The American Rescue Plan (ARP) Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund provided the greatest opportunity to support students in afterschool and summer programs with federal funds since the creation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) initiative. However, demand for afterschool programs still far exceeds the supply. For every child in a program, four are waiting to get in. While most school districts dedicated some ARP ESSER funds toward afterschool and summer programs, the investments represent only a small portion of available funds. Districts can still direct ARP ESSER funds to support afterschool and summer opportunities.

Braiding funds is one way that district leaders and program providers can make the most of ARP ESSER funds to enhance programs, increase their capacity, and provide more supports for students. When braiding funds, district leaders and program providers fund the different components of their program with multiple funding streams — such as 21st CCLC or city and state-specific funds — while reporting on each funding stream separately.

This spotlight takes a closer look at one school district in Alabama that braided ARP ESSER funds with funds from their city and the 21st CCLC initiative to scale up their summer learning programs.

**Overview**

Based on research illustrating the impact of summer learning loss, Tuscaloosa City Schools made an explicit commitment in 2017 to summer learning programs as a core component of their strategy to address academic achievement gaps. A few years later, the state of Alabama passed the Alabama Literacy Act and the Alabama Numeracy Act that mandated academic support, including summer support, for students who were low-performing in literacy and math. Given the heightened emphasis on providing high-quality, engaging summer learning programs, Tuscaloosa City Schools set out a bold vision: ensure that every student in the district participates in summer learning each year.

ARP ESSER funds helped advance that mission. The district was able to provide summer learning programs to more than 40 percent of their K-4 student population, with an even higher percentage of district students performing below grade level. The funds covered supplies, transportation, field trips and scaled up staffing of their summer program. The district was able to hire 500 people, including directors, teachers, bus drivers, nurses, and other staff, and partner with community organizations and program providers to enhance services. Together, these efforts advanced their vision for a robust summer learning ecosystem.

**Tuscaloosa City Schools, AL**

| Amount of ARP ESSER funding dedicated to afterschool and summer learning | $2.7M |
| Average number of students served by the afterschool/summer program per year | 3,000 |
| Percentage of children from families with low incomes | 66% |

Main funding sources:
Tuscaloosa City Schools braided the following funding streams to support their afterschool and summer learning programs.
- ARP ESSER funds
- Local city funds
- 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative
To fund each site, the district looked across its existing funding streams to identify which sources of funding it could bring together and how it could coordinate spending on its summer learning programs. That funding included city funding, resulting from a 10-year commitment from the City of Tuscaloosa to provide funding for summer learning, and 21st CCLC grants that supported specific sites. Some program sites were funded by a combination of 21st CCLC, city funds, and ARP ESSER funds. At a site that did not have access to 21st CCLC funds, they used city and ARP ESSER funds. This method ensured that program sites were able to serve every student wishing to participate in programming, and helped increase capacity across the district.

**A Typical Day for Students**

Tuscaloosa City Schools designed its summer programs to combine standards-based learning and fun, engaging enrichment opportunities. The summer programs are voluntary, full-day programs that run for at least five weeks or 22 days at no cost to parents, with a small class size of about 15 students. The elementary and middle school programs focus on preventing learning loss by incorporating more than three hours of reading and math. The high school programs include opportunities and experiences that help prepare students for college and the workforce and could enhance their resumes or transcripts. Examples include: affinity-based experiences; community service; internships; ACT prep; and dual enrollment. Tuscaloosa City Schools leaders built flexibility into the program so that individual schools and program directors could tailor their activities and field trips, and center programs around unifying themes. Past themes include: theme parks (focused on building and modeling roller coasters); the red carpet; and the Octonauts (inspired by the animated cartoon and focused on completing expeditions and outdoor activities about health and wellness).

**TIP: GETTING BUY-IN**

Discuss the research on how out-of-school time programs support student development. Be very clear about your vision for supporting students and how out-of-school time programs support that vision. Make the case for your vision by tracking any data from existing programs. Create clear messages demonstrating the impact.

Tuscaloosa City Schools’ commitment to summer learning began when district leaders met to discuss the research about summer learning loss and what they were going to do about it. The conversation led to a vision of a robust, high-quality summer learning ecosystem that normalized participation in summer learning programs. It was clear that it needed to be “a community responsibility and commitment” that outlasted district leadership. From there, they dove into the research around quality and implementation and shaped their program.

**TIP: HOW TO ATTRACT STAFF**

Be creative in your outreach and recruitment efforts. And while it’s important to pay a competitive salary, don’t focus only on salary. Provide flexibility for your staff and welcome their voice.

A few of the reasons Tuscaloosa City Schools leadership was able to hire sufficient staff were: flexible certification requirements; reaching out to recent graduates; and paying a salary that was competitive for their area but that they were confident the district could maintain after ARP ESSER funds end. They also gave a great deal of voice to teachers by allowing them to design what they would do in the program. It became an “incubator” for teachers to develop new approaches rooted in grade-level standards. Finally, they were flexible with the days and hours that staff worked, deciding that having staff work part of the summer program was better than none. While this method did take longer to logistically plan, it meant that staff showed up fully present for the program.
Impact and Outcomes

**Summer Programs Available at Every School.** Braiding existing funds with ARP ESSER funds made it possible for district leaders to ensure that all schools were able to offer high-quality, high-capacity summer learning programming.

**Participation Led to Reduction in Learning Loss.** Tuscaloosa City Schools data from the summer of 2022 revealed that students who attended at least 15 days out of the 22 days of summer programs had a 73 percent chance of showing no learning loss, whereas students who attended 10 days or fewer had only a 13 percent chance of no learning loss.

**More Students Served.** During the summers of 2022 and 2023, the district was able to serve more than 3,000 students, doubling the number of students served since 2019. More than 40 percent of their K-4 students were able to participate in a program. The percentage of students performing below grade level was even greater, due to the way the district structured participation. As one district leader noted, “the role ESSER has played is in accelerating our journey.”

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**TIP: FOCUS ON YOUR VISION**

Approach it with a problem-solver mentality instead of a scarcity mentality. Commit to your vision as indispensable, as a strategic part of your efforts, and understand what your non-negotiables are. What’s sacred? Then, focus on acquiring the necessary funding and figure out the most fiscally responsible way of funding the program.

The sacred component for Tuscaloosa City Schools leadership was the student-to-staff ratio. They knew that if they altered the 15:1 ratio recommended in the research, they would sacrifice the quality of their program. They also approached summer learning with a whole-systems view. Their 21st CCLC programs did not have separate program models. All of the summer learning fell under a single, central model in which they prioritized equitable and high-capacity programs. They dug in further by asking themselves what was “the optimal way” to run a program based on research, data, and mixing in an element of fun. Once clear about the vision and their non-negotiables, they identified the funding needs and focused on their compliance requirements.
Looking to the Future

As ARP ESSER funding ends, Tuscaloosa City Schools is looking at different strategies to sustain the programs. They do not plan to scale down the summer programs because their benefit in reducing summer learning loss is too great. The district instead will pull funding from other spaces to sustain the current funding level. For example, some non-Title I school program sites will re-institute parent-pay models. The district also plans to advocate for increased funding from the City of Tuscaloosa, making the case that in addition to decreasing learning loss, the summer programs create jobs locally, contribute to quality of life for families, and support local community organizations that are tapped to help provide enriching and fun activities in the programs.

Tuscaloosa City Schools leadership hopes to continue improving the summer programs, aiming to increase attendance among students performing below grade level, and expand partnerships with community-based organizations that offer programming. They’d like to address their transportation system, which runs large vehicles that aren’t full, and to tackle communication and facility challenges, making it easier for outside organizations to lead programs. Lastly, their broader aspiration is to create a community organization that would coordinate and facilitate out-of-school time programming and partnerships, bringing afterschool and summer learning programs to the larger community and reach a greater number of Tuscaloosa children and families.

Visit EngageEveryStudent.org, an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education, to learn more about accessing ARP funds for afterschool and summer.

Endnotes


TIP: LEVERAGE COMMUNITY PARTNERS

It starts with having conversations. Extend invitations to community partners to use your facilities and hold meetings with them. Listen to your staff’s recommendations and identify what organizations they already have relationships with. Bring them to the table. Focus on sharing resources in the name of your broader vision.

Using these strategies, Tuscaloosa City Schools has built partnerships that enhance their programs. For example, the local Boys & Girls Club leads half-day summer programming. Smaller enrichment providers focus on activities such as archery or karate, and community members contributed expertise in subjects such as science. The district provides facilities for partners to run their own summer programs, and has funded scholarships for students to attend programs such as the University of Alabama summer learning program. They worked to simplify logistics and communication for their partners, helping them communicate with, contact, and secure student participants, and helped them become approved vendors.

“"If you believe something is important, you find the funding to make it happen."”

– District Leader at Tuscaloosa City Schools