

Planning Successful Summer Programs: The Power of Strong Leadership and Cross-Departmental Collaboration

THE SUMMER SNAPSHOT SERIES: PART III





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

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The Summer Snapshots Series: Part III

This brief is part of a multi-part series titled ‘Summer Snapshots’ born out of ongoing research on the District Summer Learning Network (DSLNN). 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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“Launching a quality summer program is akin to launching the school year, only with less time for planning and execution.”

— Getting to Work on Summer Learning,
Recommended Practices for Success, 2nd Ed, RAND Corporation.

Well-planned, high-quality summer learning programs can produce meaningful benefits for students. In particular, programs that go beyond traditional remediation to provide engaging learning experiences tailored to student needs and interests can help address chronic absenteeism and disconnectedness ([Naftzger & Newman, 2021](#), [Pyne et al, 2023](#)). Students who attend summer programs consistently can show improved learning outcomes and social-emotional life skills, develop new interests and relationships, gain exposure to new experiences, and are more engaged in learning ([Schwartz et al, 2018](#), [McCombs et al, 2019](#), [Afterschool Alliance 2024](#)).

To realize the promise of summer programming to accelerate and enrich learning, school districts must organize resources for thoughtful planning and execution. Too often, planning for summer programming is treated as an afterthought. Many district leaders charged with summer planning must juggle multiple competing priorities. To successfully develop stimulating and effective summer programs, program leaders have a long list of planning decisions to make, such as: identifying facilities; hiring site leaders and teachers; selecting and engaging enrichment providers; choosing or designing summer curricula; training staff; communicating with families; recruiting students; actively promoting consistent attendance; and managing logistics, such as transportation, meals, and supplies. All this needs to be achieved in a shorter period of time and with fewer resources than in the regular school year ([Schwartz et al, 2018](#)).

Research on summer learning has identified key practices for effective summer program planning:

- **Create and staff a summer director role.** The summer director(s) should have time dedicated to summer planning and project management.

- **Start planning early.** Planning for summer learning should start before January and rely on a calendar with clear tasks and deadlines.
- **Construct a cross-departmental planning team.** District departments that are important to summer running smoothly (such as curriculum, food, transportation, hiring, and enrichment) should meet regularly to plan together.
- **Engage stakeholders early in planning.** Community partners, site-level staff, and students and families should be brought into the planning process early to help shape programming and contribute to continuous improvement.
- **Invest in site-level capacity early.** Summer site leaders and teachers should be thoughtfully selected, trained, and collaborated with prior to summer to ensure high-quality programming ([Schwartz et al. 2018](#)).

In this Snapshot, we spotlight three school districts—Newark, New Jersey; Rochester, Minnesota; and Seattle, Washington—that have invested in evidence-based planning practices to reimagine what summer learning can look like.

These three districts are part of the [District Summer Learning Network](#) (DSLNN), which has helped more than 100 districts and six states design, carry out, and sustain high-quality, evidence-based summer learning programs that prepare students for academic success and support their wellbeing. Funded by [The Wallace Foundation](#), DSLNN is designed and led by [FHI 360](#), with NYU Metro Center’s Policy, Research and Evaluation (PRE) team as the research partner. DSLNN helps districts adopt evidence-based planning practices to take advantage of summer as a time for acceleration and enrichment and make progress toward district goals.

In each of these three districts, strong leadership and investments in early, collaborative planning catalyzed innovations in summer programming. This included new leadership pipelines, rich programming tailored to community needs and interests, and coherent year-round approaches to instruction. These three districts illustrate how strategic, comprehensive planning enables districts to harness the summer months to advance key goals.



<p>Table 1.</p> <p>Overview of Districts' Strategic Planning for Summer Learning Programs</p>	
District	Key components of strategic summer planning
<p>Newark Public Schools, NJ</p> <p>64 schools 41,000+ students City: Large Northeast</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated leadership setting a summer vision: Leaders established a vision for summer as an important opportunity to provide fun and enriching learning experiences. • Cross-departmental planning: Regular planning meetings starting in September enabled district leadership, departments, and principals and teachers to share ownership of summer learning. • Stakeholder engagement: Districts and partners collaborated to co-design programming that blended enrichment and academics. • Investing in site capacity for instructional quality: District-led professional development, classroom walkthroughs, and coaching helped site staff deliver high-quality, coherent instruction.
<p>Rochester Public Schools, MN</p> <p>35 schools 17,000+ students City: Midsize Midwest</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated leadership setting a summer vision: Leaders established a vision of reimagining summer learning as engaging, dynamic and student-centered. • Cross-departmental planning: Summer leaders engaged in early, collaborative planning by convening a large summer task force and working closely with site-level teacher leaders. • Stakeholder engagement for continuous improvement: Summer leaders incorporated ideas from students, families, community partners and site-level staff to refine summer learning.
<p>Seattle Public Schools, WA</p> <p>104 schools 49,000+ students City: Large West</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated leadership setting a summer vision: Leaders established a vision of making summer part of a coherent, year-round approach to learning. • Cross-departmental planning: Summer taskforce members from all departments became invested in their roles in making summer a success. • Collaborating for year-round learning: Close coordination across district departments and with partners led to innovations in the summer curriculum and continuity between summer programming and the regular school year.

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Newark Public Schools, NJ:

District leaders, partners & site staff collaborate for an enriching summer experience

The Newark, NJ school system serves more than 41,000 students in its 64 schools. For five weeks in the summer, Newark Public Schools provides over a dozen different programs for students in Pre-K through 12. The elementary offerings are anchored by the Summer Achieve academic program and the Summer Quest enrichment program. Together, they provide an array of rich learning opportunities, further enhanced by the K-Ready Kindergarten Bootcamp, focused on language arts, literacy, math, science, and socio-emotional and life skills development; a Visual and Performing Arts Academy for middle schoolers; and tailored programming for English Language Learners and students with special needs.

For older youth, summer offerings have shifted from credit recovery to focus on academic acceleration and enrichment. Opportunities such as the Post High School Planning program and support for college funding applications, along with a Future Business Leaders internship program put students on the fast track to college and career readiness. High school students across Newark are also given the opportunity to participate in high-interest activities aligned with their school's career and magnet academies. These offerings are designed, planned, carried out, and continuously refined by a dedicated team of district staff in collaboration with partners, site-level educators, and community members.

Collaborating on a shared vision of summer learning

Newark's superintendent, who believes that summer is crucial for a child's success, has established a district-wide vision for summer as an important opportunity to provide fun and enriching learning experiences. Newark's Director of the Office of Staff Development, Matt Brewster, who has been involved in summer learning in different capacities for about a decade, doubles as the summer program co-coordinator. His counterpart in the work is the district's Director of Extended Learning, Dr. Julianne Bello, who collaborates with the district's Teaching & Learning directors to plan the curricular component of summer. Together, they lead a planning process to enact the superintendent's vision for the seamless integration of academics, enrichment, acceleration, and community partner involvement.

In addition to the core summer team, a range of district departments have seats at the planning table, including the Office of the Superintendent, Student Information Services, Special Education, Bilingual Services, Teaching and Learning, Career and Technical Education, Extended Learning Time, Communications, Data, Human Resources, Health Services, Security Services, Facilities, and Transportation. Alongside them are summer school principals and teachers, under the supervision of the Deputy Superintendent of Schools. These leaders convene on either a monthly or bimonthly basis depending on planning needs. They start planning as early as September to review the prior summer, generate ideas for the next one, and "start making reality what the superintendent envisions" for summer. Throughout the year this team plans and problem-solves together. Brewster reflects on how working collaboratively creates a shared sense of ownership of summer:

“ *It builds mutual accountability. It doesn't say to the early childhood department, 'If you have a problem with transportation, call Matt Brewster and ask him about it.' It puts them in the same room with the director of transportation. They know, 'if I have a problem with transportation, I know that's the person to talk to, and that person was at the meeting...' We're building this thing where summer is now part of what we do.*”

This collaborative approach enables Newark's summer team to coordinate with school leaders early for a robust student identification and recruitment process focused on the superintendent's priorities for summer learning: serving English language learners (ELL), students receiving special education services, and students with unfinished learning¹. The district's data team uses test scores, grades, and attendance records to identify students with unfinished learning who can benefit from summer programming. Families of identified students receive three different messages between February and April informing them that their children will be automatically enrolled in the summer program. These notifications are linked to marking periods and are sent alongside report cards. After the third marking period, school principals conduct personalized outreach to families to confirm participation.

Simultaneously, central office leaders work together across departments to tailor summer offerings to the needs and interests of these priority student groups. For instance, the Director of Bilingual Programs collaborates closely with the Director of English Language Arts to build a specialized language acquisition-focused program for ELL students titled 'English Plus.'

Engaging partners early to better serve student needs

The district's historic strategic plan envisions high-quality education for all students with enrichment programming as a key lever. To that end, all summer elementary sites have the Quest afternoon enrichment program that features student choice of courses in arts, music, literature, sports and recreation, and CPR certification. Newark engages national and community-based organizations such as the After-School All-Stars, the Ironbound Community Corporation, and the FOCUS Hispanic Center for Community Development to supplement the enrichment component of its summer programming. Dr. Bello enlists and coordinates with these organizations to put together a menu of partnership opportunities for schools based on their interests, capacity, and location. Partner organizations are invited to a joint planning meeting to help realize the vision for summer, collaborate on possibilities for afternoon enrichment programming, and provide feedback on the district's plans.

In 2023 the district invited its primary partners to work with the summer team at the beginning of planning processes in the fall—earlier than in previous years. This helped the summer team move from prescribed plans that felt like “a to-do list” to a more co-designed model. Brewster shared how partners are able to bring “their time, their talent, or their treasure” to the table to best serve the needs of students when they are involved in summer planning early on and have time to think about ways to collaborate.

¹ Unfinished learning refers to concepts or skills in any subject that students were in the process of learning but unable to master or never had the opportunity to learn. This term implies that while student learning is incomplete, it will continue if it hasn't already. <https://www.prodigygame.com/main-en/blog/learning-loss-unfinished-learning/>

This close relationship with partners made possible a major shift in how Newark delivered K-12 enrichment programming in summer 2024. In order to ensure coherence between core academic and enrichment components of its summer program, Newark's superintendent envisioned a model in which the district's certified teachers would serve a greater role in delivering them. Over the course of the school year, enrichment partners worked closely with certified summer teachers, providing them with professional development on partner-developed content and instructional strategies.

This model allowed the district to connect academic curriculum and enrichment and provide students with the consistency of engaging with the same adult throughout the academic and enrichment parts of the day. Brewster explains,

“*That ensured a level of quality on our part because we knew that those teachers could more easily make the connections between what they were doing with yoga, for example, and our phys-ed program or our science program or our math program because they're our teachers. We really took advantage of that opportunity to engage the partners but still bring our certified teachers to the benefit of our students.*”

The new model also involved extending enrichment programming to 6pm instead of 3pm at the elementary level, better meeting the needs of working families. The district worked closely with partners to make this pivot.

“*One of the major steps to making that vision a reality was meeting with the partners, our community-based organizations, and letting them know that this change was coming down the pike and letting them understand what their role would be if they wish to continue having a role. Almost all of them did.*”

Investing in site-level capacity building for high-quality instruction

To ensure sites are prepared to deliver the district-developed academic curriculum, Newark's Office of Teaching and Learning staff coordinates with site-level leaders prior to summer. Newark hires school-year vice principals to work as summer principals. Two teachers serve as Teachers to Assist, which are akin to summer vice principals, at each site, one to support operational planning, so that the summer principal can focus on instructional quality with the other. By giving site staff opportunities to take up more responsibilities and grow in the summer, Newark's leaders use summer programs as an incubator to advance the district's overall leadership pipeline goals.

In the lead-up to summer, Newark provides bi-weekly professional development for summer leaders and teachers. They learn how to best meet the needs of diverse students, while building a community of summer site staff who collaborate and problem-solve together. During summer, district Teaching and Learning staff members along with representatives from the Assistant Superintendents' Offices, conduct regular classroom walkthroughs and provide coaching tailored to teachers' needs.

District summer leaders are able to invest in strengthening site-level instructional capacity and leadership by planning for it early and fostering connections between central and site-level staff. Their efforts also create strategic connections between Newark’s summer program and the regular school year as summer staff carry summer lessons into the following school year and are better prepared for new leadership roles. For instance, summer educators use summer as a “learning laboratory” and are therefore more prepared to teach the same ELA and math curriculum in the fall, even acting as peer leaders for other fall teachers.



Brewster attests to the effectiveness of this strategy,

“ We’re getting to a point where people understand that this is a 12-month process. Teaching these kids, helping these kids succeed, helping our leaders develop, helping our schools improve is a 12-month job. It’s not something that just happens from September to June, and then we pick it back up the other September. It goes all the way through.



Rochester Public Schools, MN:

A district-wide task force plans early to realize a new vision for summer

Situated in southeast Minnesota is the mid-sized city of Rochester where the public school district serves more than 17,000 Pre-K through 12th-grade students in 35 schools. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Rochester had traditionally provided summer programming aimed at math and reading remediation. The program struggled to attract and retain students and teachers due to low interest. In the wake of the pandemic, the infusion of federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds provided Rochester with an opportunity to reimagine summer learning as something more engaging and dynamic.

Dedicating leadership to come up with a new summer vision

Minnesota's funding model for summer learning prioritizes students who meet one or more of eleven qualifiers that place them at higher risk, including multilingual learners, students missing academic benchmarks, and students with foster care experiences. Amy Eich, Rochester's then-Director of Community Education who was tasked with leading the summer redesign, recognized that priority students often lacked access to the kinds of engaging and enriching summer experiences that more resourced families were able to access. She and her colleagues saw summer as a chance for the district to address,

“... experience gaps between our students with a lot of means at home to provide supplementary experiences and then other families who can't afford that. We wanted summer to be very experiential, lots of field trips going places that students might not have been able to go, bringing in experts that they might not have had access to.”

In fall 2020, Eich worked with the district's family engagement team to survey families to understand what they appreciated about the previous summer learning model and what they would want to change. Concerned that they might not be able to reach some families with an email survey, the family engagement team also held focus groups in multiple languages. Families shared that they wanted to maintain a strong focus on academics but were also concerned about their children's connections to peers and to school, particularly in the wake of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2021, Rochester launched the 'Summer of Discovery' focused on four key areas identified through family input: academics, experiences, relational skills, and wellness. This new model emphasizes project- and theme-based learning, outdoor education, experiential field trips, and activities focused on socio-emotional and life skills. Class sizes are limited to 15 students, with pairs of classes sharing an educational assistant. Partnerships with universities, cultural institutions, and community-based organizations offer hands-on learning experiences and exposure to exciting careers. For example, InSciedOut, a partnership between Rochester Public Schools and the Mayo Clinic, links students with scientists to conduct experiments to analyze local water quality.

Coordinating planning between central office and school site leaders

When Eich and her team began reimagining summer learning, they first pulled together a task force of more than 50 stakeholders, including district staff and community-based partners. Task force members engaged in a six-week sprint of planning sessions starting in December 2020, an experience that Eich describes as “building the bicycle while riding it,” before handing the reins to site-level coordinators to customize implementation plans. In the years since, Rochester has been able to establish a more structured and intentional planning process that starts earlier, providing time in the fall to reflect on the previous summer. The district has also added an Assistant Director for summer programming to help guide planning.

This early planning provides ample time to engage key district departments and coordinate planning between central office staff and site-level leaders. Eich and her team purposefully work with staff from district departments that focus on the needs of priority students, including the Multilingual Learners team, the Equity and Engagement team, and the Student Support team overseeing special education services, mental health, and socio-emotional learning.

Each site is led by two teacher-leaders who share responsibility for academic, enrichment, and operational aspects of the program. Staffing at school sites reflects the commitment to engaging personnel best positioned to meet student needs: each elementary and middle school site has a dedicated multilingual learner expert, a mental health expert, a special education expert, and an additional teacher to focus on an area of the site’s choice, like art or music. Site leaders plan jointly with the district summer learning team and then work with staff to tailor plans according to site-level student and family input.

Soliciting student and family feedback for continuous improvement

Beyond the initial outreach to understand families’ priorities for summer, Rochester continues to thoughtfully gather student and family feedback to refine Summer of Discovery programming. After the first Summer of Discovery in 2021, for example, a teacher from the multilingual learner team led a “mini-study” with students, families, and teachers to understand the summer experiences of multilingual learners. After gathering data during the fall, she worked with colleagues to develop recommendations ensuring summer learning environments would proactively address language acquisition needs and affirm students of all language backgrounds. She and her colleagues then led professional development sessions for summer site staff to help them incorporate tailored strategies into their summer instructional plans.

Partners often play a key role in brokering student and family participation. For instance, the InSciEd Out team worked with middle and high school students to identify experiences they wanted to see in summer learning, and site coordinators incorporated this feedback into their summer offerings. The YMCA’s youth development team worked with middle and high school students to develop summer learning activities for younger students, drawing on the older students’ reflections about meaningful summer experiences.

Rochester used a \$5000 collaborative planning stipend offered by DSLN to work directly with the Community Engagement Response Team (CERT), a local community-based organization that builds connections between African American communities and local institutions. The stipend supported a series of meetings with mothers from CERT to reflect on the summer learning experiences they wanted for their children. These discussions surfaced a desire for more connections between students' communities and cultures and their learning experiences in school. In response, Rochester has worked with CERT to engage local minority-owned businesses in Summer of Discovery programming. Business owners host field trips and visit school sites to share their experiences as entrepreneurs of color.

Rochester's commitment to seeking out and acting on input from students, families, communities, and the staff who work most closely with students has helped the district realize the promise of summer as a time for engaging, student-centered learning.



Seattle Public Schools, WA:

District leaders build a culture around student-centered summer learning

DSLNL encourages districts to envision how high-quality summer programming can catalyze progress toward broader district goals. Since 2022, Seattle Public Schools leaders have worked to recast afterschool and summer learning not as an isolated time for remediation but as part of a coherent strategy for year-round learning.

As in many districts, past iterations of summer learning in Seattle focused on remediation and intensive intervention strategies for students with substantial unfinished learning. After the COVID-19 pandemic, a new summer learning team reimaged summer—along with afterschool programming—as part of a coordinated, year-round approach to core instruction. They hoped that this approach would give students extra time to master grade-level material and encourage schools to provide appropriate supports year-round, instead of waiting until summer to do intensive remediation. This shift meant rethinking all aspects of how Seattle plans for, staffs, and delivers summer learning.

Encouraging ownership of summer through collaborative planning

To make this new approach a reality, the district's summer learning team invested in a foundation of collaborative, inclusive planning. When Sara Mirabueno, Director of Continuous Improvement, and Tasha James, the Summer Program and Student Services Coordinator, began this work in 2022, one of their first moves was to put summer on the agenda of the district's Year-Long Excellence Squad, or "YES."

YES, a cross-departmental planning group, was established out of necessity during the pandemic, when teams across the district needed to address urgent student needs while coordinating rapid pivots remotely. The collaborative approach fostered by YES quickly proved invaluable, enabling departments to streamline communication and deliver timely solutions. Recognizing the ongoing benefits of this close coordination, district leaders decided to continue YES meetings beyond the pandemic. The group continues to convene weekly, regularly drawing up to 50 participants from across the central office and various departments, including Curriculum and Instruction, Student Support, Partnerships, Continuous Improvement, Transportation, and Technology, for unified planning.

In 2022, Mirabueno and James strategically embedded summer learning into YES' weekly meetings as a regular talking point. James explains,

“ *[YES] was largely about building a culture of summer school that isn't siloed. If summer school touches your work, let's try and find where that work happens and intersects.”*

Making summer a standing agenda item in district-wide operational meetings cemented summer learning as a core part of the district's year-round work. As a result of this work to de-silo summer planning and start planning in the fall instead of spring, summer leaders observed a shift in district culture, with teams across departments invested in the success of summer and thinking proactively about their roles in its success. As one example, the Office of Information Technology spent significant time and energy investigating how to make the district's student information system, PowerSchool, available for summer while still completing necessary annual maintenance. They developed a plan to configure PowerSchool for use during summer 2024, a vast improvement over tracking student attendance in spreadsheets as in previous years.

To further advance planning for summer, Seattle converted the part-time summer learning coordinator position into a full-time, year-round position. The coordinator Lisa Clayton explains that a full-time role affords her time to build systems, plan thoughtfully, and document processes for cross-departmental collaboration. For example, in Fall 2024 she circulated a survey to all of the departments that support summer learning, asking about their timelines, priorities, and needs in planning for the next summer. She also coordinated with site-level leaders to put in place a robust student identification and recruitment system.

Driving instructional innovation through partnerships

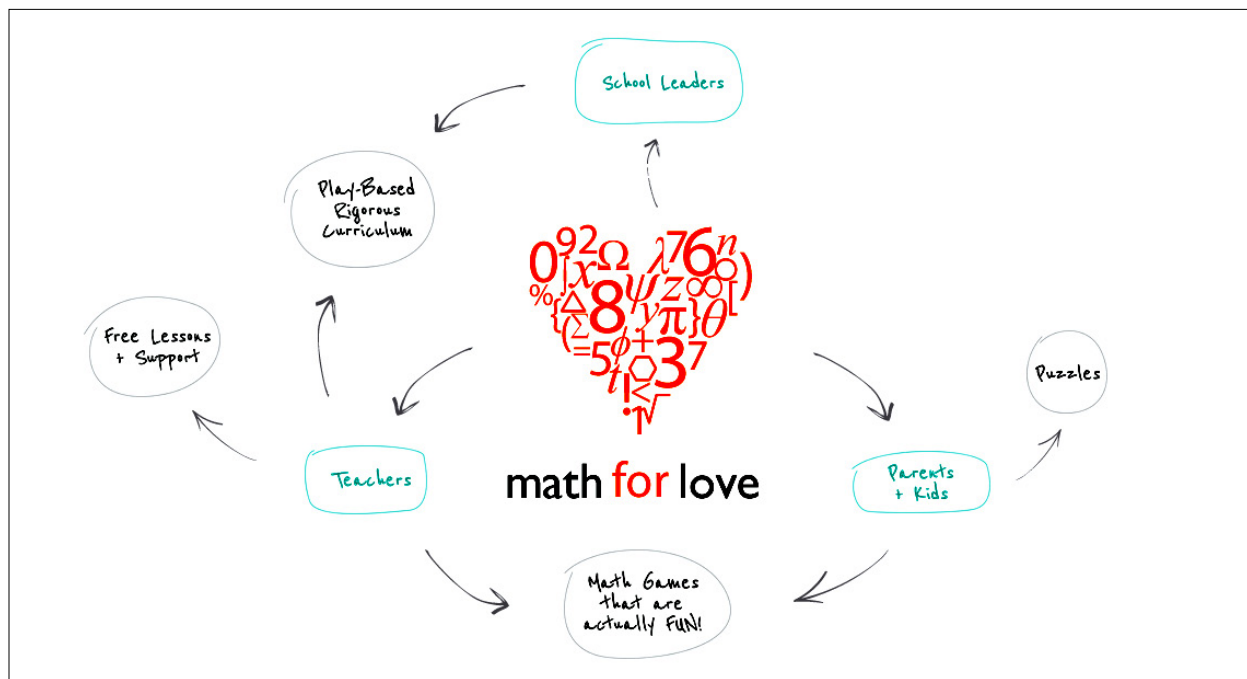
In summer 2023, Seattle offered full-day elementary and middle school summer programming that combined core academic instruction and daily partner-led STEAM enrichment. The summer learning team developed an application process starting in January to select partners with strong STEAM programming and a commitment to Seattle's values of equity and inclusion. Partner staff provided STEAM-focused afternoon enrichment with support from classroom instructional assistants. Offerings included coding, robotics, financial literacy, mural painting, and dance. In addition, Seattle's summer learning team worked with the district's Career and Technical Education director to infuse college and career readiness into weekly programming.

The summer team coordinated closely with Curriculum and Instruction and Continuous Improvement leaders to bring year-round coherence to summer instruction, while also capitalizing on the extra time for innovation that summer provides. For example, Seattle's English Language Arts curriculum team partnered with Scholastic to design summer instruction centered on Scholastic's Rising Voices libraries, a collection of STEAM-focused books curated to represent diverse student populations. Scholastic used Rising Voices books to develop daily summer ELA lessons while incorporating the frameworks, structures, and routines of Seattle's regular school-year ELA instruction. According to James, this summer model **"was solidifying and confirming the same practices we want to have in core instruction. Teachers walk in and they have familiarity with the curriculum, but it doesn't look the same."** Summer staff reported that students responded enthusiastically to the Rising Voices book selections, while lessons reinforced core literacy routines and concepts.

Close collaboration with the Curriculum and Instruction team catalyzed a similar innovation in summer math instruction. Summer learning teachers had been using Math for Love, a play-

based program, as the main summer math curriculum for several years. Wanting to create more coherence with school-year math instruction and inspired by the work on summer ELA instruction, Seattle's math curriculum specialists built a set of lessons that blended games and activities from Math for Love with routines and content from the school-year core curriculum. These lessons were so well-received by summer teachers and students that the math team decided to roll them out as part of school-year instruction.

The summer learning leadership's collaboration across departments and with key enrichment partners has helped them advance their vision of coherent year-round instruction. This year-round connection was further systematized in a district reorganization that placed extended learning, including summer, under the Academics department, alongside Curriculum and Instruction.



Conclusion

These three districts demonstrate how investment in early, consistent summer planning sets districts up for thoughtfully designed summer learning tailored to district goals. From inclusive planning teams to strong partnerships, Newark, Rochester, and Seattle are prime examples of how to plan for and develop evidence-based summer learning programs. Some key takeaways for leaders and staff of other districts running summer programs are:

- Direct involvement from the district superintendent and senior leadership helps focus summer planning on a shared vision.
- Planning for summer as early as September supports a smooth transition from the regular school year into summer programs and ensures that summer programming advances broader district goals.
- Cross-departmental collaboration facilitates smooth logistical and programmatic planning, prepares summer staff to meet the needs of priority students, and can facilitate innovation and experimentation.
- Co-designing programs with community partners and incorporating students' and families' voices into the planning process supports the development of engaging, enriching, responsive summer programs.
- Thoughtfully planned summer learning provides opportunities to strengthen leadership and instructional capacity that benefits districts year-round.

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