

Rethinking Summer Learning:
**Why—and How—Two Districts
Transformed Their Programs**

**CLAUDIA
DEMEGRET**

Welcome to the Wallace Summer Learning Podcast series. I'm Claudia DeMegret, senior Program Officer at the Wallace Foundation, and I'll be the host for today's episode. In this series, we delve into an important area of our youth development portfolio. Summer learning this episode explores how two districts Alabama's Tuscaloosa City schools, and New Jersey's Newark Public Schools have completely reimagined their summer learning programs. Both districts have shifted from traditional summer school models to using evidence-based practices focused on truly engaging young people and fostering their wellbeing while helping them learn and build new interests and skills. Yet the districts are taking two very different approaches to the shift. One district began its summer learning journey in 2018 in response to emerging evidence about what works in summer programming. The other turned to the summertime frame as a strategy to help address COVID-19 impacts, which also highlighted preexisting inequities in the system.

But both districts are clear that there's no going back to business as usual for summer learning. The districts are part of the District Summer Learning Network, DSL or DSLN for short, which is led by FHI 360 and funded by the Wallace Foundation. The national effort of more than a hundred districts and six state education agencies focuses on maximizing the potential of summer learning through coaching, professional development, and peer learning. Participating districts and states are building summer learning programs that combine academics and enrichment are rooted in evidence and designed for impact, and they are a lot of fun. Two visionary leaders from Newark and Tuscaloosa have joined us today to talk about how they've reinvented their summer learning programs and are seeing some strong results. Matt Brewster is the director of the Office of Staff Development for Newark Public Schools, and Dr. Andrew Maxey is director of strategic initiatives at Tuscaloosa City Schools. Joining them as our moderator today is Nancy Gannon, our fantastic senior advisor of teaching and learning for FHI 360's education programs. Nancy directs the District Summer Learning Network and provides overall leadership for the program's partnerships with states and districts. I'm so excited to hear from

the trio, about the steps they took to rethink how they work in summer and how it could be different and better, and the impact it has had on their students, staff, and communities. Thank you all for being here. I will now turn the podcast to our moderator, Nancy.

NANCY GANNON

Thank you, Claudia. I'm so excited to be here today and to help spotlight the work of these two districts. Before we dive into your summer learning programs, I'd like to learn more about your respective communities to help ground the conversation. Can each of you share a little bit about your districts and student populations? Matt let's start with you.

**MATTHEW
BREWSTER**

Yes, Nancy. Good morning. Newark Public Schools is the largest school district in New Jersey. We have about 38,000 students and 66 schools. 70% of our students get free or reduced lunch, and our student population is about 52% Hispanic, and the rest are black, white, and Asian, and others.

NANCY GANNON

Great. Andrew, can you add a little bit about your district as well?

ANDREW MAXEY

Absolutely. Thank you again for this opportunity to talk with each other. Tuscaloosa City Schools serves about 11,500 students here in what has been the home of college football. Who knows whether it will continue to be. Like Newark, we serve a very diverse group of students. A fairly unique feature of our district is that there is one of the widest ranges of differences between the socioeconomic statuses of our students. Our district has universal free lunch because of the number of students who qualify for that, and then we have a fairly balanced ethnic diversity in our student population as well.

NANCY GANNON

Thank you for that. To both of you, I want to ask, we know there are summer learning leaders who want to move away from the strict summer school model of yesteryear, but they're not really sure where to begin. Can you help us understand the evolution that happened in each of your districts before you made the shift? What did summer school look like in your community? What does it look like now? Matt, do you want to start?

**MATTHEW
BREWSTER**

Yeah, sure. So, before we started making our shift, summer school was just that: it was a place for kids to go during the summer to keep them off the street. The stakes were kind of low, teachers didn't expect to have to really, really dig into the curriculum or anything like that. It was just

business as usual. And again, it wasn't anywhere or any place that people were looking to for real results. It was just keeping the kids off the street.

ANDREW MAXEY

And in Tuscaloosa, summer school was punitive, as it is or has been in most places. Summer school was a place where students who were in danger of retention were assigned to go. It was almost exclusively meant to be remedial and in effect punitive for the students who participated.

**MATTHEW
BREWSTER**

You know, I think that punitive piece is something I should probably highlight as well. It's kind of something that teachers would hold over kids' head, if you don't do well, we're going to send you to summer school. So, I'm glad you pointed that out Andrew.

NANCY GANNON

Yeah, I was thinking about that when you said low stakes, Matt, because it might have been low stakes in terms of nobody expecting results, but it wasn't low stakes for kids in terms of ruining their summer. And I probably want to come back later to this idea of low stakes as thinking about summer learning as a vehicle for districts achieving goals around student learning, and how that in a traditional model is pretty low outcomes, but in this model might be a lot more serious and high stakes. What was the impetus for reinventing your approach to summer programming and making that shift?

ANDREW MAXEY

In Tuscaloosa, we essentially took a gamble one year and attempted to provide something different for students. That was actually in the summer of 2017. And as you'll recall what I consider watershed research on what works in summer learning was released that fall. In attending NSLA's conference that fall, we were in the room when that research was released. And what that led to was at the senior level of the district, we essentially, we literally said to each other, do we believe this research about summer learning loss? And if we do, what should we do about it? So, that was the first step for us. We talk in districts about being data-driven and following the evidence. This is a case where we said, do we believe this or not? And if we do, what ought we do? And that set us on this path.

**MATTHEW
BREWSTER**

For us here in Newark, I think it was the pandemic that really got us started. As we all know, the pandemic shed a spotlight on the inequities that existed in our communities. And it became really clear to us that we had to find ways to help students recover from what happened during the pandemic. And we joined the Wallace Foundation's principal pipeline, PLC, in the fall

of 2019 before any of us knew what COVID-19 was. Being a part of that initiative got us focused on leadership and how to develop our bench of leaders in the district. All of that kind of came together for us to do something with summer because we knew that one of the best ways to help students deal with learning loss was to have them spend more time with us. The summer was a really ripe opportunity to increase the amount of time students were with us and provide them with rich instruction.

NANCY GANNON

I'd love to spend a minute talking about your unique pathways. How did you start? So, you have this realization, whether it's because of the pandemic or because of the research, you see the need in young people. Where do you start then, and what were some of the first steps you took?

**MATTHEW
BREWSTER**

For us, one of the first steps was making sure that we got our leaders prepared for what was coming next. In addition to the pandemic creating learning loss in our students, it also resulted in a lot of people leaving the profession. Whether through retirement or resignation or other kinds of attrition. And so, we had a real need to continue to develop leaders to staff our buildings and lead our programs. And so, doing that, making sure that we use summer to build that capacity of our leaders. I mentioned earlier that were part of the principal pipeline. Our aspiring leaders who were becoming prepared to become principals needed an opportunity to get some field work, right? We used our summer program as a proving ground for them, right? Our summer programs are led by our sitting vice principals. But these aspiring leaders then came into those programs as sort of an assistant principal to that summer school principal to learn the ropes of school leadership. We spent a lot of time getting those leaders developed in terms of curriculum development and instructional leadership and making sure that teachers were doing what they needed to do to make those days during the summer really, really effective.

NANCY GANNON

Matt, having visited your program in its first year, what I saw was leaders that were really excited, young leaders that were trying it out. And in a moment where we saw and read about educators leaving the profession across the country, we went to your site and saw people that were really bought in and excited about stepping into this role. How did you create that buy-in?

**MATTHEW
BREWSTER**

I think it's a matter of investing in people and letting them know how committed the district gets to their development. Having resources like the Wallace Foundation, having university partners come to the table and

encouraging people to understand that being committed to this district is going to have a payoff, right? We wanted to invest in people who were either born here or live here or have significant ties to the community. It was all about just building that mindset that if you invest in us, we'll invest in you. We'll do this together for the betterment of the children of the city of Newark.

ANDREW MAXEY

The success of programs like this are going to depend on the adults wanting to be part of them as well. So, you design programs that students want to be part of, but you also go about your work in a way that adults prefer to be in your program. We have people who get disappointed that they can't get a spot in summer learning, as opposed to many of our peers who struggle in the summer in the same way they do during the school year. And Matt has touched on some of these they do as well. We're flexible with what your assignment looks like. You can work a half day, or you can work some of the days as long as we plan ahead on that, you help make decisions about what you're teaching. There are guardrails, but you have a voice in that.

And then, we pay as well, or a little bit better than what a teacher could make doing any other temporary job in the summer. So, again, we're very responsive to the adults in identifying what would make this a thing that you want to be part of. So that is good for the students, but not at the expense of the adults. If the adults are happy doing the work, the students are the ones who benefit from that. The program is when you see joy in a program, when you see community in a program, that doesn't happen when you have people who are grudgingly present.

NANCY GANNON

Andrew, you want to say a little bit about how you got started and, and how you built your program? What were your first steps?

ANDREW MAXEY

Absolutely. I mentioned how at the beginning we asked that question of ourselves about where we stand on the research. The answer to that question for us was that we do believe the research and that because we do, we must make summer learning a core strategy for addressing achievement gaps. Since the research indicates that elementary summer learning loss is a major driver of widening achievement gaps, we simply can't afford to allow that anymore. We must intervene in that specific area. In addition to other strategies that were taken as a district to address learning for students from the beginning, we said that we were going to set out to normalize summer learning. What we mean by that is in Alabama,

attendance in kindergarten is not required, but everyone, pretty much everyone does it. In fact, in our city, we have defacto universal pre-K that's what we want for summer, where it may not be required, but it's what everyone does.

And we set out there, but then we were very careful not to attempt to hurt our progress by starting too quickly. What we did every year is say, what does quality look like? What does impact look like? And how do we make a commitment to continuing to grow our capacity to do that work? The point is we did not tackle the whole thing at once, but we made a commitment to doing the work and to growing into scale and expertise in the work. For us, in studying the research on what works best, we knew that these had to be programs that students would not stay away from. Then, students are the ones that help recruit themselves. They talk to their parents about coming, of course, full day programs that are of high quality are great for parents too. So, you communicate directly to parents, but you also recruit students through the quality of your program and the attractiveness of your program.

We set out to identify and pursue quality and to build partnerships along the way so that this is not owned only by the district, but it's a community commitment to this work. This is a whole district approach. Literally every single department in the district contributes to this work. It's no longer a one-off thing. It's no longer small, it's a very significant commitment by the district. And so, myself and a couple other people have a deep expertise in this area, but everyone has a shared understanding of what we're doing and why we're doing it. So yes, there are leads on this work, but we are literally all in this work across the district.

NANCY GANNON

I want to connect a couple things. The fact that in a moment where we're talking about how hard it is to retain educators, and yet you have these educators that are super excited to be there, and in a moment where we're talking about how we have an emergency in attendance across the country, and yet your kids want to come. And the thing that I heard from both of you is the importance of investment. And not specifically about money, although of course money is really critical for this work, but investment of time, investment in humans, investment in the adults that are doing this, and making them feel that investment in kids and making them feel that investment. That's a really powerful idea, to think about what a difference that makes. And then the second thing I want to say is when we started this conversation, Matt mentioned something about low stakes. And having been a principal, I know that summer school did feel low stakes. But the

thing that you are talking about, both of you, feels high stakes. It feels like a very powerful resource that if you're not tapping into it as a district, you're really missing out. I just wanted to call that out. Matt, you wanted to build on something?

**MATTHEW
BREWSTER**

Yeah, I just wanted to piggyback on what Andrew was saying about students and students and their voices. We've conducted focus groups with students the past couple of summers, and we heard from them and where they told us things like I wish the regular school year was like this. I wish we could do this when the school year starts off. And so, we knew that we were doing something in the summertime that was innovative and that we were digging deep to get students engaged. Also, those focus groups with teachers said the same kind of thing, right? I can teach in the summer school program; the academic interventionists can intervene. The academic coach can actually coach. We don't have to cover classes or do some of those other things that we would have to do during the regular school year. And so, the challenge of course, is how do you replicate that for the regular school year? How do you make those things that are exciting people in the summertime? How do you reproduce them to move on into the regular school year?

NANCY GANNON

And just to be clear, since I walked around your building or your multiple buildings, but kids were doing math and kids were doing exactly literature, and kids were doing science. It wasn't like they were at the pool saying, why can't we do this? They were doing academic work.

**MATTHEW
BREWSTER**

Yeah. And I'm glad you mentioned that because our summer curriculum is developed by our Office of Teaching and Learning. So, we had our content area directors and supervisors embedded in all of our summer school programs. They conduct walkthroughs with the site leaders. They give feedback to teachers on the spot because, hey, it's 25 days. You can't allow someone to be making a mistake in curriculum implementation. You only got 25 days. But the intent is to make sure leaders understand their responsibility as instructional leaders and what they have to do to make sure the curriculum is being implemented with as much fidelity as possible.

NANCY GANNON

Andrew, Matt, I heard both of you talk about the importance of quality of your summer learning program, both for recruiting teachers, recruiting families, and recruiting students. Give us a sense of what that looks like.

**MATTHEW
BREWSTER**

Well for us, quality was about making sure that the people working the program had the professional development in advance that they needed to hit the ground running on day one. Providing PD in the springtime for the teachers and the leaders, letting them dig into the curriculum, letting them see what the materials are going to be, making sure those materials were in place, so that on the very first day of summer school, they can start teaching. Everything is ready to roll on day one. In addition to that, making sure that the focus is on teaching and learning, that kids are provided with high quality, engaging instruction and teaching that is going to produce a product at the end. And so, a culminating activity, whether it be a play or a project or a performance, whatever the case may be, the kids know from day one we're building towards something at the end of the summer, and your parents are going to be invited to come see it, and you're going to put it on display for your friends and your classmates. So, making sure the program has everything it needs to be its best from day one is really important for us in terms of quality.

ANDREW MAXEY

For us in Tuscaloosa, each of our programs, we hire directors in the fall, as Matt mentioned they do in Newark, who begin work on planning their program. We support them. They work independently. The expectation is that all programs adhere to what the research describes quality programs have in common with each other. That includes they must be affordable. The research says our programs are free. They must last at least 20 days. Ours last 25 days. They must be full days because the families of children who need it the most are less likely to be able to participate in a program that is not full day. They must include at least three hours of academic instruction. They must create spaces that are safe for students, that create community for students. And then for us, quality is also in the feedback, in the description when students choose to attend the program and report satisfaction when parents choose to send their children and report satisfaction. And you can keep going with that. The root motivation here is to shield students from learning loss, but programs need to do much, much more than that for students and for the adults that participate in them. So, for us, we actually have a very high bar of what we're trying to accomplish in all of these programs. Quality is, is much more complicated than most children grew, or most children had a positive academic outcome.

NANCY GANNON

What are the changes that you saw in results coming from a drastically different kind of programming? Can you cite any specific impact that you've been able to document through this work?

ANDREW MAXEY

I can cite among many and let me cite two data sources that we have available to us. Just lay a little groundwork here. Our philosophy is that the purpose of summer learning for elementary students is to shield them from learning loss. I have the utmost respect for our colleagues who think of and talk about summer learning as acceleration. And some still talk about it as remediation. For us, those are byproducts. The prime directive is protect student learning from eroding. That's how we look at the data. And what we know is that when students attend a majority of our program, they have a 73% chance of losing no learning over the summer compared to their peers who do not attend a program having only about a 13% chance of losing no learning. In other words, in Tuscaloosa, the shielding works. Alabama, like some other states, has a letter grade report card for schools. This year, three of our schools improved at least one letter grade. They have very strong after-school programs and very high rates of participation in very high-quality summer learning programs. It's not the answer, but it is absolutely part of the answer. So, we see these results both at the individual student level, and we can see them at the school level as well.

MATTHEW BREWSTER

Absolutely. I mean, I couldn't say it any better. Here in Newark, we found out this spring that 20 of our schools were taken off the state's comprehensive review list, right? And while that's not directly attributable to summer learning alone, it's part of our process. It's part of our strategy to help students recover from learning loss that happened during the pandemic. And so, afterschool program, summer learning, higher stakes summer learning with intentionality in terms of developing leaders and curriculum implementation and solid enrichment programs and opening up more sites. All of that contributes to the fact that those 20 schools came off the list. In addition to that, the Council of Great City Schools, of which we are a member, recently put out some research that was published in the New York Times that highlighted Newark as one of the districts that increased student enrollment, since the pandemic, as well as produced math results that are outpacing the nation. Not everything has to do with summer school, but it's part of the strategy, and we're seeing results from the strategies that we're implementing.

NANCY GANNON

That's fantastic. Again, thinking about that way we used to think about low stakes summer school programs, and now hearing from both of you that summer can be a way for the district to really achieve big goals for their schools and for their young people, means that it moves from low stakes to high stakes in the eyes of the district, too. That makes a lot of sense. Any final advice for summer learning leaders who want to start reinvigorating summer as a time of learning?

**MATTHEW
BREWSTER**

Yeah, I think a district should identify a focus, identify where they're going to get started. You can't do everything at one time. You have to understand that it's a process. It's a journey. Ours has been a three-year journey, going on four years, where each year we do something a little bit different and where we refine what we're doing to make sure it's better. Each year, we talk to students, we talk to teachers, we talk to parents, we talk to staff members. We try to be responsive, and we try to be flexible. Andrew mentioned providing more opportunities for teachers to have flexible schedules and just do different things to make sure we get the very best people involved. I think for any district looking to move from summer school to summer learning, they need to be intentional about setting goals and reaching those goals one at a time. I cannot be any more appreciative of the work that we've done with the District Summer Learning Network to help us do just that.

NANCY GANNON

Thank you, Matt.

ANDREW MAXEY

My advice to other leaders would be to make the decision about where summer learning fits into the puzzle of your district. Of course, my strong advice is make it a priority. Not elevate it above anything else, but to say, we're going to move it from this is a thing we do into being intentional about the role of summer learning in achieving student learning outcomes. I think Matt and I would both say, whatever you do out there, do not cut and paste what we have done. Go to the research study and then try to work out what that looks like in your situation. And then the other piece I would recommend is, from the beginning, talk to your people. Start with your parents and ask them what they want out of summer. Empower your people, tap into what they want and what they value. But then, if you have the buy-in of your community you're going to be successful in this space.

**MATTHEW
BREWSTER**

I just want to go back to something Andrew said a little while ago when he talked about the investment of the people in the district. It's really, really important for everyone to understand that it's not just a small team of three or four people that are coming together to do this work. We have a team of 30 people that come together on the instructional and operational side on a monthly basis or bimonthly basis, depending on need. And our very first meeting for summer 2024 took place in September 2023. Every month we were being intentional about getting people together and getting them moving in the same direction to be prepared for summer programs in the summertime. So as much as you have to get that buy-in and commitment from the community, you have to know that people in the district are all moving in the same direction. That you have a team of people that are dedicated to, committed to, getting the work done.

NANCY GANNON

And of course, from the District Summer Learning Network and the work that FHI has done in this sphere, we know that that looks really different in a small rural district. But in terms of numbers, in terms of buy-in, you still need the buy-in. We have some summer learning programs that are being run by the third-grade teacher, and they do this part-time, but they're still working across the district, even if it's a tiny district, to make sure that everybody's on board. And people share that same understanding of the importance of this work and how it's tied to the research. And I just want to say in terms of FHI 360's District Summer Learning Network, the work that both of you have done in connecting to other educators and creating a learning environment where education leaders can come in and learn from each other and see an array of models, I think that that's critical.

And so often education leaders are trying to figure this out on their own, or they're trying to read the research and imagine what implementation could look like. And Andrew, I take your point about nobody can cut and paste, but I have seen a lot of districts across the network inspired by the array of different programs that are out there. And to find yourself a learning community, whether it's 70 districts or three districts, there are lots of ways out there to connect with other education leaders and really get some examples of what this looks like in process.

ANDREW MAXEY

You couldn't have said it better, Nancy, that there's this tension between making the decisions and doing the work in your context and the temptation to just do exactly what someone else did. But the key is how do you take the pieces from your network and put together components that fit your context really well.

NANCY GANNON

If you're talking to your educators and you're talking to your community, your kids and your families, you can't cut and paste because you've listened to them as well, right? You have to really be in it to listen to all the different voices and stakeholders. I want to thank you so much for sharing your experiences and your insights today. Andrew, Matt, it's been a real pleasure learning from and with you. Claudia, I'll turn the podcast back over to you.

**CLAUDIA
DEMEGRET**

Thanks so much, Nancy, for moderating today's conversation and for helping to share some of the work of the District Summer Learning Network. I also want to join in thanking Matt and Andrew. It's invaluable to hear how communities can build programs that are research-based and responsive to the unique needs and context of their communities. And thank you to our listeners for joining us as well. If you want to learn more about planning, implementing, and sustaining summer learning programs, please visit our website at www.wallacefoundation.org.