

A Summer of Growth & Learning

Now more than ever, young people need a summer filled with opportunity, joy and connections.



Photo credit: Wings, South Carolina afterschool program

Summer learning programs have the power to be a game changer for youth, offering students experiences and opportunities that are proven to accelerate academic growth and support their well-being. But many children from low-income families and children of color miss out due to cost and lack of available programs.

This year, school districts have an extraordinary opportunity to meet the need. The American Rescue Plan provides funding school districts can use to partner with evidence-based summer programs that are designed to help students thrive.

Meeting Student's Needs

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.

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. These local experts stand ready to partner with schools to expand and adapt their programming to meet the needs of kids and families today.

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.

Power of Partnership

The American Rescue Plan provides substantial funding to school districts that can be used to expand or launch new summer and afterschool programs, especially in low-income schools and neighborhoods. Funds may be used over the next several years. To see funding by district, examples of school/program partnerships, and experts in your community, visit: [HelpKidsRecover.org](https://www.HelpKidsRecover.org)



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 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 return to work or take time to seek employment.



Photo credit: Breakthrough Cincinnati, Ohio afterschool program

Maximizing American Rescue Plan Funding: Connecticut's Summer Enrichment Initiative⁵

With American Rescue Plan funding, the Connecticut State Department of Education launched its Summer Enrichment Initiative in Spring 2021 to help students re-engage with peers, accelerate learning, and prepare for returning to school. The \$8.6 million in grants went to more than 200 programs serving 108,000 students, including with camps focused on STEM, college and career readiness, arts, life skills, and more. Enrollment increased dramatically from 2020, likely due to programs being more affordable and accessible. In 2021, about 30% reported it was their first time attending a summer program; 56% of all students enrolled received a scholarship or fee waiver to participate.

More than 94% of students reported having fun and 3 in 4 site supervisors felt their camps were effective in building students' preparation and enthusiasm for returning to school, attributing this to staff relationships with students, learning activities, and social interaction. Students had strong connections with camp staff, describing them as "friendly," "warm," and providing "a safe space" where youth can have "discussions about things that bother us."

Addressing Summer Hunger Nearly 12M U.S. children at risk for hunger⁶

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 and many may also serve as food distribution sites for families or communities.



Photo credit: Camp Fire Lone Star, TX afterschool program

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.⁷

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.



Research and Resources

✓ [Summer Planning Bootcamp](#)

The National Summer Learning Association offers tools and tips for partnerships, programming and staffing.

✓ [Every Summer Counts](#)

A longitudinal study of summer programs involving nearly 6,000 students (RAND, 2020)⁸

✓ [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)⁹

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

Find more research-driven strategies and tips (RAND, 2018)¹⁰

Sources

- 1 <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Every-Summer-Counts-A-Longitudinal-Analysis-of-Outcomes-from-the-National-Summer-Learning-Project.pdf>
- 2 <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/investing-in-successful-summer-programs-essa-review.aspx>
- 3 http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/issue_briefs/issue_hepa_sel_72.pdf
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- 6 <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/child-hunger-facts>
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