

# How Community Partnerships Strengthen Summer Learning in Rural Districts

THE SUMMER SNAPSHOT SERIES: PART II





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

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## **The Summer Snapshots Series: Part II**

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.

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### **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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# How Community Partnerships Strengthen Summer Learning in Rural Districts

From enlisting a local former Olympian to inspire young people with his journey to collaborating with Cherokee Nation elders for immersive cultural activities like basket weaving and stickball, some rural school districts are drawing on partnerships with local communities to bring students enriching, fun and engaging summer learning opportunities that they otherwise might not be able to access.

## **Opportunities and challenges for summer learning in rural districts**

About 20% of students in the United States attend [rural schools](#). These schools share certain assets such as “resilience, adaptability, strong family involvement, and close connections to businesses and their communities” (O’Connell, 2023). Smaller rural communities are often tight-knit, making it easier for schools to build close relationships with students, families, and local community organizations like churches, businesses, and libraries (Johnson et al., 2021). Schools play a key role as community institutions and have economic importance in rural areas as major employers. Because of their importance to their communities, they draw multi-generational involvement in school activities (Azano et al., 2019).

That said, rural districts also face unique challenges. Students in rural districts tend to start kindergarten slightly ahead of non-rural students academically but fall behind by middle school; importantly, this gap is compounded by larger summer learning losses in rural areas (Johnson et al., 2021). Many rural communities lack major providers of free and low-cost summer enrichment like YMCAs and Boys and Girls Clubs. Access to cultural resources like museums or recreation centers is limited, particularly for rural families of color and low-income families (Afterschool Alliance, 2021). Transportation systems are more expensive and challenging to operate. Unfortunately, the distinct needs in rural education — and specifically rural summer learning — are sometimes neglected, both in policy and in research.

## The power of community: Partnerships for summer learning

To address these challenges and improve student opportunities in the summer, rural districts within the District Summer Learning Network (DSLNL) are tapping into the assets of close-knit community members and local partners to expand and enhance their summer learning programs. 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 serving as the research partner.

In DSLNL, community partners are key players in planning and implementing engaging, well-rounded summer learning. Particularly for rural districts, community partnerships can help fill in gaps in programming, provide supplies and funding, and bring career exposure and enriching opportunities to students who don't have access to them otherwise. Connecting with community members and businesses can give rural students access to more locally contextualized curricular resources, ease their school-to-work transition, and provide a sense of place and belonging (Bauch, 2001).

In this Snapshot, we describe four rural districts working to design summer learning that blends core academics with exciting enrichment opportunities. Each of the four rural districts featured has built a range of strong partnerships to extend and enhance summer learning opportunities. Importantly, the informal, close-knit nature of rural areas lend themselves to more flexible and creative configurations of partnerships, as districts tap a unique mix of local community assets, resources and networks to broaden horizons and opportunities in the summer.



Table 1.

**Overview of Districts' Summer Learning Programs and Community Partnerships**

<b>District/size</b>	<b>Summer learning program</b>	<b>Community partnership highlights</b>
<p><b>Blount County Schools, Alabama</b></p> <p>17 schools 7700 students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12-day, 15-day and 20-day programs</li> <li>• Offering full-day literacy and numeracy camps blended with enrichment activities like arts, career explorations, and field trips</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community members like firefighters, farmers, beekeepers, and artists volunteer their time and expertise for enriching summer activities and presentations.</li> <li>• Local organizations such as the Friends of the Locust Fork River facilitate summer field trips.</li> <li>• Local businesses, churches, and individuals donate bikes to incentivize student attendance.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mountain Empire Unified School District, California</b></p> <p>11 schools 1800 students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 19-day program</li> <li>• Offering full-day hands-on academics and enrichment activities like dance and swimming for TK-12</li> <li>• Additional career and college readiness for middle schoolers and credit recovery for high schoolers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner-based programs were born out of student feedback and interest.</li> <li>• As a result, the San Diego County Office of Education collaborates with the district to bring career readiness resources to students.</li> <li>• Remote partners STEMForged and LEGO Robotics offer project-based video game design and coding classes in response to student interest and feedback.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Muldrow Public Schools, Oklahoma</b></p> <p>3 schools 1300 students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-day programming offering academics focused on literacy and STEM in the morning</li> <li>• Blended with physical education, outdoor field trips and other enrichment activities in the afternoons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muldrow Public Library brings interactive activities to summer literacy instruction, such as connecting necklace-making to read-aloud sessions.</li> <li>• Janet Huckabee Center provides outdoor summer activities like archery and fishing.</li> <li>• Cherokee Nation provides funding for academic programming and direct enrichment programming led by community elders.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Stigler Public Schools, Oklahoma</b></p> <p>3 schools 1200 students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-day programming offering literacy, STEAM and physical education in the morning</li> <li>• Blended with enrichment activities like sewing, photography, art, agriculture in the afternoons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Army Corps of Engineers provides students and families free lake access and boating activities in a summer water safety program.</li> <li>• Choctaw Nation provides funding, cultural materials, supplies, and staff PD for summer months.</li> </ul>



Blount County Schools, Alabama



Mountain Empire Unified School District, California



Muldrow Public Schools, Oklahoma



Mountain Empire Unified School District, California



Blount County Schools, Alabama



Stigler Public Schools, Oklahoma

## Building core partnerships to accelerate academic progress

### Partnering with Tribal Nations

Responsive and engaging summer programming is especially important for students from marginalized groups in rural areas who are at greater risk for summer learning loss. Rural Native American families are less likely to have summer programs in their community than other rural families and face greater financial barriers to accessing programming (Afterschool Alliance, 2021).

**Stigler Public Schools** in rural southeast Oklahoma’s Haskell County serves 1200 students, a third of whom are Native American, across its three schools. Stigler has a long-standing partnership with the Choctaw Nation, whose Partnership of Summer School Education (POSSE) program funds hands-on summer academic programming during the summer from 7:30 AM to 2:30 PM, including support for teacher compensation and professional development. (The district uses 21st Century Community Learning Center funding to provide afternoon enrichment programming from 2:30 PM to 5:30 PM.) Stigler’s summer learning program benefits from additional in-kind support provided by the Choctaw Nation, including cultural materials, guest speakers and cultural teachers, and free field trips to the Choctaw Culture Center via Johnson-O’Malley funding.

Michelle Moore, who directs 21st Century Community Learning Center and Johnson-O’Malley programming in addition to her role as principal of Stigler Middle School, reflects,

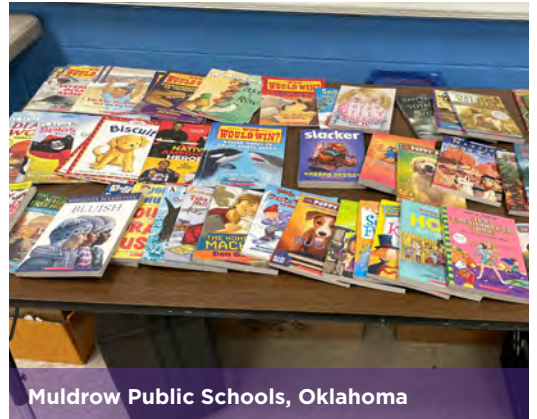
“ Choctaw Nation is an amazing part of our community as a whole. The tribe provides so many services and resources to our school and families that overall benefit our entire community, not just our Native families. The leaders have always gone above and beyond to be supportive and to strive to serve the needs of our students and families.

Muldrow Public Schools similarly depends on its close partnership with the Cherokee Nation to make summer learning possible in the district. Muldrow, situated in eastern Oklahoma’s Sequoyah County, is home to three public schools — an elementary, middle, and high school. The district serves about 1300 pre-K through 12th-grade students, nearly half of whom are Native American. The Cherokee Nation funds summer academic programming and supplies, as well as providing direct enrichment programming taught by Cherokee elders such as basket weaving and the Native American sport stickball. According to Angela Williams, Federal Programs Director of Muldrow Public Schools, the Nation works closely and flexibly to support the district wherever needs arise and helps students connect to the region’s local heritage.



## Cultivating partnerships for hands-on literacy and STEM learning

Over the past several years, **Muldrow Public Schools** has worked to transform its partnership with the Muldrow Public Library. Historically, the partnership entailed sporadic library visits by students as part of summer learning programs. DSLN provided two \$5000 grants to participating districts to deepen partnerships; Muldrow used this resource to engage the library. They invited the library's literacy experts to collaborate with teachers to integrate literacy and STEM learning. In summer 2023, librarians were on-site during every day of summer learning, working with each elementary grade one day a week to connect read-alouds and hands-on activities with STEM lessons; the librarians designed these activities to connect to students' cultures. For instance, a librarian read aloud a book featuring a Native American necklace maker to a group of 4th grade students while they rolled colorful clay into necklace beads. Library staff also brought each student a new book to take home during each visit.



Williams recounts how easily and quickly district staff can plan and communicate with library staff:

“ Most of our community partners are nearby, enabling us to communicate frequently in person. These face-to-face interactions strengthen their commitment to supporting the school.

The district's DSLN coach, Stacy Silverman, describes this partnership as symbiotic since it also helps the library serve more kids.

Nestled in the southeastern part of California's San Diego County and covering over 660 square miles, **Mountain Empire Unified School District (MEUSD)** serves over 1800 students, and similarly worked with partners to offer rich STEM learning opportunities in the summer. Before California dramatically expanded funding for expanded learning through the state's Expanded Learning Opportunities Program, the district wasn't able to provide summer programming for elementary and middle grades students, and families lacked a safe space for children to enjoy summer activities.



After going through a period of remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, MEUSD wanted to design a summer learning experience that would emphasize engaging, hands-on experiences. Based on a recommendation from their DSLN coach, MEUSD partnered with STEMSoul, a professional development nonprofit blending STEM instruction with social justice. A STEMSoul facilitator designed a full-day training for summer learning teachers during which they built their own kits of STEM materials and planned a learning sequence for the four-week program. MEUSD teachers used kits throughout the summer that received enthusiastic feedback from students and families.



The district also worked closely with staff from the San Diego County Office of Education, who participated alongside them in DSLN, to plan for summer learning. The County Office of Education offered career planning and development activities for middle schoolers to support their future readiness—a key opportunity that summer learning can provide.

## **Tapping into local networks for career exploration and experiential learning**

Alabama's **Blount County Schools**, a rural district covering 660 square miles, serves 1700 students across its 17 schools. The district's primary summer partner is the Blount County Education Foundation (BCEF), which has supported year-round learning in the district since its founding in 1998. BCEF's Executive Director, Mitchie Neel, also leads the district's summer learning programming. Blount County's summer program, which blends academic learning with camp-like enrichment catering to students' talents, interests, and passions, addresses a real need in the community, particularly for working parents who desire engaging activities for their children during the summer. BCEF provides funds and supplies for literacy and numeracy summer camps, organizes a range of free enrichment camps, and coordinates an extensive network of individuals, organizations and businesses that play key roles in summer learning.



Neel notes, "For a rural county like ours, the list of partnerships is really productive and necessary for success. Our partner list this year included over 50 local partners." After joining a DSLN small learning community focused on partnerships, Neel used the DSLN partnership tool to map each of Blount County's partners and think strategically about how to build enduring connections that match resources to the schools and students who need them most.

Blount County and BCEF rely on local community members to offer summer learning participants opportunities for real world hands-on learning and exposure connected to their local setting. This extensive network of firefighters, law enforcement officers, farmers, beekeepers, bankers, doctors, storytellers, and artists serve as guest speakers throughout the summer, helping build students' knowledge of different career pathways. One of the most impactful guest speakers is a local former Olympian from Senegal who talks to students about speed and agility while embedding lessons on goal setting, decision making, and critical thinking.

Summer learning programs offer a unique opportunity for rural students to access rich place-based learning experiences that are otherwise inaccessible because of distance and cost. Blount County and the BCEF work with local partners to organize summer field trips that allow students to immerse themselves in their local natural and agricultural resources. Friends of the Locust Fork River organizes 'Kids Day on the River,' during which campers kayak and see raptors, reptiles and amphibians. 'Youth Farm Tour' brings campers to local farms to visit animals and explore farming.

Other rural districts similarly take advantage of their natural resources for summer learning. Stigler Public Schools partners with the National Resources Conservation Services to offer lessons on farming and fishing, along with seeds, soil, plants, and fishing poles for students and their families to use. The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service of Oklahoma State University provides curriculum resources, nutrition classes, and materials for experiential learning including incubators for hatching eggs. Muldrow Public Schools partners with the Janet Huckabee Center, about 50 miles from the town across the Arkansas state line, to let students explore archery, fishing, and other outdoor activities. Campers travel to the Center every summer, which for some students is their first time visiting a lake.

### **Cultivating partnerships to sustain student and family engagement**

Mountain Empire relies on extensive surveys and frequent feedback conversations with students, families, and staff to ensure that summer programming matches students' interests and needs. In these surveys, students and families have given the STEM activities high marks. The same is true for the district's work with Pine Valley Dance and Play, which works to bring dance, cheer and tumbling programs to schools in rural areas and small towns in the southeastern corner of California.

Student and family interests have continued to shape their summer offerings. As Amy Conforth, Director of Education and Instructional Services at MEUSD describes, "We tapped into just talking to kids and being like, 'Hey, what are you interested in?' A lot of them said gaming." Since local resources weren't immediately available, MEUSD reached out to the remote-learning company STEMForged to offer project-based video game design for middle schoolers. Elementary schoolers can participate in Lego Robotics and coding classes.

The tragic drowning death of a student's family member motivated the district to focus on the high rate of summer drownings in rural areas without easy access to public pools. After looking into the possibility of building swimming lessons into summer learning offerings, Mountain Empire decided to partner with the San Diego YMCA facility closest to the district to offer swimming instruction to all third graders each year as part of the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program. Because the YMCA is still an hour's drive beyond the district's boundaries, students receive bus transportation and meals to make participation feasible.



Stigler Public Schools has also built a key partnership to meet families' needs for safe access to water recreation. The US Army Corps of Engineers offers a water safety program for Stigler summer learning students, which earns them and their families free swimming and boating at a nearby natural lake upon completion. Since there is no community swimming pool, this free lake access is a big draw, helping build student and family engagement in summer learning and interest in the Army Corps of Engineer's programming at the same time.

In Blount County, BCEF runs a summer bike giveaway to encourage summer learning attendance. Initially, BCEF was able to give away one or two bikes per site, but the initiative has gained momentum in the last two years with “a tremendous number of local individuals, organizations, businesses, [and] industries” contributing to the program. The district has gotten such overwhelming support that “the Foundation is not going to have to go seek any donations to buy the bikes,” according to Neel.



## The Relational Work of Rural Partnerships

Leaders in the four districts emphasized their dependence on a mix of deep, longstanding partnerships and larger informal local networks to make summer learning a reality. Muldrow’s Williams reflected that close partners, such as tribal nations, provide “security, because you know that they’re going to help you figure out a way... they give you peace of mind to know that you’re always going to be able to do what you want for your kids.” Neel noted that Blount County’s summer learning “can’t function” without the extensive network they’ve cultivated:

“...the grantors, the people that do guest speaking, the people that do presentations, the people that donate things or loan things to us, or help us plan something because we want to do a camp that’s in their wheelhouse, but we don’t know exactly what to put in content-wise.

District leaders described the ways partnerships are built through social ties that overlap with formal professional relationships, and sustained by informal relationship-building activities like picking up the phone, dropping into the partner’s office, or running into each other around town. Many district leaders responsible for summer learning have worked and lived in their districts for decades, have taught generations of residents and raised their own families locally. Williams notes that the small size of the district central office means district leaders are in close contact and can make decisions, such as greenlighting new partnerships, quickly. She notes:

“We are a small rural community, therefore some resources are limited. However, this setting does give us the advantage of knowing everyone and sharing information easily with community partners to ensure our student needs are met.

These informal connections bring additional benefits for students, as well. In Stigler, whenever Moore drops by a partner’s office or calls one to check in about programming, she invites them to visit the school as a guest reader. She mentions inviting police officers, a local pharmacist, and staff from the extension office to read to students, both to cultivate a love of books among students and to help students build relationships in their own community.

Blount County’s home library program, which strives to ensure each summer camper has at least one brand-new book, has also benefited from the local community’s involvement. Neel shares, “that has gotten to the point where books are coming from all sources that I didn’t reach out to. They contact me. That’s another example of how word is spreading in the community about what our needs are.”

## Conclusion

These four rural districts showcase the power of leveraging strong community partnerships for summer learning. Some key takeaways are:

- ◉ Native American nations are often integral support systems for rural districts serving large populations of indigenous students, and provide key resources and programming to accelerate summer learning for all students, as well as expertise to make summer learning culturally relevant.
- ◉ Local businesses and community members can offer a wealth of information on career pathways and can fill programmatic gaps by providing academic and enrichment opportunities rooted in students' local contexts.
- ◉ Local partners can expose students to learning opportunities that exist in their environment and community, connected to their setting, natural resources, and culture.
- ◉ Summer offers opportunities for districts and their partners to connect students with experiences outside the district that are otherwise inaccessible.
- ◉ Close-knit relationships and physical proximity make it easier for district leaders to coordinate with partners and forge partnerships for mutual benefit.

Partnerships are a key means of enhancing and supporting summer learning programs with horizon-expanding activities beyond academics. We often see urban and suburban districts as rich with the potential for deep and meaningful partnerships. In this ongoing study, we hope to continue to document how rural districts are taking advantage of local community partnerships, and explore how these partnerships can contribute to their long-term summer story.

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