

Going Beyond High School Credit Recovery in Summer Learning: *From Remediation to Acceleration*

THE SUMMER SNAPSHOT SERIES: PART I





**Center for Policy, Research,
and Evaluation**

NYU Metro Center

August 2024

The Summer Snapshots Series: Part I

This brief is part of a multi-part series titled ‘Summer Snapshots’ born out of ongoing research on the District Summer Learning Network (DSLN). This research, conducted by the NYU Metro Center’s Policy, Research & Evaluation (PRE) team, explores how school districts across the U.S. plan and implement high-quality, evidence-based summer learning programs for students.

About the Center for Policy, Research, and Evaluation:

The Center for Policy, Research, and Evaluation (PRE) at the NYU Metro Center conducts applied research and evaluation studies focused on promoting positive educational outcomes for youth, and understanding the influence of both schools and communities on those outcomes. Its goal is to use research to inform educational policies and practices at federal, state, local, and programmatic levels.

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Sponsored by The Wallace Foundation

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By giving high school students fun, hands-on learning opportunities like creating podcasts for English credits or applying geometric equations to a leatherworking project, some school districts are reimagining summer learning programs that have previously relied on a traditional model of credit recovery.

In 2021, two million US students dropped out of high school; pending credits and course failures are key risk factors for leaving high school without a diploma (Balfanz, et al., 2010). Keeping students on track and ensuring that they complete high school is a key equity challenge, given that Black and Brown students, multilingual learners, and students experiencing poverty graduate at lower rates than the national average (Irwin, et al., 2023). This makes summer a crucial opportunity for getting and keeping students on track.

Traditional credit recovery models enroll students in condensed, pared-down versions of classes in which they need to earn credits. These courses are increasingly offered online or in hybrid models, with students working through coursework individually. But in the post-pandemic world, online and hybrid recovery models have exacerbated absenteeism, increased mental health concerns, and lowered performance, particularly for students from low-income communities (Dorn, et al., 2021). Further, typical credit recovery models don't address the underlying challenges that prevent students from accumulating credits on time, including gaps in foundational academic skills, disengagement from coursework, mental health challenges, and limited opportunities to develop socioemotional and life skills that support school achievement, among others (Gourley, 2009; Mac Iver, 2013).

School districts have an opportunity to re-envision summer as a time for engaging, relevant, well-rounded programming that can set students up for future success while ensuring they stay on track for graduation. By designing summer learning programs that embrace students' interests, needs, cultures, and identities, districts can inspire a greater love of learning and foster a sense well-being (Bang, et al., 2021). And some districts are actively rethinking the design of their programs with this in mind.

The DSLN Approach to Summer Learning

Districts within the District Summer Learning Network (DSLNL) are shifting away from the traditional “summer school” remediation model to offer enriching programming that accelerates learning and fosters student well-being. DSLNL has helped more than 100 school districts and six states design, implement, and sustain high-quality, evidence-based summer learning programs that prepare students for academic success and support their wellbeing.

Funded by The Wallace Foundation, DSLNL is designed and led by FHI 360, with NYU Metro Center’s Policy, Research and Evaluation (PRE) team as the research partner.

Expert coaches help DSLNL districts maximize the potential of summer programs with a focus on evidence-based practices, academic quality, whole child development, strong community partnerships, and intentional program design that supports all students. Particularly for high school students, this means going beyond traditional credit recovery models to more innovative and enriching summer programs.

In this Summer Snapshot, we provide practical examples of how two DSLNL districts, one small and one large (see [Appendix A](#)), have re-invented summer learning to prepare high school students for future success. They have incorporated youth voice in summer learning design, offered highly engaging project-based learning experiences focused on skill and subject mastery, and exposed students to career and college readiness opportunities.

Much of what is known about designing summer learning programs focuses on elementary and middle school. By highlighting **Manchester Public School District’s Flight School** and **Oakland Unified School District’s Summer HACK** program, we hope to show what innovative summer learning for high school students can look like.



Photo courtesy of The Center for ArtEsteem

Highlights from this Summer Snapshot:

- **Manchester, CT Public School District** developed Flight School, an inquiry-driven, mastery-based summer learning program that incorporated social-emotional and life skills development, college and career readiness, and authentic adult-student relationships.
- **Oakland, CA Unified School District** piloted Summer HAcK (Healing and Academics for Kids), a five-week summer learning credit recovery program for 9th and 10th grade high school students that integrated project-based academic learning with social-emotional supports and enrichment activities.

Key Programmatic Features of the Two Acceleration Models:

- Positioning community partners as thought leaders and co-designers
- Elevating community and youth voice and leadership
- Offering college and career readiness programs
- Ensuring high academic standards
- Embedding social-emotional and life skills development

Photo by Paul Ofria for Manchester Public Schools



◀ *Students in Flight School were offered three interdisciplinary courses that blended two or three content areas including science, culinary arts, math, performing arts, health, technical education, ELA, and social studies*

▶ *Teaching Artist and ArtEsteem Artistic Development Manager Etty Alberto worked with Mr. Gonzalez's Biology class to explore the Golden Ratio. They created papier mache models of the Fibonacci spiral and compared how this pattern is found on the human body, plants, and animals.*



Photo courtesy of The Center for ArtEsteem

Manchester's Flight School:

Blending enrichment, academics, and youth voice into credit recovery

A short drive from Connecticut's capital city sits the large suburb of Manchester, home of the Manchester Public School District, which serves more than 6,100 Pre K through 12th-grade students across its 10 schools. For Manchester High School (MHS) students, summer credit recovery traditionally involved students registering for summer courses that required them to complete two to three assessments aligned to academic course standards. While this approach helped students meet graduation requirements, it did not address the complex causes behind why they had struggled to complete courses during the school year, such as feelings of disconnectedness from class assignments and peers. In 2022, MHS reimagined summer learning as a chance to support well-rounded youth development by combining academic growth, socio-emotional and life skills development, community relationships, and leadership, while ensuring students could earn needed credits.

The result of Manchester's reimagining was Flight School, a four-and-a-half-week summer learning program that combined three styles of pedagogy: (1) inquiry-based learning, whereby students were challenged to find answers themselves; (2) culturally relevant learning, whereby courses had a personal draw or connection to students' identity and lives; and (3) project-based learning, which emphasized collaboration and the power of creating something of one's own. The model also incorporated social-emotional and life skills development, college and career readiness, and authentic adult-student and peer relationships.

High school students who were at least one year behind in pending credits could apply. Forty-two students were selected for summer 2022, and 39 students were selected for summer 2023. Selection criteria included quality of application, number of credits needed, and evidence of potential for success in the program.

From 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM each day, Flight School offered three interdisciplinary courses that blended two or three content areas including science, culinary arts, math, performing arts, health, technical education, ELA, and social studies. Students could earn 2-2.5 credits per course. The three Flight School courses relied on four teaching dimensions: content, skills, critical thinking concepts, and cultural relevance. Manchester developed tailored rubrics with standards for each course. Students were evaluated on mastery of content-specific skills, not completion of work. They had to demonstrate mastery against at least 3 out of 5 standards in each content area, corresponding to a "C" grade, to earn credit.

Students as design partners and leaders

Creating opportunities for students to develop their voice and leadership was another essential feature of the Flight School's design. Manchester positioned students as co-creators of their learning, acknowledging that student insights could positively shape Flight School programming. During the months leading to the Flight School's launch, Manchester leaders invited high school students to participate in weekly planning meetings and orientation activities alongside staff.

Amanda Navarra, Manchester’s Innovation and Research Strategist, expressed the value of having students as partners in planning:

“ [The students] were wonderful, they ended up putting together a one-page front and back document that was like a guide for teachers that said, ‘Here’s how we recommend you structure a class period. Here are some things that you can do that we all universally find engaging. Here is some feedback on how you may or may not want to assess students and how we feel about being assessed in certain ways.’ Teachers said, hands down, that was the most helpful resource that they had for that summer... Without having any idea that they were doing it, students were almost quoting strategies from texts like Zaretta Hammond’s *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* and Peter Liljedahl’s *Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics*.

Strong relationships and relevant, engaging learning

Flight School students were divided into three cohorts, a design feature intended to build trust and connections with peers and adults within small groups. Courses were co-taught by teachers representing different disciplines, with one adult for every four students. Teachers focused on building a safe community for students to reflect, learn, and engage with the coursework as well as with peers and adults. Manchester instituted a no-phone policy with the hope of deepening interpersonal connections without the distraction of devices.

Because courses were designed with cultural relevance in mind, students explored topics that were relevant to their lives, identity, and community. For example, the ‘Struggle to Strength’ course blended ELA, performing arts, and health content areas and was co-taught by teachers of those disciplines. Students wrote and recorded personal narratives about their life experiences. In small groups, students conducted research, created a podcast with two music producers from a Hartford studio, and shared their podcast with their peers. ‘Struggle to Strength’ also encouraged students to reflect on their mental health at different points in their lives for half a credit of health. Reframing a challenging situation in terms of learning, growth, and strength was a strategy students practiced daily and was the central theme of the course.

MHS school leaders reported that students felt welcome, engaged, and safe as a result of blending positive relationship-building and self-reflection with academic learning. For example, Bryan McCain, an MHS Science Teacher and Flight School Site Coordinator shared,

“ These students opened up, they shared ideas with each other, and supported each other. They explained how this is the most comfortable they have been in school and the happiest they have been in school, which led them to opening up and doing work. They shared stories with the teachers and their peers about their vulnerabilities and fears and about the difficult experiences they have gone through. They opened themselves up to others and to a new future.

The most noticeable change in student attitudes and behavior was self-confidence. In a 2022 Student Reflection Survey administered by Flight School staff, 97% of students reported an increase in self-confidence. A majority attributed this confidence boost to team-building

ice-breakers facilitated in the first three days within each cohort, which made them more comfortable with their peers and teachers. One such ice-breaker was a ‘Hula Hoop Pulse,’ in which students stood in a circle holding hands and sent a hand-squeeze “pulse” through the circle continuously without stopping. Eventually, the facilitator silently added a hula hoop to the circle with no explanation. This added challenge was meant to be a distraction, as the primary goal was still to keep the pulse going as a group. Team building activities of this kind became a recurring feature of Flight School the following year due to the positive feedback they received.

Program outcomes and future directions

Flight School was intentionally designed to be a small-scale and high-quality pilot program, with the goal of tracking data and success stories that could help improve future iterations and make the case for future funding and expansion. Since each course was designed to integrate more than one discipline, students earned 2-2.5 credits per course by demonstrating mastery in multiple content areas. Flight School also held high standards for attendance and emphasized that ‘each day is important.’ One day of absence resulted in one less credit, and students with two absences were asked to leave the program. In 2022, this resulted in a 98% attendance record with 95% of students earning all seven credits required for one school year. In 2023, 39 students participated, and 38 completed the full four-and-a-half-week program. No student missed more than one day of Flight School (one exception was made for an injured student), and on average, students recovered roughly six credits.

For the Flight School team, this pilot was a success. Manchester now has its sights set on expanding the program to future summers and beyond. The district has already begun thinking about how Flight School programmatic features can be embedded throughout the school year. McCain notes,

“ If the strategies used in this month of school were able to make this happen, what can they do in the regular school year? Imagine if, because of the way school functioned, students became more confident and less stressed. Imagine every student wanted to learn. Imagine if every student in your school felt welcomed, valued, and loved. This is what was accomplished in one month of [summer] school.

Flight School’s unique model signals that districts have the potential to think beyond remediation and build mastery-based learning that embeds student voice and socio-emotional and life skills development. Importantly, the district documented its decision-making processes, successes and lessons learned, which can be a cornerstone of the program’s future sustainability. The program’s 2022 annual report shares student and staff reflections on the success of the program, along with key implications for the regular school year, such as the importance of integrating life skills in a way that affirms students, team-building activities, enforcing attendance and no-phone policies, and ensuring future credit recovery programs continue to focus on mastery and inquiry-driven, culturally responsive, project-based learning. In the future, Flight School intends to embed another district initiative into this model—the College Application Academy led by two college and career readiness experts who help rising high school seniors narrow down their college lists, complete essays, and apply for financial support programs like Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Oakland's Summer HAcK Program:

Leveraging community partnerships to create enriching and relevant learning experiences

Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is a large public school district located in the Bay Area in California, serving more than 35,000 students and about 6,500 pre-K through 12th-grade students during the summer. OUSD's summer programming for high school students focuses on credit recovery to ensure timely graduation.

In the past, a typical summer program day involved students working with one teacher for a 2.5-hour block in the morning and with another teacher for a second block in the afternoon to recoup unmet credits. However, when the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated unfinished learning for high school students, OUSD's High School Network created a Central Academic Recovery (CAR) team to respond with summer programming that met students' multiple needs.

CAR team leader Gina Hill shares that they were **“adamant about creating programming that responded to the moment in a way that [was] holistic considering the global trauma we all experienced. It could not be a business-as-usual program.”** OUSD's CAR team recognized that relevant and engaging learning opportunities could support both the academic and social-emotional needs of high school students, and sought to reimagine what credit recovery could look like.

They piloted Summer HAcK'22 (Healing and Academics for Kids), a five-week summer learning credit recovery program for 9th and 10th grade high school students that integrated academic project-based learning with social-emotional supports and enrichment activities. Five courses were offered: biology, algebra 1, geometry, English, and physical education. Ninety-three students from 10 Oakland Unified schools participated in the Summer HAcK'22 program during summer 2022, with most pursuing a total of 12.5 credits.

Community-district co-design and teaching

OUSD educators designed and taught each Summer HAcK'22 course in collaboration with a community-based organization (CBO). For example, the biology course, taught in collaboration with the Niroga Institute, a yoga and wellness center, focused on the mind-body connection, chronic stress, and approaches to resilience. Students hand-painted t-shirts depicting the benefits of various yoga poses and, as Hill describes it, “were like a walking art gallery exhibition.” The algebra 1 course was developed in partnership with the Chabot Space and Science Center, where students spent Fridays learning algebra concepts within the context of rocket launching. The geometry course was co-taught with The Crucible, a nonprofit art school offering woodworking, machine shop, welding, and leatherworking, among many other activities. Students constructed a leather-working project using geometric equations and strategies and depicted tessellation designs using acrylics on canvas. The Center for ArtEsteem, an art program that supports youth in developing emotional, social, and academic skills through creative media, collaboratively taught the English course. The physical education course was taught in collaboration with the women-led indigenous Sogorea Te' Land Trust; students went on historical learning walks, counted their steps, took pictures, and then made presentations about the deliberately erased stories of indigenous people from various Oakland locales.

Mastery-based learning

Each Summer HAcK'22 course ended in a culminating project and used mastery-based grading to assess student performance. Teachers used rubrics with a scale of one to four, where four = Advanced or A, and one = Not yet, which meant “keep trying,” and students had to pass with a C- or higher. With their “no fail” policy D’s and F’s weren’t an option, and educators and CBO leads worked with students until they demonstrated conceptual mastery of the course content. Most importantly, these courses offered rich opportunities for students to connect academic content to the world around them while building the life skills they need to thrive. The model offered in-class support from volunteers and college interns, small class sizes, weekly progress reports and communication with families, community-building exercises, and Dynamic Mindfulness wellness practices rooted in yoga (led by Niroga and trained teachers) in all classes. In addition, Summer HAcK students were also offered themed “Fun Fridays” that focused on topics including college exploration, community building, cultural appreciation, and wellness.

Strong financial and human resources investments

OUSD deeply invested both financial and human resources in the design and implementation of Summer HAcK'22. As Julie McCalmont, Coordinator of OUSD’s Expanded Learning Programs reflected,

“ We have never invested this much [in a] summer re-design effort at the high school level. It was a complete flip of past credit recovery models, which were mostly students sitting passively and re-taking coursework.

These investments allowed Summer HAcK'22 to offer small class sizes. Teachers also received coaching and extensive professional development on supporting students’ social-emotional and academic skills, as well as on a restorative justice peacemaking model focused on community- building practices that tend to prevent harm from happening. Additionally, OUSD carefully recruited teachers who would embrace co-teaching alongside CBO staff.

Program outcomes and future direction

According to district leaders, the Summer HAcK'22 pilot was a success. Ninety-three percent of participating students received a C or better, 91% of participating students earned all credits attempted, and their attendance retention rate was 88%.

OUSD offered the Summer HAcK program for the second time during summer 2023. Programming was expanded to serve 129 students. The district continued to partner with community organizations ArtEsteem, The Crucible, and the Niroga Institute, and added the social enterprise Zymbolic, which supports students’ social-emotional and life skill development, and the youth leadership organization Urban Peace Movement. Students continued to work on creative projects. For example, in the English course with ArtEsteem, students created multimedia self-portraits that depicted their personal and experiential connections to characters in *There There* by Tommy Orange, a book featuring Native American characters living in Oakland. In another ArtEsteem partnership, biology students created papier mache models of Fibonacci spirals typically found in plants, animals, and parts of the human body.

Summer HAcK '23 students visited the Chabot Space and Science Center and the UC Berkeley Oxford Tract Farm & de Young Museum. Students also visited local organizations and employers to learn about jobs and internships, colleges, and universities. In 2023, 95% of students received a C or better, 85% earned all credits attempted, and 93% boosted their overall GPA.

In the future, OUSD intends to continue to expand the Summer HAcK program to serve more students who can benefit from this innovative approach.

Conclusion

These innovative summer learning pilot programs highlight how creating learning environments that blend social-emotional and life skill development, academic standards, enrichment, and positive relationships with peers and adults can transform credit recovery programs from remediation to models that accelerate learning. These models show promise: district leaders saw high school students enjoying summer programming, and preliminary evidence showed positive academic outcomes.

However, these models also take considerable time, money, people power, and strong partnerships. While this snapshot showcases two exemplary districts that were successful in pulling together the resources, funds and human capital required to carry out promising pilots, we recognize that this might not be replicable in all contexts. For instance, Manchester's pilot was possible because it focused intensive support on a relatively small group of students. Oakland's ability to invest resources in partnerships enabled it to design collaborative courses that engaged students. Sustaining and scaling these models long-term is a different challenge. Through our ongoing research, we hope to learn more about what it takes to plan, implement, and sustain summer programs that push the boundaries of traditional 'summer school' and support students holistically.

Appendix A

<p style="text-align: center;">Table 1. District Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2023-24 and District Dashboards 2018-22</p>			
District	Region	Urbanicity	Student Population
Manchester School District, Connecticut	Northeast	Suburban	6,192 students
<p>District community demographics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 58% White • 16% Black or African American • 17% Hispanic or Latino • 10% Asian • 9% Some other race alone • 6% Two or more races • 26.6% Families with Food Stamp/SNAP benefits 			
Oakland Unified School District, California	West	Large City	34,149 students
<p>District community demographics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 32% White • 22% Black or African American • 27% Hispanic or Latino • 16% Asian • 1% Native American • 1% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander • 18% Some other race alone • 10% Two or more races • 22.8% Families with Food Stamp/SNAP benefits 			

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