largest and longest study of summer programming to date.

I'm delighted that the two researchers who led that study and authored many reports that resulted from it are joining me for the next two podcast episodes to discuss what they've learned about summer learning over the years. Catherine Augustine is director of RAND's Pittsburgh office and senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation, where she has over 20 years of experience conducting education research. She's also a professor of policy analysis at the Pardee RAND Graduate School. Catherine's research focuses on improving academic and social and emotional learning outcomes for students in urban school districts. She also specializes in out-of-school time, including afterschool and summer learning, studying how programs are implemented as well as their results. Jennifer McCombs is director of research at the Learning Policy Institute and an adjunct policy researcher at the RAND Corporation. Her research focuses on evaluating the extent to which public policies and programs improve outcomes for children and youth, particularly those facing disadvantage. Her studies combine implementation and outcome data and are designed to provide practitioners and

policymakers with guidance on how to improve their programs. Jennifer is a frequent advisor on summer and afterschool programs and has served on several advisory committees as an expert on summer learning. During today's episode, we'll discuss the opportunities and risks associated with the summer months, the variety of summer programs available to children and youth and what makes these programs effective. Catherine and Jennifer, thank you for joining me today.

**CATHERINE AUGUSTINE** Thank you.

**JENNIFER MCCOMBS** Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

**ANN STONE** So before we dive into what the research tells us about summer learning, let's get into the right frame of mind. We know that summer is a favorite time for many kids and adults for that matter, but I want to flip this question in an unexpected way and ask you, what is your worst summer memory? Catherine, we'll start with you.

**CATHERINE AUGUSTINE** Okay, great. Thank you. You know, I grew up in a very rural area and my worst memories of summer are actually being bored. I was bored a lot as a child and when I was old enough to figure out that I could sign up for tennis programs and science programs and theater programs, I did so like crazy. So when I think about the summer timeframe, I really feel for kids who might be feeling like I did back then and wishing for engaging opportunities.

**ANN STONE** What about you, Jenn?

**JENNIFER MCCOMBS** Okay. So I have a really poor memory so I'm going to reach back into the nearer past and say that one of my worst summer memories is being a parent when my children were no longer in daycare. And suddenly my daughter was in kindergarten and school came to an end and had to figure out how I'm going to keep her engaged, safe and cared for during those summer months while I'm still working. And so that's something that, you know, just as Catherine shared about her experience, being a child being bored, like there's the flip side of that as parents. We're all worried about how can we engage our kids? How can we still promote their growth? Keep them safe and engaged over the summer months? And it's a challenge that we all face.

**ANN STONE**

So let's talk about why it's important to think about the summer months as a distinct period for young people's development. Jenn, you were part of a national committee that looked at this exact question. And can you say a bit about what the opportunities are that the summer timeframe presents for children and youth. And also, are there any risks associated with the summer months?

**JENNIFER MCCOMBS**

So summer marks a departure from sort of the regular structures of school, that school provides us. And so it is both this great time of opportunity that we can seize. And it's also time where there are greater risks for families and for students. The National Academy of Sciences Reports highlights this, that summer is this fabulous time to provide these targeted services and programming that can address needs, expand horizons and promote equitable outcomes. But without really intentional efforts, summer leads to greater inequity between youth from higher and lower income families. So in absence of those intentional efforts, we see that summer is widening opportunity gaps. So during the summer months, children and youth from families with lower incomes have far less access to summer programming, enriching experiences and safe places to play. Summer also increases food insecurity among children and youth from families with lower incomes. So we have this time, right, where we have like these great risks, but also we have an open space of opportunity that we can all utilize to promote more equitable outcomes.

**ANN STONE**

So how do summer programs provide those rich opportunities you mentioned and how do they address the risks that summertime can present? Catherine, why don't you take this one?

**CATHERINE AUGUSTINE**

Well, on the plus side, there are a variety of summer program type. They're not all addressing the same goals, but some are addressing physical health. Others are addressing mental health, some are addressing academics. And so those programs are designed to address those exact risks that Jenn just talked about. And there might not be enough of those programs, but there are a variety of them. And one thing that is important to keep in mind is that, whatever the program's goal is, it should be intentionally designed to meet that goal. So for example, if you're putting on a summer program and you want to improve reading outcomes for early

elementary students, you're going to want to do a lot of reading. You're going to want to do a lot of reading comprehension, et cetera, but you want to make sure the content of it is well aligned to the goals of that program.

**ANN STONE**

So you talked about there being many different types of summer programs. Jenn, could you talk a bit about some of these different types and what we've learned about the benefits that they can provide?

**JENNIFER MCCOMBS**

So when we think of summer, you can think of a lot of different types of programs. So there are recreation camps, there are specialty camps that are targeted at particular interests, like a STEM camp or robotics camp. We have academic programs that can either just be solely focused on academics or ones that combine academics and enrichment. There are youth employment programs for older youth. So there is this huge variation and there's also a variation in the types of setting. So summer programs are provided by schools, in camps, by community-based organizations, through churches, and even there are at home programs. And all of these different types of programs and different types of settings can be effective, but they have to be really purposely designed and they have to be thinking about sort of like measuring relevant goal-aligned content. So for instance, we know that different types of specialty programs can promote interests and can all be effective if well designed and implemented.

And we also know that youth employment has really terrific outcomes for children and youth, actually, not children, but just youth, in terms of both academics and also in terms of some crime reduction and thinking about future outcomes. We know that youth employment is linked to future employment and earnings. It's really this great opportunity for communities to think about the variety of needs that can be fulfilled by these programs, and then how to target them to the children who need them the most. And to make public investments in places where people might not have the access that they should. So we have sort of like a breadth and variety of programming that all can be effective. But in order for it to be effective, it has to be well designed and well implemented. And that is not always easy.

**ANN STONE**

So Jenn, I'm recalling the study that you did where you really looked systematically across this range of different types of summer programs and assessed the quality of the evidence that was in the studies on these programs. So could you just say a little bit about the ESSA evidence tiers that you used as a threshold for looking at effectiveness?

**JENNIFER MCCOMBS**

So we looked at the effectiveness of programs and when we do this, we, ESSA provides a nice framework for thinking about the level of evidence that we have. So there's a level of evidence that's tier one, that's our strongest level of evidence. And that's created by what we call randomized controlled trials, where we have a lot of confidence that the outcomes that are produced are due to the program. And also tier one, it follows sort of multiple sites. So we have a small bit of information about programs that meet that type of evidence. And that's actually, it's really interesting because there's a lot of evidence that doesn't fall into that because of the requirements for the number of students that are in those programs and that they are, they fall across a lot of different areas so that they're not just located in one place.

There's also tier two evidence where we have relatively strong evidence, moderate level of evidence about effectiveness. And those are produced by smaller randomized control trials and also well conducted quasi-experimental designs. Then we also have tier three which are, where we have very strong correlational evidence, where we have lots of controls for other factors that may have produced those outcomes. And we see evidence across these various levels. In terms of academic programs where we have tier one, tier two and tier three evidence, programs that are designed to meet social and emotional outcomes where we have a lot of tier two and tier three evidence. And in youth employment programs where there's also that strong level of evidence that we have in tier one. And Catherine, what am I missing from the types of findings that we had in that study?

**CATHERINE AUGUSTINE**

Well in terms of the academic programs, there are some reading and math at-home programs that have both tier one and tier two evidence as well.

**JENNIFER MCCOMBS**

Yeah. I mean it is interesting to think, because I just want to dive a little bit into the idea of the academic programs because there is

evidence of all kinds of different programs. And one we see sort of a lot and most people think of when they think about summer programming. They think very traditionally in terms of summer school, which is a mandatory program, which does have strong, moderate levels of effectiveness. So those have proven to be effective, but they are very limited in who they're provided to and also have sort of a negative connotation towards them. People think of that as a punishment, not necessarily as an opportunity to learn. We also have voluntary summer learning programs and that is what we focused on in the National Summer Learning Project. But there are other studies of voluntary summer learning programs as well.

And these are programs that are offered to a broad array of students who might be able to meet them and benefit from them. And these tend to combine both an academic component to them, typically mathematics and reading, and a set of enriching opportunities. So things like swimming or rock climbing, arts and crafts, sports, things that we think of in terms of what comes to mind when we think of summer camps and these types of programs tend to have both of those components. And then there are also a set of programs that are focused on learning at home. So providing some sort of like reading at home programs or some mathematics at home that also have, where kids are doing this sort of by themselves, sometimes with some teachers scaffolding prior to the summer. And those also can be effective in producing academic outcomes.

**ANN STONE**

So let's go deeper into what you learned about summer programs in the National Summer Learning Project. So first, what did those programs look like, Catherine?

**CATHERINE AUGUSTINE**

Well Jenn has started to describe them. So these again are the programs we know the most about because we studied a set of them for six years and these programs were five to six weeks in length, voluntary, as Jenn said, for students and their families. And they were run in this study by five urban districts across the country and each of them worked with at least one community partner in putting them on. Jenn mentioned the fun activities, I think she said rock climbing, there was water polo, theater, dance. And those were often put on by whichever organizations in the community were expert at developing those skills. These targeted upper elementary kids' math and reading skills. Those classes were taught by certified district teachers. And

the programs that we studied served hundreds of kids from the district in general targeting those who are the most in need of academic support.

Although as Jenn said, voluntary programs like these are often offered to a broad array of students. Students might want to engage in a program like this for various reasons, right? Maybe their parents want them to be in a place that's safe. These programs are free. They provided transportation to and from them, they provided meals throughout the day. And so they could help kiddos in a lot of different ways, academically, for sure, but also in terms of having a safe place to be developing relationships with peers and adults, developing a new skill or a new interest. There were a lot of needs being served by these programs.

### **ANN STONE**

Both of you and a large team at RAND were deeply engaged in studying these summer programs. You were doing observations, you were collecting a substantial amount of data over many years. What did you learn about the key components of these programs and the specific practices that made them effective? Jenn, why don't you take that one?

### **JENNIFER MCCOMBS**

I'm going to take that but I'm going to add something before that, that I think that we learned that is equally as important, which is that there's strong demand for these programs. So our study, right, relied on a randomized controlled trial. And we were able to do that because parent and student demand for the programming was strong and each district received more applications than they had available slots, which enabled us to ethically randomize students into those slots and give them the opportunity to provide, to receive sort of up to two years of consecutive summer programming. And so I think that that's a key takeaway, is that there's a lot of demand for these programs, something that is attractive to kids and to families. And we also know that they can be effective in producing benefits. So, you know, after the first summer sort of across the board, we have strong evidence of benefits in mathematics.

After two summers, we see these benefits for high attenders in mathematics and in reading and in social-emotional outcomes. And those, the magnitude of those gains is, was not small. So that they represented about 20 to 25 percent of what kids at that grade-level

would learn in a given year. And so it's through the state implementation of the programs that we were able to both link aspects of programs to program quality, the overall quality of the program, and also to program effectiveness. And we have learned a lot about sort of like how to design them. And I think one of the key takeaways, and I think that there's a lot to unpack here so I'm going to go back and forth with Catherine on this one. But the first one that I'll start out with is like the key components of program duration and attendance, right?

So Catherine talked about these programs were offered for five to six weeks. The academics were one to two hours per subject, per day across that period of time. And we know from our findings that kids had to attend at high rates in order to benefit meaningful ways into the long-term, where they were seeing significant, meaningful educational benefits. And that's at about 20 days of attendance. So I think that's important to think about sort of like in developing programs is thinking about how long the program's going to be. And then of course, how are you going to motivate and incentivize attendance? And there are several ways that people can do that. And one of them is through creating really strong, high-quality, engaging programs that kids want to attend. And there are some core, like some very like discreet things that you can do to encourage that in terms of like the messaging for the programs to make sure that people aren't treating it like a drop-in program. But also in terms of establishing and planning to have a really positive site climate, the one aspect that was directly linked to student attendance. And so when thinking about that, how are you going to create a warm, welcoming, caring, culturally responsive environment that is promoting positive behaviors and supportive relationships between adults and youth? Catherine, I'm going to kick it over to you to talk about how you might plan for those things.

**CATHERINE AUGUSTINE**

Yeah. And I want to add a couple of things on to what you said. And one is, even though we do recommend three hours of academics a day. We found that the students needed more time with reading than with math. So we would recommend at least 90 minutes of reading instruction a day. If not two hours for reading and one hour for math. And absolutely, the kids need to attend in order to benefit, right? That's kind of a no duh, but it's hard sometimes to get kids to attend regularly in the summer when there are other things competing for



their time. And so, as Jenn said, the students want to feel like they're welcomed there and they're valued. And there are a lot of exciting ways that summer programs are doing that, including by meeting the students in the morning and giving them a personalized greeting, looking them in the eye, telling them that they're glad they're there.

And that kind of adult-to-student positive interaction can be replicated throughout the day, during lunch and transitions in the hallway and of course in the classroom. So there's a lot of effort being put into that now, which is also being done during the school year, in creating positive school climates. And that can really help in the summer in terms of attendance rates. And yes, as Jenn said, all of this has to be planned in advance. As we started out by saying, these programs need to be intentionally designed and well implemented. And that takes advanced planning. A summer program is like putting on an entire school year, but you don't have as much time to plan for it, right? And these districts we studied, they were coordinating busing and meals and hiring academic teachers and partnering with community organizations to provide the fun enrichment activities.

All of that takes coordination, takes advanced planning, developing MOUs, working with transportation and food departments. So having a point person within a school district who is allowed to work on this for all of their time or the majority of their time and they're starting to do this in the fall, this planning, is a best practice that we recommend. And in hiring those teachers, the district certified teachers to teach the academics, it's really important to hire teachers who are familiar with the subject and also familiar with the grade level. In the programs we studied in the beginning of our study, there were some high school teachers, for example, who said, "Oh, it'd be fun to work in the summer with fourth graders." But once they actually got in the classroom, they really didn't know what a fourth grader was or, you know, how, what the behavioral expectations were, let alone the standards for reading in fourth grade.

So these programs are short, you know, five to six weeks might sound like a long time for a summer program, but there's not a lot of time for teachers to acclimate to the students or to the material. So getting teachers in there who are motivated to be there, who know the standards for that grade level, know the developmental stages of those kids is super important. So and yeah, and then getting, you know, attendance through setting that warm and welcoming climate

in, as Jenn said, marketing materials that let parents know that attendance is expected in these programs and providing incentives for kids to attend. There are some programs that will do like an ice cream Sunday party on Fridays in a class if all the kids attended all week, right? So that there's peer pressure among the kids for everybody to come every day. So trying out those kinds of incentives within a program can also make a difference in terms of attendance.

**JENNIFER MCCOMBS**

Yeah. And really thinking about what is going to be attractive to kids and also developmentally appropriate. So we studied programs for upper elementary school students where you can motivate them with an ice cream party or even like a dance party in the cafeteria. You know, that's not necessarily, what's going to motivate a middle school student or a high school student. So really thinking about sort of like the types of content that you're providing, your expectations, sort of like how you're incentivizing it, and how it is meeting the developmental needs of kids at different ages is particularly important in thinking about this.

**CATHERINE AUGUSTINE**

Absolutely.

**JENNIFER MCCOMBS**

One thing that Catherine pointed out that was directly linked to the quality of instruction was the qualification of teachers, right? She pointed out that you really need to have the somebody who is familiar with the grade level and also the subject. Another component that can help support teachers in providing quality instruction is actually providing them a curriculum. This is the one period of time where teachers do not want to create their own lessons from scratch on a daily basis. This is the time where we found a couple things. One is that a curriculum helped teachers make better use of instructional time, teach more content and improve the equity of student experience across the district. The second was that teachers really liked it. When in one of our districts where the teachers created the curriculum early on, not only did we find that they weren't teaching as much content to students, but they were also less satisfied.

They weren't getting, they didn't have sufficient time built in the schedule to be able to do that. And they wanted the summer program to be a little bit easier than teaching during the school year. Like we have to think about teachers mental health and the supports that they need in order to be effective as well. The teachers in our programs

typically really liked teaching in their programs because one reason was small class size, which is also critical to the effectiveness of summer programs, so that they could individualize attention and get to know students better in a faster period of time. They also liked the programs that tended to be departmentalized. So if they only had to teach one subject instead of two, for instance, or potentially teaching half days. There was strong demand to teach in these programs but we know that now there's a lot of concern about teacher burnout and things like this. So thinking about those types of things that can incentivize both the quality of the instruction that teachers are providing, but also helping them enjoy the experience and want to teach in the summer programs is particularly important.

**ANN STONE**

Did you learn anything about professional development? What kind of PD is helpful for supporting instructors and preparing for summer programming?

**CATHERINE AUGUSTINE**

We did. We interviewed and surveyed teachers after the PD experience and observed those sessions as well as subsequent instruction and a few things popped up. As Jenn said, it's great to hand the teachers a curriculum, but the scope and sequence of it is going to be tailored to the summer timeframe and teachers won't necessarily be familiar with it. So having an opportunity in professional development sessions prior to the summer to see the curriculum modeled by someone from the curriculum department, to have an opportunity to practice with it, to get some feedback on it, was super helpful for teachers to start running on day one of the summer program. And also there were a couple of other things. One was, reminding the teachers that there's a sense of urgency with the summer program. I think oftentimes summer is synonymous with, you know, sort of being laid back and relaxed and in a way these programs are, right? Because they're not trying to hit standards at the same rate as teachers are during the school year.

There's not necessarily an assessment they're preparing the students for. So it can be a little bit more relaxed, but there's still a very short period of time to help kids who need help. They need to master content to be able to be successful in the next grade level or to catch up to their peers. So reminding teachers that they should be making good use of those 90 minutes or 60 minutes in math each day is important. And also because, as Jenn said, the class sizes are small

in the programs we looked at, there were about 12 kids per teacher. There's really also an opportunity to make sure that each child is understanding the material before you move on to the next content. And often teachers would tell us that during the school year there were kids in their class of 30 kids or 25 even who they knew weren't getting it, but they had to keep going. And in the summer you don't have to do that. You can stop and make sure that each student understands the material before you move on. And often in these programs there were other adults who could help with that. Some had paraprofessionals, some had special education teachers or others who could pull out groups of kids or work with some of the students one-on-one to make sure they were mastering the material. So setting that up pre-program in professional development sessions is a big help.

**JENNIFER MCCOMBS**

Yeah. And that really highlights some core things about the planning. So in order to run a well-developed, professional development session, prior to the program, where teachers have curricula and pacing guides in hand, to be able to go over those types of details, requires a lot of advanced planning. And so, and what we found is that, you know, planning matters so much throughout the program and really enhances the quality. So we recommend that districts start planning in January for their summer program, because if particularly if they're having large comprehensive centralized programs. It takes a lot of planning to be able to do that well. And planning really matters in the amount of instruction that kids receive, the quality of experience that they're having and also teachers' quality of experience. So when you think about sort of like everything's chaotic on day one because the materials aren't there, you don't have enough supplies, the, you know, the bus isn't there, you have confused adults and folks who are frustrated. And that in turn impacts kids' experiences. It can also lead to kids not having things to do, like if you don't have all the materials ready for them. And that is not great. So while summer is more laid back and it can be enjoyable, to me, engagement is critical. Like kids need to be engaged in order to be having an enjoyable time. So it matters a lot in terms of enjoyment.

**CATHERINE AUGUSTINE**

Right and the National Summer Learning Association likes to say that summer starts in September, meaning that's when you should begin

planning. So January is really the latest that we would recommend that planning begin.

**ANN STONE**

Thank you for joining me in this rich conversation, Jennifer and Catherine. It's always so nice to hear from both of you.

**CATHERINE AUGUSTINE**

Thank you, Ann.

**JENNIFER MCCOMBS**

Thanks, Ann.

**ANN STONE**

And thank you to our listeners for joining us as well. Please look for our next episode where Jennifer and Catherine will be sharing more about community-wide approaches to summer learning as well as how summer learning can be part of a recovery strategy for young people whose lives were so disrupted by the pandemic. They'll also share considerations for policymakers and leave us with the questions we still need to answer about summer learning. And if you want to learn more about research on summer learning, you can go to Wallace's website and find reports on a variety of topics, a summer planning, toolkit and other resources at [wallacefoundation.org](http://wallacefoundation.org).