

A Summer for Learning & Recovery

Summer Programs as Essential Supports for Equitable Recovery and Accelerating Learning



Shauta Marsh/Big Car Collaborative

Summer learning programs have the power to be a game changer for youth. Programs can help students re-connect with peers and caring adults, re-engage in learning, and accelerate students' social, emotional, and academic recovery.

Providing the Supports Students Need to Make Gains

Summer learning programs have a proven record of providing the supports youth need today, from enriching academics and social-emotional supports to healthy meals, active play, and hands-on job experience. Importantly, struggling students and children from families with low income experience the greatest gains from summer learning programs.

Students who regularly attend summer learning programs:¹⁻⁴

- make gains in reading and math
- engage in fun, enriching activities that spark interest in learning
- have access to nutritious meals and enjoy safe outdoor physical activity
- connect with caring mentors and peers
- have opportunities to earn high school or college credits
- explore careers and gain workforce skills

Local Experts Stand Ready to Help

Community partners, including community-based and faith-based organizations, libraries, parks, museums, recreation centers, and businesses have been running summer learning programs for decades, and stand ready to help implement strong programming to help youth re-connect, re-engage, and recover.

A typical model includes:

- coordination with schools and tapping local educators and school staff
- staff trained in a youth-centered approach to supporting well-being and strong social skills, offering mentorship, and providing hands-on learning experiences that build work and life skills
- partnerships with arts, sports, and health organizations; parks, museums, recreation centers, churches, local businesses and others

Struggling students and children from families with low income experience the greatest gains from summer learning programs.

Resources to Help

The American Rescue Plan provides funding to state and local education agencies for learning recovery strategies, including afterschool and summer enrichment programs.



Essential for Equitable Recovery

Many families, especially families of color and those living in underserved rural or low-income communities, have lost income and jobs during the pandemic, causing spikes in hunger, food insecurity, and unemployment. Summer learning programs can serve as a lifeline for these families, keeping kids safe, healthy, learning, and active—and ensuring parents are able to work or take time to seek employment.



S.Wells/Life Pieces to Masterpieces



Program Spotlight: Energy Express, West Virginia (statewide)

This West Virginia University Extension summer literacy program is staffed by college students who are AmeriCorps members. Staff focus on helping kids achieve gains in reading and literacy skills, engage them in hands-on, minds-on activities and support social and emotional learning through carefully selected readings. The program is actively involved in the state Department of Education's Campaign for Grade Level Reading and serves approximately 3,000 children in low-income and rural communities across the state each summer.

Addressing Summer Hunger 17M U.S. children are at risk for hunger⁵

Many summer programs provide students with access to nutritious meals, which are especially critical when schools are closed and millions of children from low-income families lose access to the school breakfasts, lunches, and afterschool meals they receive during the regular school year. This summer, programs will have an extraordinary role and opportunity to provide healthy food to children who participate in educational, enrichment, physical, and recreational activities. Many may also serve as food distribution sites for families and communities.



Jacksonville Arts & Music School

Research Highlight: Accelerating Reading and Math Gains

A randomized controlled trial study found elementary school students who attended learning programs for two summers outperformed their non-participating peers in reading and math both in the fall and the following spring. Summer program students had **gains equal to 20%-25%** of the typical annual gains in reading and math.⁶

Guidelines to Get Started

Research-Based Strategies for Successful Summer Programs

Years of research, including a longitudinal study involving nearly 6,000 young people, have documented the importance of summer learning opportunities and the benefits from participating. The research base suggests key strategies for successful summer programs:

Leverage Community Assets to Provide a Mix of Academics and Enrichment.

Summer programs that are jointly planned by school districts and community partners, include both academic support and enrichment opportunities, and a mix of certified teachers and youth development professionals, are more likely to meet the needs of young people and help them succeed. These programs include an array of activities that young people choose to participate in based on individual interests, along with academic support for all, are culturally responsive, and keep students engaged and attending regularly.

IMPLEMENTATION TIPS

1. Recruit and retain a mix of staff who are connected to the local community and local schools, including current and aspiring classroom teachers, youth development professionals, and community members with content expertise. Ensure all staff participate in the same training and professional development to ensure consistent, high-quality engagement with young people.
2. Offer a mix of hands-on academic and enrichment learning opportunities and ensure that both are well planned and well executed by staff with content expertise and enthusiasm. Keep group sizes to 15 students or less, whether in academics or enrichment activities.

Put Students' Needs and Your Program's Intended Outcomes at the Center of Program Design and Implementation.

Summer programs that are intentional about aligning activities with students' input and needs as well as intended outcomes are more likely to yield results. For example, programs that listen to youth and recognize the social and emotional needs of young people—which is especially important as we emerge from the pandemic—and are explicitly designed to enhance students' social and emotional skills are better positioned to help young people grow socially and emotionally.

IMPLEMENTATION TIPS

1. Ensure your program fosters a welcoming, positive climate that promotes healthy relationships with adults and peers to help young people remain engaged in learning and attending regularly.
2. Foster a shared commitment to program goals and outcomes and provide transparency among partners on shared measures of program quality, student participation, and student learning to promote a culture of continuous improvement.

Design Your Program with Sustained Participation in Mind.

Students who consistently attend summer learning programs benefit most, so programming must keep kids feeling welcomed, interested, and engaged so that they voluntarily keep coming back over the course of a summer, and ideally for multiple summers. Recent research on voluntary summer programs with a mix of academics and enrichment finds that students who attend a summer program for at least 20 days benefit in math in the following fall and through spring. Those students who attend for a second summer continue to benefit in math and language arts, and also demonstrate social and emotional learning benefits throughout the following school year.

IMPLEMENTATION TIPS

1. Design your program to last at least five weeks and encourage families and young people to participate across multiple summers.
2. Build your program with the needs of families in mind by offering a mix of activities, access to healthy snacks and meals, and sufficient hours of programming to meet the needs of working families.
3. Ensure that cost is not a barrier to participation through no-cost and sliding scale options and help families address transportation issues.



Learn More About the Evidence Base for Summer

✓ [Every Summer Counts](#)

A longitudinal study of summer programs involving nearly 6,000 students (RAND, 2020)⁷

✓ [Investing in Successful Summer Programs: A Review of Evidence Under the Every Student Succeeds Act](#)

A report finds summer learning programs meet the most rigorous evidence standards of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (RAND, 2019)⁸

✓ [Getting to Work on Summer Learning](#)

Find more research-driven strategies and tips (RAND, 2018)⁹

Sources

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5 <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/advocacy/2021-us-childhood-report.pdf>

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7 <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Every-Summer-Counts-A-Longitudinal-Analysis-of-Outcomes-from-the-National-Summer-Learning-Project.pdf>
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