



Findings From the  
**TEXAS SUMMER LEARNING STUDY**



Advancing Evidence.  
Improving Lives.



# Applying Summer Learning Evidence

How Texas State Policy  
Supports Strong Programming

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# How Texas State Policy Supports Strong Programming

Existing research documents the benefits of summer learning programs for young people, which include improved academic performance and social, emotional, and physical health and well-being.<sup>1,2</sup> But young people are not the only beneficiaries of these programs. Summer learning programs provide a resource for working families and opportunities to strengthen community engagement when the programs partner with other local organizations, businesses, and municipalities.<sup>3</sup>

Summer learning opportunities vary in their program goals, in reflection of the locales where these opportunities are offered and by their providers. In turn, benefits can also vary. Recently, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts, specifically, are exploring ways to reimagine summer as a time of learning and opportunity.<sup>4</sup> For young people, families, and communities to realize the benefits of summer learning programs, however, the programs must be well designed and implemented with quality.<sup>5</sup>

Strong summer learning programs leverage evidence-based design principles—the practices, strategies, policies, tools, and resources that research suggests contribute to effective programs. For example, we now know that summer learning programs can be effective when educators have time to plan programs that are sufficient in duration and offer high-quality instruction and enrichment.<sup>6,7,8</sup>

**We have more to learn.** As a field, we have come a long way in furthering our understanding of what works in summer learning programs, yet we know less about how programs use, adapt, and sustain these evidence-based design principles. As state and local education agencies (LEAs) continue exploring ways to facilitate the spread of evidence-based summer programs across the country, we have opportunities to learn from their efforts and continue building our collective knowledge base.

In Texas, for example, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has been implementing an innovative approach to summer learning programs for students in Grades K–5 through its Additional Days School Year (ADSY) initiative. Since 2020, the state has provided a planning program to support the design and implementation of summer learning programs grounded in the evidence base. The planning program has been supported with a mix of state funding, private philanthropy, and federal relief funds through the American Rescue Plan. Texas’s efforts can provide a road map for state education agencies and LEAs that want to apply the evidence base in support of strong summer programming.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

In 2020, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) launched the Texas Summer Learning Study (<https://www.air.org/project/texas-summer-learning-study>) in collaboration with the Texas Education Agency and its partners and with support from The Wallace Foundation. The study is designed to explore how Texas is scaling and sustaining strong summer programs that are grounded in the evidence of what works in summer learning. The study builds on prior summer learning research by exploring how the state education agency is creating policy and support systems for local education agencies to plan and implement Texas’s *Additional Days School Year* summer learning programs (<https://tea.texas.gov/academics/learning-support-and-programs/additional-days-school-year>).



This brief is the first in a series of publications about Texas’s summer learning efforts. Here, we highlight findings from the first 4 years of the 6-year Texas Summer Learning Study. Our goal is to elevate lessons learned about how state policies and supports—such as those in Texas—can facilitate LEAs’ design and implementation of evidence-based summer learning programs. We also seek to describe what the implementation of those evidence-based programs looks like at the local level. The findings presented in this brief draw on data gathered between 2020 and 2024. We conducted interviews and administered surveys with more than 60 LEAs and with TEA and its partners, analyzed extant program administrative data, conducted document reviews of planning program tools and resources, and observed programming in a sample of LEAs. The Texas Summer Learning Study will follow Texas’s progress through 2026, and future publications will dive deeper into state policy and local-level implementation.



A student learns about baby chicks at Camp Goliad, Goliad Independent School District

## Texas's History of Support for Summer Learning

**Summer learning is not new in Texas.** Texas offers summer school and other remedial education programs through the State Compensatory Education program, and Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers<sup>1</sup> have supported summer learning for years. Attention to summer increased, however, in 2019, when the 86th Texas Legislature passed House Bill 3 (HB 3), a historic education finance bill that was designed to address challenges in the Texas public education system, such as inadequate funding, teacher compensation, and property tax issues. One element of HB 3 is the ADSY initiative, which gives LEAs different options for adding up to 30 days to their school-year calendar. One such option is to provide a voluntary summer learning program. ADSY provides half-day funding for every student attending each additional day for up to 30 days. To receive ADSY funding, LEAs must have a 180-day school-year calendar, and, if they choose the summer option, their voluntary summer learning program must serve at least one grade level from prekindergarten through fifth grade and provide at least 2 hours of instruction per day delivered by a certified teacher. TEA manages the ADSY initiative.

To help LEAs integrate evidence-based design principles into summer learning programs, TEA also offers the ADSY Planning and Execution Program (ADSY PEP, hereafter the planning program). The planning program is an optional, competitive grant program that provides LEAs with additional planning, design, change management, and continuous improvement supports to help them create and run an evidence-based summer learning program.

**A cadre of partners supports Texas's planning program.** The Wallace Foundation has provided ongoing funding for the planning program, and the Texas Impact Network (a joint effort of the Commit Partnership and Educate Texas) is a financial intermediary and strategic advisor to the state. A team at The Learning Agenda, an organization that specializes in summer, expanded learning, and innovative school and program design, has advised on the overall design of the planning process and developed the associated planning tools and resources. A group of external consultants from BellXcel/SCRI, Westat, Big Thought, the Weikart Center, and FourPoint Education Partners serve as LEAs' "Design and Implementation Partners," providing individualized technical assistance to support LEAs in planning.<sup>10</sup> In this brief, we refer to this large group of partners as the state but also highlight instances in which partners played important roles.

“The impetus here is really making sure that we’re using evidence-based principles within summer programming and that *we are focused on the actual use of time* as opposed to just adding time . . . More time is great, and it has to be TEKS [state standards] based . . . but physical education is also TEKS based, and a weeklong basketball camp is very different than a 5-week enrichment, math, and reading summer program. So that’s where the work starts . . . having the opportunity to support folks through a robust design and planning process.”

— Brian Doran, Director of Expanded Learning Models, TEA, on the purpose of the state’s summer planning program

<sup>i</sup> The Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers program<sup>9</sup> supports the creation of community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. Administered through the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the program is supported by a federal formula grant to state education agencies.

**Participation in the planning program requires that LEAs plan and implement a summer learning program with additional design elements, grounded in the evidence base.** Specifically, LEAs commit to running a program that:

- ◆ Adds 25–30 days of instruction (compared to the baseline ADSY allowance of funding for “up to” 30 days)
- ◆ Includes 3 hours of academic instruction, 2 hours of enrichment, and 1 flex hour (e.g., lunch, transitions) to create a program day that is at least 6 hours long, thus extending beyond the half day that ADSY funding covers
- ◆ Ensures that all academic hours are led by a certified teacher
- ◆ Adopts and implements instructional materials for reading and mathematics that meet TEA’s standards for High-Quality Instructional Materials.<sup>11</sup>

**The planning program requirements and the strategic planning process and tools serve as the central mechanisms for ensuring LEAs design and implement an evidence-based summer learning program. These elements are made possible with additional funding, and they are supported by tools and guidance, a learning community of participating LEAs, expert review and feedback, and individualized technical assistance.** The design of the planning program—informed by prior summer learning research from the National Summer Learning Project<sup>ii</sup> and other state grant models—incorporates 10 evidence-based design principles into the approach (see page 6 for an overview of the evidence-based design principles).

The planning program is designed as a 4-year program, during which cohorts of LEAs come together as a learning community to participate in a robust planning year to prepare for initial implementation of programming in the first summer. Cohorts then follow the planning year with up to 3 implementation years (in some cases, expansion years).<sup>12</sup> Learning community meetings and an online resource website (the Community Hub) provide LEAs with access to research about the evidence-based design principles so that LEAs understand what they are planning for and *why*. During learning community meetings, LEAs also have time to hear from each other, discuss strategy and success stories, and share challenges.

Each LEA creates a comprehensive strategic plan using a detailed template, and, in subsequent years, LEAs use a reflection and revision tool to make adjustments to their original strategic plans. **The strategic plan serves as the anchor for the planning program**, guiding the LEA’s work and serving as the foundation for the learning community.

**LEAs create their strategic plans with the support of an external technical assistance provider.** Although the

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ii The National Summer Learning Project (<https://wallacefoundation.org/focus-areas-and-initiatives/youth-development/national-summer-learning-project>) was a 6-year effort to learn more about whether and how district-led summer learning programs benefit young people and what it takes for a summer learning program to be successful.



supports that each technical assistance provider offers to an LEA vary based on local needs, these providers work closely with LEAs to complete their strategic plans and to support facilitation of the planning process within the education agency. The technical assistance providers offer expert insight into the evidence base behind strong summer learning programs and support LEAs in their decision making related to how to implement or adapt evidence-based design principles in their local contexts.

In addition, a team of **summer learning experts engaged by the state reviews each strategic plan against a set of success criteria drawn from the evidence base.** These success criteria examine whether, how, and to what extent LEAs designed plans that incorporate evidence-based practices. LEAs receive ratings and extensive feedback and have opportunities to make revisions to better align their program with the success criteria, effectively moving them toward stronger inclusion of evidence-based design principles in their plans.



Students work on a literacy activity, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District

# Ten Evidence-Based Design Principles for Strong Summer Learning

*The Texas Summer Learning Study uses multiple studies of summer learning programs to understand evidence-based design principles. We conducted a literature search at the start of the study to ground our work, and we have distilled the findings into a list of 10 design principles that can be applied to summer learning programs that have an academic goal. We drew heavily on lessons from the National Summer Learning Project; the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine consensus study on summertime experiences; and McCombs and colleagues' review of the evidence for summer learning programs under the Every Student Succeeds Act. Our understanding of these principles is informed by and continues to evolve with the work in Texas and in the field more broadly.\**

- 1 Planning** for summer should be early and comprehensive and should involve different perspectives, voices, and lived experiences. Planning should also focus on minimizing the loss of instructional time during the summer.
- 2 Program design** should ensure that summer programs serving elementary-aged youth operate for at least 25 days and incorporate a mix of academic instruction and enrichment activities.
- 3 Program climate and culture** should ensure that young people feel safe, supported, and included.
- 4 Budgeting** should be data driven and incorporate cost efficiencies. It is also important for budgeting to be comprehensive and involve individuals with budget knowledge and control.
- 5 Data collection and continuous improvement** should be systemic and should prioritize understanding of implementation and short-term and longer term outcomes at the state and local levels.
- 6 Staffing** of summer programs should be comprehensive, involve careful consideration of recruitment and hiring practices and academic and enrichment activities to ensure appropriate student-to-staff ratios, and support staff with professional development.
- 7 Marketing, student recruitment, and attendance** practices should include developing accurate, timely, and personalized recruitment materials and strategies for enrollment, as well as mechanisms for promoting strong attendance.
- 8 Academic instruction** practices should involve choosing high-quality instructional materials that align with academic standards and students' needs, observing instruction, and providing feedback for teachers and other staff.
- 9 Enrichment** activity practices should involve selecting a model for providing enrichment activities, planning lessons to include sequenced activities that integrate with academics, monitoring implementation, and ensuring that enrichment instructors have strong content knowledge and are trained in behavior management.
- 10 Community partnerships and family engagement** practices should build on existing relationships or prioritize new relationships to expand and strengthen program offerings.

\* Schwartz, H. L., McCombs, J. S., Augustine, C. H., & Leschitz, J. T. (2018). *Getting to work on summer learning: Recommended practices for success* (2nd ed.). RAND. <https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Getting-to-Work-on-Summer-Learning-2nd-ed.pdf>

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). *Shaping summertime experiences: Opportunities to promote healthy development and well-being for children and youth*. National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25546>

McCombs, J. S., Augustine, C. H., Unlu, F., Ziol-Guest, K. M., Naftel, S., Gomez, C. J., Marsh, T., Akinniranye, G., & Todd, I. (2019). *Investing in successful summer programs: A review of evidence under the Every Student Succeeds Act*. RAND. <https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Investing-in-Successful-Summer-Programs.pdf>



When additional, dedicated funding for summer learning became available through the American Rescue Plan, the planning program provided the state with a mechanism for increasing access to strong summer programming. The new funds made summer programming available at a time when it was needed most—as LEAs were focusing on post-pandemic learning recovery. At the time of this writing, the state has dedicated more than \$115 million in funding for the planning program through private philanthropy, state funding, and federal relief funds.

The planning program has included four cycles, with new LEAs joining as a cohort each year since the program's inception in 2020. LEAs are selected to participate in the planning program through an application process. Priority is given to LEAs that already have a 180-day academic calendar (which makes them eligible for ADSY funding), prioritize summer implementation, and have higher percentages of students who are economically disadvantaged. As of July 2024, 75 LEAs have participated in at least one cycle of the planning program and there are currently 60 active LEAs in the planning program.

A wide range of LEAs participate in the planning program. These LEAs are located across the state, in cities ( $n = 24$ ), rural areas ( $n = 15$ ), suburbs ( $n = 12$ ), and towns ( $n = 9$ ),<sup>iii</sup> and they represent municipal or independent school districts ( $n = 35$ ) and charter schools ( $n = 25$ ). Participating LEAs vary in size, from small, single-school districts to some of the larger districts in the state, which run multicampus programs. During the 2023 summer program, LEAs that participated in the planning program served more than 26,000 students.

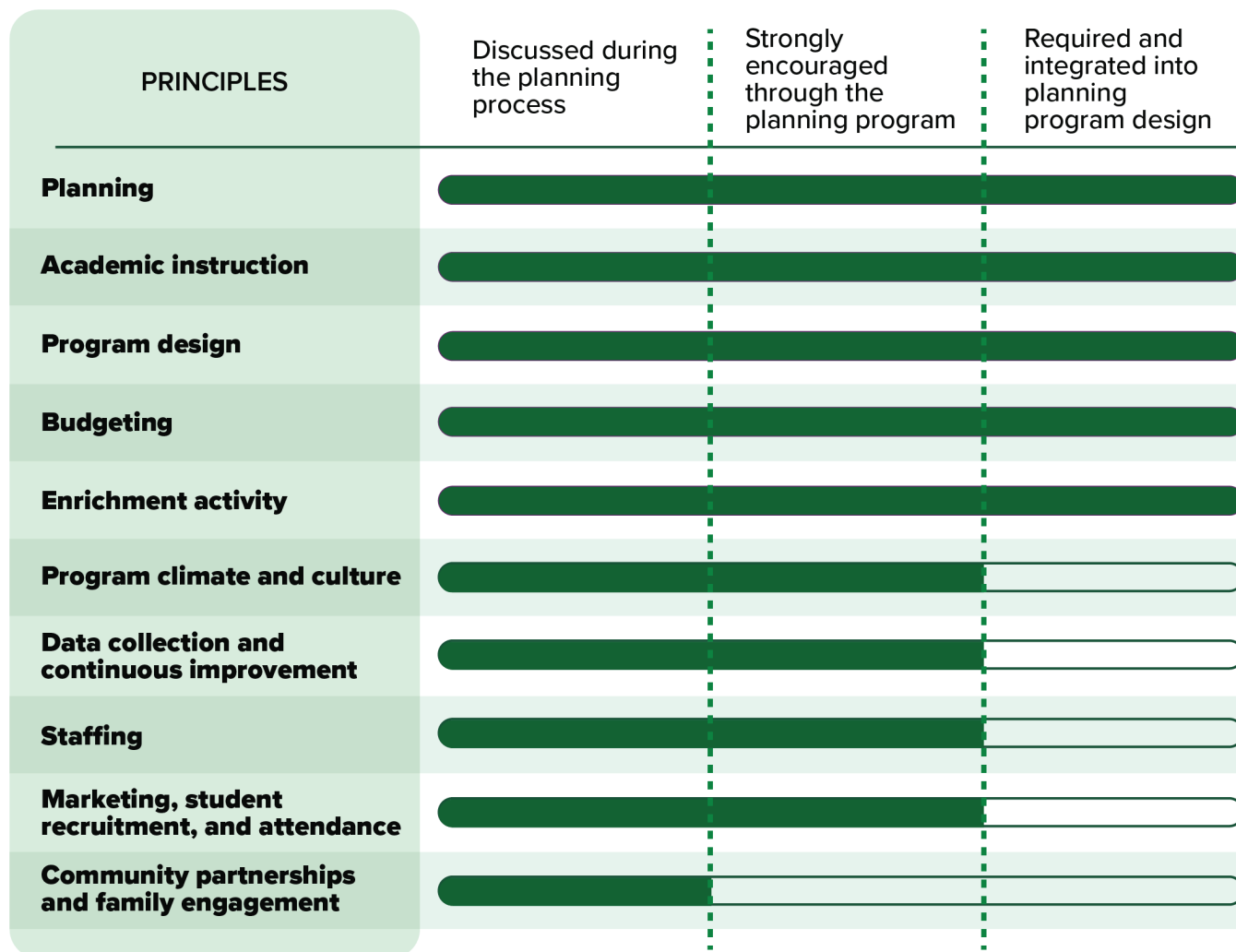


<sup>iii</sup> This information is provided by the National Center for Education Statistics, the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education.

Texas’s efforts suggest that state policies can drive strong summer programming, especially when those policies are bolstered by funding, planning tools, and technical assistance and are flexible enough to allow for local context and continuous improvement.

The state has integrated evidence-based design principles into the planning program in different ways and has supported the adoption of those evidence-based design principles through a combination of funding, facilitated planning, and individualized technical assistance. As shown in Exhibit 1, some evidence-based design principles are required and integrated into the planning program, others are strongly encouraged through planning tool guidance, and some are discussed during the planning process. Preliminary findings from the Texas Summer Learning Study suggest that LEAs are implementing evidence-based design principles more frequently, consistently, or with greater fidelity to the evidence base when those evidence-based design principles have stronger support from the state.

**Exhibit 1.**  
**How Evidence-Based Design Principles Are Supported by the Planning Program**





The design of the planning program is flexible and adaptable enough to accommodate LEAs' local contexts and implementation readiness, both of which affect whether and how programs implement evidence-based design principles. Although the policies and tools emphasize how to plan and what to consider in the program design, they rarely specify *exactly* what LEAs should offer. For example, LEAs are required to identify and implement high-quality instructional materials that are approved by the state, but an LEA may choose the materials that meet its needs. Similarly, the strategic plan template encourages LEAs to develop a comprehensive student marketing and recruitment strategy and provides examples, but an LEA determines its approach based on local context.

Early findings suggest that **LEAs perceive the individualized technical assistance to be instrumental in their ability to design and implement strong summer programs**. One project manager shared, “The meetings with the [technical assistance partner] are instrumental to keep one on task. Otherwise, things get busy, and you overlook things that are important, [but] they kept me grounded.” This sentiment was expressed by many LEAs in different ways throughout the years. Some LEAs gave “shout-outs” to their technical assistance provider in feedback surveys or highlighted them by name during interviews, describing their individualized assistance as “fantastic,” “essential,” “supportive,” and “a wealth of information.” The technical assistance providers played a critical role in bolstering LEAs' capacities to engage in the strategic planning process.

In addition, **the state has been responsive to feedback from its partners and from LEAs to facilitate continuous improvement**. Throughout the years, the state has gained a deeper understanding of community-level context and an LEA's readiness to participate in the planning program *and* design an evidence-based summer program. The state has also gained a better of understanding of successes and challenges in the planning process. In response, the state has revised the planning program process and tools to better meet LEA needs.



Students visit a mobile dairy classroom at the local public library, Betty M. Condra School



# Eight Ways That Texas Has Supported Strong Summer Program Planning, Design, and Implementation

Texas's ADSY initiative laid the foundation for strong summer programming by providing funding for LEAs to add instructional days during the summer. **It was the state's decision to launch the planning program; however, that spurred the design and implementation of strong summer programs grounded in evidence across the state. The planning program raised the bar on the requirements for each LEA's summer learning program and created an infrastructure for the robust program planning that prior research has indicated is critical.** In this section, we take a closer look at *how* the state has approached the design principles that are required or strongly encouraged and what LEA implementation looks like on the ground.

## Planning

**Planning is required and integrated into the state's planning program.** This idea may seem obvious but it is worth stating clearly: By participating in this planning program, LEAs are engaging in many of the evidence-based planning practices that are instrumental to summer learning programs. For example, one evidence-based design principle is to plan *early*, which is made possible because the planning program begins each fall with a new cohort. In addition, LEAs receive funding to designate a project manager to lead the development of their comprehensive strategic plan as part of their participation in the planning program. Some LEAs have created a new position with this funding, whereas other LEAs have adjusted their staffing to accommodate this role.

In their first year, LEAs create a robust strategic plan, using a template that directly integrates multiple evidence-based design principles. The strategic plan template provides guidance (i.e., what the principles are) and structure (i.e., prompts) for LEAs to plan a program that aligns with these principles. The strategic planning process and supports allow for autonomy for LEAs to develop summer programs that best fit the needs of their local communities. When LEAs are paired with their technical assistance providers, as a first step, they often engage in consultation related to the LEA's community so that the technical assistance providers can learn more about the LEA's needs and context before the team begins the strategic planning process. In subsequent implementation years, the reflection and revision tool includes a self-assessment for LEAs that involves reflecting on prior programming and their evolving local context to inform planning for the next summer.

In addition, each LEA is required to establish a steering committee to support the planning process. Steering committees frequently consist of LEA staff, as well as school leadership and staff. These committees may also include parents/

“The way the strategic plan was outlined . . . it broke it down by chunks, so you could really home in on each component of your summer camp. We usually met after school, and our steering committee would review each one of those components and talk through it. We were able to finalize plans fairly quickly with consensus.”

— A single-school, rural independent school district

guardians of students in the district and community partners. LEAs are encouraged to include a variety of roles and individuals with a variety of perspectives in their committees, and they are strongly encouraged to ensure that the steering committee includes a member with budget authority on the committee—an important lesson learned after the first year of the planning program. Most steering committees also include administrators, campus-level leadership, and curriculum and instruction staff.

## Program Design

Findings from the National Summer Learning Project<sup>13</sup> suggest that (a) regular attendance is critical for young people to realize the benefits of summer learning programs and (b) attendance begins with program design. Young people who attended programs that ran for at least 5–6 weeks and attended for at least 20 days showed greater improvements in reading and math compared with peers with less frequent attendance.

**Program design elements are required and integrated into the planning program.** LEAs design a summer program that runs for at least 25 days, ideally spanning 5–6 weeks. Most LEAs offered their summer program as one consecutive session; a smaller group of LEAs split their program into multiple sessions separated by a break. In addition, programs provide at least 3 hours of academics per day, taught by a certified teacher, and 2 hours of enrichment. LEAs varied in the design of their daily schedule; most LEAs offered academics in the morning—in keeping with guidance from the study of the National Summer Learning Project about scheduling academics in one continuous block of time—and enrichment in the afternoon.

Program design has proved challenging for some LEAs, particularly as it relates to issues of student attendance. Programs are required to run for at least 25 days; however, programs experience a significant drop in attendance around Independence Day (July 4). As such, many LEAs have sought to end their summer program before the holiday break but find it challenging to fit in 25 days between the end of the school year in May and the holiday in July. LEAs have described making adaptations to state guidance and have sought waivers from the state to operate for fewer days or to make staffing accommodations. For example, one project manager shared, “We needed to get the waiver [to drop down to] 20 days. We also needed to ask for a waiver to combine ages and grade levels, because again, we’re very small. So, we needed that flexibility, and they granted us that.” This is an example of how the evidence-based design principles may sit in tension with the practical challenges of time available during the summer. This lesson learned is not unique to Texas and is something that the field will continue to grapple with as we work to balance what we know is effective (students spending adequate time learning) with student and family realities.



Students perform a dance at Cityscape Schools

## Budgeting

Prior research elevates important evidence-based design principles for creating budget efficiencies for summer learning programs; however, findings from our work in Texas have revealed that LEAs have needed more guidance than what the literature details, particularly when it comes to developing budgets that are timely, accurate, and comprehensive. As such, how the state supports the budgeting process has evolved each year to meet LEA needs. For many LEAs, running a robust summer program that meets the planning program design requirements is new and requires significant support, not only for design but also budgeting.

**Budgeting is required and integrated into the planning program.** In the first year of the planning program, LEAs created a budget for their summer program based on guidance from the state. However, there was not a standardized template or tool to use, and LEAs experienced significant budgeting challenges. In subsequent years, the state prioritized budgeting and provided additional budgeting tools that were eventually embedded into the strategic plan template. Currently, LEAs in the planning program are required to use a specific budgeting template, but they begin by creating a process for developing the budget; identifying individuals who will be involved in budgeting; and establishing budget estimates early, typically in early winter; and then moving into the actual budgeting process. The budgeting section of the strategic plan template currently captures important financial metrics, including program costs and projections, as well as a detailed budget summary with revenue estimates. The budget must be reviewed by the LEA's chief financial officer (or designee) prior to submission to the state.

In addition, LEAs participate in specialized workshops on budgeting throughout the year and have access to office hours with budgeting and school finance experts who were engaged by the state after the first year of the planning program. LEAs also receive expert review of all first-year program budgets at two different time points—once in the middle of the school year (a draft) and later in the school year when the budget is finalized.

“Trying to make sure that, with a small community [and] very limited staff . . . how I can pay them competitively and also have enough people to do this at three different campuses [has] been challenging. In that way, budgeting was the hardest for me, but I got a lot of support from [technical assistance] partner. [They made] a tool that grabbed the [student] enrollment from my Google Form . . . and dropped it [in] by various campuses, so it did some of that live sorting for me [and] it would put it into a table where it would say how many students per staff. So, when I was hiring for staff, I could know how many to plan for.”

— A medium, urban independent charter district



## Data Collection and Continuous Improvement

**Data collection and continuous improvement are integrated into the planning program, although the requirements are flexible and provide LEAs with decision-making autonomy.** LEAs are encouraged to establish and plan “SMART” goals and collect three categories of data—program quality, stakeholder satisfaction, and student outcomes—that are connected to the evidence base for what is possible in strong summer programs. LEAs create these SMART goals using a Program Goals, Metrics, and Outcomes Table, which is embedded in the strategic plan template. LEAs are required to set goals in predetermined categories. They have flexibility in what goals they set, how they measure progress, and what they report. Most LEAs have set goals related to staff professional development, staff satisfaction and retention, and family satisfaction. Most LEAs also set goals for student attendance in the program (e.g., 75% average daily attendance for students, which is in alignment with the evidence base) and for demonstrating growth on assessments because these are directly linked to the outcomes they report for their program. Upon the conclusion of their summer program, LEAs report on goal-aligned outcomes in the following areas: program quality; staff, partner, and family/student satisfaction; student growth from the beginning to the end of summer based on pre/post assessments; and program participation rates. This information supports continuous improvement efforts in subsequent implementation years.

## Staffing and Professional Development

Research suggests that staffing is an essential element of running a strong summer program—from recruiting and hiring staff based on a site staffing model, to hiring teachers with relevant content- and grade-level knowledge, to using prior attendance data to make important program decisions such as knowing how many staff to hire. **Evidence-based design principles for staffing and professional development are strongly encouraged through guidance in the planning tools.** The strategic plan template sections on staffing and professional development provide LEAs with guidance for planning their staffing, including outlining plans for staff recruiting and hiring, professional development, and teacher care and retention. This section of the strategic plan is also linked to their budgeting work because staffing requires a significant portion of funding.

Despite these supports, staffing remains a persistent challenge in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>14</sup> LEAs report challenges with hiring enough staff and hiring the *right* staff who understand the goals and purposes of their summer learning program, which often requires a mindset shift away from remediation toward fun and creative learning opportunities. Yet, many LEAs have found ways to staff their programs. One solution adopted by some LEAs is to offer flexible scheduling for teachers who work in the summer program, which allows for teachers to share classes and alternate when they teach or to split the day so that some staff teach in the mornings and other staff teach in the afternoons. LEAs have also highlighted the importance of using program materials and

“We already pulled data to determine which students to invite to program . . . We also have data trackers in place for our big academic goals, so I’m excited about that and seeing our students’ growth . . . ADSY principals have also already met with academic coaches, and they reviewed which goals folks would oversee and how we’re going to achieve those goals. So there’s kind of a planning process [with data] happening [and] I’m excited about that.”

— A medium, urban independent charter district

“[We] started pretty early in the spring semester getting folks at the central office to start making decisions about curriculum and staffing . . . As a result, they were really well informed and able to provide good trainings to teachers. There was not a single ADSY classroom I walked into that was not using our curriculum. That’s not easy to pull off. I know it’s because I had a team that planned early and provided good training to teachers.”

— A large, urban independent charter district

curricula with which teachers are familiar, which makes the program easier to staff and launch quickly. This strategy is also useful when teachers have the flexibility to sub in and out of the program because it ensures that everyone knows and is able to implement the same materials.

Staffing does not end with hiring, however; staffing also includes ongoing professional development relevant to the summer program. Accordingly, LEAs are strongly encouraged by prompts in the strategic plan template to establish a professional development plan. Most LEAs offer professional development on academic instructional materials, program climate and culture, and program procedures.

## Support for Marketing, Student Recruitment, and Attendance

Student attendance is a key factor in whether and how students experience the benefits of strong summer programs. Bearing this in mind, **evidence-based design principles for marketing, student recruitment, and attendance are strongly encouraged in the planning guidance**. The planning program provides LEAs with time to strategize and learn from peers about how to promote strong student attendance, starting with how they market the program to various audiences and recruit students in their programs. LEAs set recruitment goals, develop messaging for key audiences, and identify different communications strategies for each audience. Audiences typically include students, families, principals, teachers, and community organizations. LEAs outline in their plans how they will market their programs to youth and families through multiple methods such as fliers, branded program gear, and social media. Key strategies LEAs use include making the summer program seem fun and appealing and finding the “hook” for their program. For example, one LEA shared that its program “will take students on an *adventure in fun and learning*” through academic offerings, exposure to new experiences, and weekly field trips. The strategic plan template also prompts LEAs to describe how they will offer incentives for strong attendance, communicate attendance expectations in program application materials, and plan to contact families when a student is absent—all of which are evidence-based design principles highlighted in prior research.

LEAs consistently report that attendance is a challenge. Many LEAs describe that attendance levels are strong in the beginning of the program but decline toward the end of program, as summer holidays approach. LEAs also describe significant variability in day-to-day attendance creating issues with planning and staffing appropriately.

To mitigate these challenges, many LEAs are employing creative incentive strategies to drive strong attendance, although determining *how* to reward attendance can be tricky when the summer learning program itself is optional. LEAs report positive effects from incentives such as gift cards for families, field trips at the end of the week for students who attend consistently, and performances or “fun days” at the end of the program.

“The attendance fluctuated a lot. We had a core group of students that didn’t miss any days, and that number stayed strong. So probably 50% of the kids didn’t miss a day, or they only missed one day. But there was probably about 20%–25% of the kids who came the first couple weeks and then didn’t come back. And then the other 25% were here a week, off a week . . . different situations like that where they were here more sporadically throughout the summer . . . But we did notice, like on the tie-dye day or on our water day at the end, those were our highest attendance days. And so, [thinking about] next year [and] considering that those events are the big days that pull the attendance [we are asking ourselves], ‘How can we tie that into more frequent arrivals?’”

— A medium, suburban independent charter district



## Academics and Enrichment

Providing academic instruction and enrichment activities are both required and integrated into the planning program, albeit with different levels of support for planning and implementation. LEAs in the planning program agree to meet *additional* requirements related to the activities they offer, as shown in Exhibit 2.

### Exhibit 2.

#### ADSY Requirements Compared to Planning Program Requirements

		ADSY <i>Any LEA across the state that meets eligibility requirements</i>	ADSY Planning Program <i>LEAs that are part of the program</i>
<b>ADSY Eligibility and Requirements</b>	Regular School Year Calendar	Participating campus must provide <b>75,600 operational minutes</b> over at least <b>180 instructional days</b> , not including staff development waivers	
	Student Eligibility	Students enrolled in <b>Grades PK–5</b> for the academic year	
	Funding	Half day for each attending student	
<b>Design Components</b>	Number of Additional Days	Minimum of <b>1 half day</b>	<b>25–30 full days</b>
	Daily Schedule	Minimum of <b>2 hours</b> of instruction	Minimum of <b>6 hours</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ 3 hours of academic instruction</li> <li>▶ 2+ hours of enrichment</li> <li>▶ 1+ flex hour (lunch, transitions, assembly time, physical education, enrichment)</li> </ul>
	Planning Process	<i>No requirements</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Year-long guided planning process</b> with support</li> <li>▶ Designated <b>Project Manager</b></li> <li>▶ Cross-Department <b>Steering Committee</b></li> </ul>
	Instructional Materials	Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) based	Texas High-Quality Instructional Materials summer units recommended

The state added the requirement to use high-quality instructional materials after the first year of the planning program. This requirement appears to have supported implementation by making a connection between the curriculum LEAs use during the school year and the materials they use during the summer, potentially with some adaptation for summer use. The use of these materials may contribute to quality instruction not only because they have been reviewed by the state but also because teachers and staff are familiar with the materials. This requirement has also created efficiencies in school district budgets and operations planning because they had the necessary supplies ready.



Participation in the planning program also requires that LEAs offer at least 2 hours of enrichment. This requirement has been perceived by many LEAs as a major departure from prior summer programs that have been, in most cases, focused heavily on academic remediation. Through the planning program, LEAs choose how to structure enrichment, including the focus of the activities and who provides them. In their strategic plans, LEAs provide descriptions of how they selected their instructional materials and examples of enrichment activities or lesson plans. When LEAs partner externally for enrichment, they are also encouraged to complete a memorandum of understanding that delineates expectations for partners and resource allocation, a practice drawn from the evidence base.

Enrichment-related decisions are heavily influenced by the local context and the assets and resources available to each school district. Most LEAs opt to have a mix of internal staff and external enrichment providers delivering the activities, identifying internal staff with experience in and passion for the content area and/or bringing in partners such as local businesses, museums, or municipal departments (e.g., a local fire station, department of parks and recreation). Enrichment activities typically focus on STEM, visual and/or performing arts, physical education, and social and emotional learning. Many LEAs also incorporate field trips into their programming, especially as an incentive to drive stronger attendance.

## Program Climate and Culture

Prior research indicates that positive program climate and culture (i.e., the attitudes, values, and behaviors that characterize the program environment) are critical for summer learning program success because they can foster stronger student engagement, relationships, and sense of belonging to the program.

**Evidence-based design principles for program climate and culture are strongly encouraged in the planning tool guidance.**

LEAs complete a section of their strategic plan in which they describe the steps they expect to take and the strategies they will use to create a positive summer climate in their program. LEAs use a variety of strategies to foster positive program climate and culture. Some LEAs describe how they will provide professional development for staff on building a welcoming program environment, and others describe how they have adopted strategies to promote positive student behavior (e.g., celebrations and incentives recognizing students who demonstrate positive behavior). Many LEAs also report that they are using themed shirts and accessories, decorations, gatherings, and chants to build a program culture. LEAs that feel their climate and culture are successful have attributed their success to staff and leadership enthusiasm, providing students opportunities to opt into activities they enjoy, strong planning and communication, and connections between the school year and summer climates.

How one LEA uses enrichment activities to support family engagement:

“Saturdays were our field trip days. I did that on purpose because of the community that we work in . . . low economic [opportunity], and they have [fewer] advantages . . . so I put [field trips] on Saturdays because it’s free for the kids, and it was going to be free for the parents as well. So, if parents wanted to come and participate with their kids—and they don’t have to work on Saturdays—they can do those things. I actually had a lot of parents who took advantage of that, so that was really cool to see.”

— A single-school, suburban independent charter district

In addition, the design of the LEA learning community embodies how summer learning program climate and culture should feel. In other words, the goal is to help LEAs feel and experience what students and staff should feel and experience in their summer programs. The learning community meetings start with welcome activities, sometimes have themes related to summer fun, and create a safe and supportive space for everyone to ask questions and learn from each other. In addition, LEAs have access to prior summer research on climate and culture, receive example practices from other LEAs that have strong program climate and culture, and engage in learning community sessions to brainstorm ideas with other LEAs.

It is important to note that the state has evolved how the planning program is designed to support climate and culture. This design principle received significantly less support in the first year of the planning program and now serves as a grounding principle for the rest of the planning process. The Learning Agenda describes this shift: **“It is *all* about climate and culture . . . We knew we wanted to make it a prevalent thing and we wanted to start the year out by making sure climate and culture were woven into everything and that we were always coming back to it. It’s interconnected with all of the other planning points: The design of the learning community, the scope and sequence, and adjustments to the planning tool put climate and culture front and center.”**

“We struggled with [Program Climate and Culture] when we were doing our strategic plan, but it was a good struggle because it had us really think about it and plan for that. We have a Captain Culture, we’re designing our program with the space theme, and we [do] a lot . . . to give the students a sense of this isn’t going to be like regular school; it’s going to be hopefully more inviting and comfortable for them for the summer. I think we’ve worked [on climate] the most, and so we probably feel the most comfortable with [implementing it].”

— A single-school, rural independent school district



## Three Strategies for State Education Agencies and Their Partners to Consider to Foster the Design and Implementation of Strong Summer Programs

Lessons learned from Texas's efforts may serve as a guide for state and local education agencies and their partners that aim to support strong summer programming in their locale. The findings presented herein have elevated three strategies states may consider when seeking to apply the evidence base in support of strong summer programming.

**Provide support for policy implementation by offering funding, tools, and technical assistance that enable quality implementation.** The planning program was designed to provide support for planning and implementing evidence-based design principles so that LEAs could run strong summer programs. LEAs participate in a comprehensive planning process anchored by resources, tools, and templates, and they receive funding to support their time and efforts. LEAs participate in a learning community where they can engage with peers and experts, and they receive individualized technical assistance. Summer learning experts review LEAs' strategic plans and provide feedback. This design and implementation support is coordinated and mutually reinforcing—the content of learning community meetings aligns with elements of the resources, tools, and templates, which, in turn, may strengthen LEAs' capacities to fully implement strong summer programs. LEAs perceive these supports to be instrumental in their ability to successfully design and implement strong summer learning programs.

**Require, incentivize, and/or provide strong supports for evidence-based design principles by integrating them into policies, mandates, and program planning tools.** The state incorporated pertinent design principles into the overall design of the planning program and its requirements and into the planning tools and templates. The learning community and technical assistance partners provide information about the *why* and the *how* behind the evidence base, and the tools and templates offer a mechanism for bringing evidence-based practices to life in summer learning programs through prompts and planning guidance. Technical assistance providers are a critical support to LEAs during their planning process by helping them understand what the design principles are and how to implement them with fidelity while also adapting them to their local contexts.

**Make sure that policies and supports allow for local implementers to have autonomy and flexibility in planning and implementation so that summer learning programs meet their communities' needs and goals.** Texas, like many states, allows for local control, meaning that LEAs have the authority to make decisions that best reflect their local contexts. As such, the state developed a planning program (including supports) that (1) requires the implementation of certain evidence-based design principles and (2) provides autonomy and flexibility to determine how those evidence-based design principles are implemented. As a result, LEAs are able to design programs suited to their contexts.



## Conclusion

This brief has highlighted early findings from the first 4 years of the Texas Summer Learning Study. We have elevated important lessons learned about how to support the design of strong summer programs that integrate evidence-based design principles. The state and its partners continue to refine the planning and execution of supports provided through the planning program in response to changing dynamics (e.g., number and characteristics of participating LEAs) and feedback (e.g., from LEAs and experts and practitioners).



A student smiles during a program celebration at Cityscape Schools



## Endnotes

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