

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 this 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 levels. 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. In 2011, The Wallace 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 excited to welcome back the two researchers who led that study, Catherine Augustine, director of RAND'S Pittsburgh office and senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation, and Jennifer McCombs, director of research at the Learning Policy Institute and an adjunct policy researcher at the RAND Corporation. Catherine and Jennifer helped kick off this podcast series with an overview of summer learning programs, including what makes them effective. Today, they 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. Catherine and Jennifer, thank you for joining me today.

So you mentioned in the programs that you studied that community organizations played important roles in the programming. And I know that you recently published a report that looked at how communities can coordinate their efforts to provide summer opportunities for young people at a pretty large scale. So I was wondering if you could

say a bit about what you learned are the various ways that communities can come together and make summer a priority?

CATHERINE AUGUSTINE

Yeah, I think that this is really exciting actually. So in various cities across the country, there are different organizations, whether it be a school district or a mayor's office, or even a library system, that recognize that there's a need for summer programming in the community, but it might not be well coordinated, it might not be well advertised, there might not be enough programs or they might not be spread out into the right neighborhoods. And so increasingly they've come together to create, you know, collaborations or councils or coordinated networks, whatever they want to call themselves, and typically their vision or their mission is to improve access to quality summer experiences. And they want to make sure in their communities that every child who wants to participate in a summer program has that opportunity. And so we took a look at a few of these cities where this was happening and they were doing a variety of things, right?

So they were setting that vision. They were looking across the community at the number of programs offered. They were collecting data on the number of children and youth who were engaged in those programs. They were doing mapping exercises to see if the programs were sort of spread out equally, particularly within neighborhoods with higher levels of poverty. And then they were taking action to either create new programs, expand new programs, bring program providers together for professional development or information exchanges. They were promoting programs to families in different ways. Some of them had, you know, press releases written on events in which the mayor would speak about the importance of summer programming. And some of them created online searchable databases of summer programs that parents could use to find programming. In some, there would be centralized locations like libraries where parents could go and then learn of other summer opportunities across the community.

So they were, these organizations in those communities were really active in working together to try to promote summer programming and quality summer programming. And I think it's a, I think it's a great step because individual summer providers are doing great work. And there's just, you know, as Jenn said, we saw such strong demand for these programs that we studied. It's clear that there aren't enough of

these summer programs and sometimes parents don't know about them and sometimes they're just, they just simply don't exist. So these efforts to have more coordinated opportunities across a given region, I think are really hopeful.

ANN STONE

So fast forward to our current context with the pandemic. We've known for a long time about the value of summer learning, but COVID has really focused attention on using the summer months as part of a recovery strategy for young people whose lives were so disrupted by the pandemic. So what is important to keep in mind at this particular time, Catherine?

CATHERINE AUGUSTINE

Yeah, so we've known for some time now that summer can be a vulnerable time for young people and the pandemic has certainly exacerbated those vulnerabilities. But as schools got back into session, kids did start to recover. They're now catching up a little bit as to where they were or should have been without a pandemic. But the disparities that we saw pre-pandemic are worse now. Some McKinsey data from December showed that students, if they are in a majority Black school, are a year behind on average to students who are not in such a school and that is not acceptable. And that is a shame and has to be addressed and summer provides an opportunity to work on that. And so there are a number of things that school districts and others can keep in mind as they're developing programs.

One is there are a lot of resources to guide them in design and implementation. There's a lot of resources on The Wallace Foundation website, through the National Summer Learning Association, even on RAND's own website. There are a lot of reports and there's even a toolkit that people can access to get templates and guidance on various steps of the process in planning for an academic summer program. And in so doing we would also encourage school districts to think about the longer term to try to plan, but we also know that kids are more likely to benefit from summer programs if they engage in consecutive summers. So planning for that now, if a school district is just starting to get into the business of summer programming, planning for that to happen every summer will benefit their kids now as they're getting caught up but also in the future.

ANN STONE

So let's talk more about that funding. So there are new resources available now that are actually dedicated to summer through the American Rescue Plan and other stimulus funding. And many states and districts are looking to build out more robust summer learning programs and maybe wondering where to start, what to focus on, and I happen to know that you, yourselves are hearing from some of these communities directly. So Jenn, what are some of the things that they want to know and what are you recommending that they think about?

JENNIFER MCCOMBS

And we do, we see this huge uptick in district interest in summer programming for all the reasons that Catherine mentioned. And I think that, recently read that over 50 percent of the plans for district spending of their ESSER funds include some sort of summer component. So it's become sort of like this uptick in interest in this area. But what's really interesting about it is that, where the interest lies is in creating these voluntary summer learning programs that are most often sort of like merging, sort of like having academic content and enrichment activities as well. So having this type of model, which has been proven to be effective in promoting positive outcomes and also helping to close the opportunity gap. So, you know, kids lost during COVID, right? So they lost in terms of academic learning opportunities, but they also lost in terms of other opportunities, in terms of social opportunities, extracurricular opportunities, et cetera.

And these types of programs, districts are looking towards them to meet both of those needs and to fill both of those losses. And so there's a lot of interest right now, people are planning. And I would say that there are a lot of questions as well. And one of the questions that comes up quite frequently is around the idea of attracting and retaining teachers. There's a lot of concern about teacher burnout due to the pandemic and how is it that you can get teachers to come and work in programs after the summer. And one of the things that sort of I recommend is to highlight the things that we found that teachers really appreciated about the programs. One of which is sort of the, actually, the ability to help students. These programs can matter. And being able to communicate that to educators is really important and helps attract them.

Two, one of the best things you can do is to be able to communicate something about the planning and structure of the program. Teachers

have been, one of the reasons why they're burned out is because there's just been a lot of different transitions and people having to pivot in an ongoing fashion during the pandemic. The more that administrators can assure teachers that the program's going to be well planned, supplies are going to be there for them, the curriculum's going to be there for them. It leads to this assurance that it's going to be a positive experience that is not going to cause undue stress. Providing, highlighting the fact that they're small class sizes. Like one of, that's one of the things that teachers really reported liking about the program. It enabled them to develop deeper relationships with kids, to be able to provide more individualized support, and those are things that are all highly motivating to them.

And then sort of like stressing sort of like the curriculum, the supplies, logistics that will be there, offering options for things to be departmentalized, offering the ability to be half-day instead of a full-day, are all things that can help attract teachers to the programs. Another question that we get a lot is about how to create meaningful relationships with the community-based organizations. So as Catherine mentioned, all of our districts had these types of relationships and while districts can and some do ask teachers to provide enrichment activities and to offer enrichment in the classes, their classes, one way to reduce cost and also to bring in some novel expertise, is to work with community-based organizations to be able to do it. And some of those, there are lots of different ways that districts can accomplish that, right?

So in some areas they might have an intermediary that they can form a relationship with, who can help broker the relationships with different community-based organizations for them. In other places we saw like people would issue an RFP for providers to be able to submit applications, to be able to work during the summer. And in some cases we saw districts sort of extend school year relationships. So for their afterschool providers that were providing activities during the school year, they were able to then sort of like extend that into the summer, get them to do some different novel types of programming and to be able to, to work that into their summer programs. Catherine, are you hearing, what other questions are districts asking you about?

CATHERINE AUGUSTINE

Well I wanted to elaborate on some of the strategies I've learned that districts are using to attract teachers because you're right, that is an

essential question. You know, how are we going to, how should we even expect a teacher who's been so burned out by the COVID pivoting, as you said, to be engaged and excited about teaching over the summer? So districts are doing exactly what you said, which is perfect, and some other things. One of which is bringing teachers into the design phase of the program so that they can have a voice in, you know, designing a program that offers flexible schedules. So like you said, a teacher could just work a half a day. Other districts are providing either onsite childcare or automatic admission into the program for teacher's children because that facilitates their being able to be there and have a safe place for their children to be at the same time.

Some are giving them extra bonuses which never hurts. And there's also been, and you mentioned this early on Jenn, there's been more attention toward teacher self-care. I mean that's happening during the school year as well. It's necessary in response to this massive burnout and it's happening in the summer too. So what does that mean exactly? Well that might mean giving teachers appreciation lunches once a week or bringing in breakfasts in the morning. It might also mean that they're given some time and space within the summer schedule. So they're paid for their planning time, you know, in addition to what they're paid for teaching in the summer program. It might also mean that they're, you know, given some autonomy to set a professional development goal for the summer, they might want to master an aspect of the curriculum or develop a particular relationship with students in a way they hadn't in the past.

And they might then be given the support to reach those professional development goals. Whether that's through a mentor or a coach or particular resources or online modules that they could be watching for professional development purposes. So there, those are some other ways that districts are trying to make sure that teachers are taken care of during the summer. That it's a positive experience for them, that they're growing over the summer, and that they're also, you know, taking care of their own their own mental health and social and emotional health as well.

ANN STONE

Have you heard anything from districts or states who are thinking it's great, we've got all this funding through these new federal sources, but what happens when it ends? How are we going to sustain summer programming that we might beef up during this time period?

Are you hearing that at all? And if so, you know, what would you say to them? What are the ways they could think about accessing more sort of ongoing funding streams in order to support summer programming for the long-term?

CATHERINE AUGUSTINE I am hearing that. And some of the districts who are concerned about that are, one of the strategies that they're using is, as Jenn said earlier, if a district partners with a community organization, in some cases, those community organizations have their own sources of funding. They might have federal government funding, like through 21st Century or some other source, but they might also have foundation funding or they might be charging a fee to parents and could use some of that funding to offset their partnering with the school district. So some of the districts that have this money now are investing in more and more partnerships. So if they're developing a partnership with a community organization, there's an understanding that there's money for that now, like the work of setting up the infrastructure of the partnership, but in the longer term, as the federal funding for the school district goes away, that partnership can still be in place and that partner might then be able to bring their own funding into serving the kids in the summer program. Jenn, have you been hearing of other strategies?

JENNIFER MCCOMBS Well, I think that it's worth a reminder that this is not the first stimulus funding that districts have received ever. So what was it over a decade ago, right?

CATHERINE AUGUSTINE 2008, yep.

JENNIFER MCCOMBS Like we had the American Rescue and Recovery Act that provided a lot of funding to districts and it's actually what developed this type of model. Remember back in 2010, 2011, and as Wallace was looking for districts to learn from, you looked for places that already had these programs in place and it had a commitment to them. And a lot of those programs started with that RF funding and they received some funding for this study from Wallace to help supplement their own funding for the study, but they've all continued it. The RF funding went away, Wallace funding went away, and they pivoted towards sort of like different sources of funding, being able to use Title I funding, general district funds, there's some state funds that can be put into this. California has just made a large investment in

afterschool and summer funding for programs, and we potentially could see other states taking that up, right?

So this is ripe area for the federal government to decide to provide additional resources into the future. For states also to make more investments in these types of interventions that are important for a number of reasons and also effective. And, you know, even in absence of that, sort of like there are ways that districts, when they recognize that something is effective and has value, end up sort of conducting some pivots in order to sustain programming. So I think it's really important to know that sort of like while the ESSER fundings may be sort of like the primary source of funding that is getting these up and running doesn't mean that they're not going to be sustained when that source of funding is gone. And it may spur some additional policy action at the federal and state level for increased investment in these types of extended learning opportunities for children and youth.

ANN STONE

So let's talk more about policy with summer programs in the spotlight now. What are some of the considerations you'd want to call out for policymakers? What is it that they should be thinking about?

JENNIFER MCCOMBS

Okay, so I'll start and then, Catherine, you add on. So the first thing that I would get them to start thinking about is, I would have them think about sort of, we know that these types of programs are effective. So how is it that you can spur on investments in ways that are going to promote program quality and program effectiveness, right? So how is it that you can set up funding structures that are going to enable districts to create programs that have both academics and enrichment content, for instance? That are able to serve students across the district who might need the programming in a variety of ways? To help districts see how to braid funding from different funding mechanisms and to make explicit that summer is an allowable use of different sources of funding, right?

So very often districts feel very constrained. So you want to have a program, you want to use your Title I funds, but you want to offer it to every school in the district. And so, not just only your Title schools receiving schoolwide Title I funding, right? How do you do that? How do you braid those funds together? And know that you can do that legally. You might want to use some of your teacher development, so your Title II money in order to help provide services. How do you

make sure that you know that you're able to do that. And by the federal and state policymakers making it explicit, what is an allowable use for summer programs, can really help that.

CATHERINE AUGUSTINE Yeah, and I'll add that, as Jenn said, some states are taking the lead on this. We've been doing some work in Texas and for some program funding there, for this particular program they have in Texas, the summer programs offered by school districts need to be at least five weeks long, need to offer at least three hours of academics a day, need to have certified academic teachers teaching those academic subjects. So there are places like California and Texas that have figured out this is important, we're going to put our own state funding toward this, and we're going to, through our policy, have requirements attached to that funding, and that's happening in Massachusetts as well. So Jenn's right that the funding might shift from the federal government to the state government, in some cases where states have money available to them. And as that happens, we're seeing that that funding is attached to what we know are aspects of quality.

ANN STONE So both of you have been doing research on summer learning for a long time now, and there's always more to learn. So in your view, what are some of the next big questions for research on summer learning? Or put another way, are there important gaps about what we know or don't know about summer learning that research could fill?

CATHERINE AUGUSTINE I'd like to take this question as what do practitioners need and then I'll let Jenn talk more about what the field could learn. So in the work that we've continued to do in supporting districts, I think there are two areas in which they could benefit from more assistance and one is in the enrichment programming. As Jenn alluded to earlier, sometimes that's sort of seen as an afterthought, particularly by a school district whose primary mission is academics, right? So they're going to put on a summer program, they might be putting more effort into getting the math and reading curriculum right. And that is important, you know, don't get me wrong. But as we've talked about throughout this conversation, we also want these programs to further students skills and knowledge and make up for the opportunity gap that we see in the summer in which there are lots of kids who don't have, like me

when I was a kid, didn't have very much to do, didn't have enough to do, were not being engaged.

And those enrichment opportunities are so important in a student's development, in their identity development and thinking about future careers. And let's not make that an afterthought. That's not a time for coloring on paper. You know, let's bring in, even in rural areas that we're working in now, school districts are partnering with farms and offering horseback riding for kids in the summer. And just providing them with something new, opening their eyes to a new experience, taking them on field trips to places they've never been. I think districts need support in that area on how to do that well. And the other is in having these warm and welcoming climates within the summer program. When we started observing these programs, we saw a lot of, we saw some, you know, kids who had to be quiet in the cafeteria or else they needed to go stand up against the wall.

You know and we worked with these programs to turn that around and make the climates more engaging and welcoming and, you know, allowing for loud conversations in the lunchroom. And teachers want that too. Teachers want to know how to have positive relationships with students. And we know so much more now as a field about how to do that, how to greet students, how to end the day with optimistic closures, how to have circle time where students are allowed to voice how they're feeling and develop relationships with each other and with adults. And so I think with school districts, in particular, those are two areas of need, the enrichment experiences and having that warm and welcoming climate. Because both of those things will get the kids to want to attend every day, and they need to be there in order to benefit from the math, reading, science, et cetera instruction.

JENNIFER MCCOMBS

Yeah, I completely agree with everything Catherine said and it also points me to sort of like where we have less evidence of how to do those things particularly around sort of like the engagement and the enrichment. And one is in rural communities, sort of like where transportation can be a barrier in particular. Sort of like what that looks like in practice and how people get around that. I think sort of like having greater evidence and documentation around that would be particularly helpful. Another is in programming for older students so middle school students. So as I alluded to sort of, it's a lot easier to incentivize and engage a fourth grader than it is an eighth grader.

There's just a, there's a higher bar. And so how is it that you can create sort of like the type of opportunities that kids want to, how is it that you can involve more choice into summer programming, which is developmentally appropriate? How is it that you can make sure that you are having both academic and enrichment experiences that are linked to the developmental stage of different students? You know, can we think about, you know, at the high school level, combining city-level youth employment programs with a credit recovery program, and what would that look like? I think that there's also a space for innovation that could be opened up as well.

CATHERINE AUGUSTINE

Yeah, and speaking of programs for older kids. As I think both Jenn and I said earlier, the youth employment programs that are in place in many cities, including New York City and Chicago, have some really interesting outcomes associated with them. So improved retention in school and also less involvement in crime, either as a victim or as a perpetrator. And that's not necessarily the focus of those programs, but those programs, by virtue of the way they're designed, involve a lot of mentoring, right? These students are put into a job for the summer working with adults. And so there's some interest in sort of unpacking what happens, like what makes for a good mentoring experience? Why do we see these positive outcomes? Is it simply the modeling or is it the interaction? Is it something that they say directly or do? And that could help with other mentoring programs that aren't necessarily associated with job programs. So trying to figure out, as Jenn said, what attracts students, what motivates them to attend, what keeps them there. And also get into sort of that black box. We know a lot about upper elementary students at this point, we know less about middle and high school kids. How are positive outcomes promoted in those programs?

ANN STONE

So anything else that you would like to share? You've talked about a lot of different aspects of summer time experiences, summer programming, policy, funding, research, anything else that you want to share with us that you think is important to think about?

CATHERINE AUGUSTINE

Well don't forget that parents want these programs. So we've talked about parent demand and how to, you know, have programs that are free and have transportation and have meals. And so it's important that parents be aware of opportunities, that they have information about what these programs will provide, and that they are, you know,

that they feel confident that their children will have a good time, will be taken care of, will be safe. So keeping the lines of communication going between teachers and parents, you know, particularly now or as school years come to an end, so that parents are aware of these opportunities. And parents often trust their children's teachers or school principals to make recommendations. So they're, so parents are an important part of the equation as are the school employees who interact with them.

ANN STONE

I think that's a fitting note to end on. I so appreciate you joining me in this rich conversation, Jennifer and Catherine, and helping us to kick off our Summer Learning podcast series and thank you to our listeners for joining us as well. 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.