Effective Summer Learning Programs for Elementary Students

Research Snapshot

Districts and states are targeting summer break — the most substantial chunk of out-of-school time in the typical year — as a prime opportunity to help students make progress with learning left unfinished due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Federal COVID relief funds will allow schools the freedom to offer programs as they never have before. But not all summer learning programs are created equal, and the pressing issue of unfinished learning makes it all the more important for providers to spend funds in a way that will benefit students the most. This research snapshot summarizes some of the most recent and relevant research on what makes summer learning programs effective.

Structural Components

Research shows that summer program providers should pay close attention to several key characteristics as they design their programs.

Duration: At least five to six weeks of full-day programming with:

- At least 120 minutes of English language arts instruction per day
- At least 90 minutes of math instruction per day
- The rest of the time spent on other content and enrichment activities

Class size: Keep class sizes small, with a teacher-to-student ratio of no more than 1 to 15.

Attendance: Require or strongly encourage attendance, and make it as easy as possible for students to attend. Students with high attendance tend to get more out of summer learning. Programs should have a clear attendance policy and communicate it with parents.

Academic Instruction

Instructional quality — a combination of effective teachers, materials and curricula — is just as important in summer learning programs as during the school year.

Teachers: Recruit teachers with relevant content and grade-level experience and provide professional development prior to the summer program. Be clear about expectations, for example about maximizing the use of instructional time.

Curriculum: Provide a curriculum, including science and social studies, aligned with state standards and the academic year. Ensure that instruction can be modified to meet learners' different needs.

Enrichment and Engagement

The promise of engaging, enriching activities can help draw families to summer learning programs and encourage regular attendance. Research shows that quality summer learning activities are challenging, relevant to students' lives, and give students a sense of agency, a voice in their own learning.

As during the school year, integrating science, technology and engineering content with reading and math instruction can account for unfinished learning in those areas, increase student engagement and help get students interested in STEM careers later on. Project-based learning, where students work together to solve multidisciplinary problems, is one way for summer programs to integrate learning across content areas.

Preparation for Kindergarten

Summer learning programs can also be a way for districts to help get children ready for kindergarten. Enrollment in pre-K declined in the 2020-21 school year, meaning fewer children will be entering kindergarten in 2021-22 with the formal preparation they would normally receive. Districts can include rising kindergartners in their summer learning programs to shore up important readiness skills and help these students move on to public school in the coming year.

For more information, see the following resources:

Hall, G., Fay Poston, K., & Dennehy, J. (2017). Summer learning programs: Investigating strengths and challenges. In N.L. Deutsch (ed.), *After-School Programs to Promote Positive Youth Development* (1-20). Advances in Child and Family Policy and Practice. https://www.wcwonline.org/pdf/ghall/Hall_et_al_(2017)_summer_learning.pdf

Naftzger, N., Schmidt, J. A., Shumow, L., Beymer, P. N., & Rosenberg, J. M. (2018). Exploring the link between STEM activity leader practice and youth engagement: Findings from the STEM IE study. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. https://www.summerlearning.org/knowledge-center/what-keeps-kids-engaged-in-summer-learning/

Schwartz, H.L, Sloan McCombs, J. Augustine, C.H., Leschitz, J.T. (2021). Getting to work on summer learning: Recommended practices for success, 2nd Ed. Executive Summary. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA205-3.html

Tarasawa, B., Johnson, A., & Yankel, C. (2021). Preparing early learners: Considerations for supporting the kindergarten class of 2021. Portland, OR: NWEA. https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2021/03/Preparing-early-learners-Considerations-for-supporting-the-kindergarten-class-of-2021_NWEA_Research-Collaborative-Brief.pdf

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