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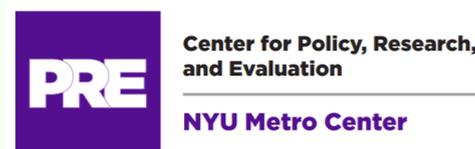
About the Center for Policy Research and Evaluation (PRE) at NYU Metro Center

The NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools (NYU Metro Center) is a comprehensive, university-based center providing research, professional learning services and supporting equity-focused, evidence-based innovations in educational research and programming. Under its umbrella, PRE produces education research and evaluations that are action-oriented, liberating, accessible, and result in more equitable systems, policies, and practices. Recognizing that research is often used as a tool of domination, we believe in the reclamation of research tools to illuminate marginalized truths, stories, and experiences.

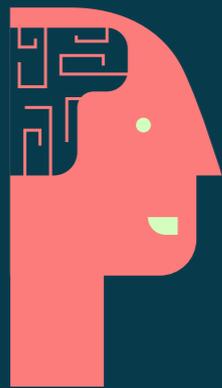
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Summer learning has emerged as a critical strategy to advance student achievement, engagement, and well-being.



Research shows that high-quality summer learning programs can improve academic outcomes for students across grade levels (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2019). Evidence-based summer learning programs provide academic acceleration — strong instruction in grade level content with tailored supports, rather than remediation focused on repeating skills and content from previous grades — coupled with rich experiences and a focus on creating a positive learning climate (Augustine, et al., 2016).

A diverse set of districts across the country have built summer learning programs incorporating these evidence-based practices, but the availability of summer learning programs has remained far below demand (America After 3 pm, 2019).

This brief draws on the experiences and reflections of district central office staff in 13 districts across the country.

These district summer learning leads worked in a range of contexts – rural, suburban, and urban; large and small; districts with long histories of summer learning and districts newer to summer. All participated in the District Summer Learning Network (DSLNL), funded by The Wallace Foundation between 2021 and 2025. Led by FHI360 and currently housed at AASA, the DSLNL provides peer networking, coaching, professional development, and tools to help district leaders design evidence-based summer learning programs and plan for sustainability.

The DSLNL was established to help districts effectively design and implement evidence-based summer programs in the context of a short-term infusion of federal funding for summer learning in the wake of the pandemic: the 2021 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Act. Advocates and funders of summer learning hoped that ESSER would spur new investments and sustained adoption of evidence-based summer learning practices, but two challenging tasks faced district central office staff: quickly rolling out or scaling up programs to respond to students' immediate needs and simultaneously sustaining changes in an uncertain funding environment.

In the following pages, we describe how summer district learning leaders implemented four key strategies to build broad consensus around the value of summer learning and develop internal capacity and partnerships to sustain progress. These efforts were especially important since pandemic recovery funding was designed as an emergency safety net that would sunset after four years. For each of these strategies, we describe how state and local contexts shaped district summer leaders' choices, successes, and challenges. Next, we share how the summer leaders approached difficult choices in the face of inconsistent funding. This brief identifies trade-offs and lessons that we hope will be instructive for efforts to sustain evidence-based summer learning in an uncertain funding climate.



Strategies for Summer Learning Sustainability

Sustaining progress on high-quality summer learning requires resources and commitment. In many districts, summer learning has long been treated as an afterthought, separate from the core academic work of schools, with limited staff time and resources devoted to planning and implementation. Researchers have identified a set of core strategies for sustaining progress on summer learning (Augustine and Thompson, 2017; EdResearch for Recovery and TN Education Research Alliance, 2023; Fitz, et al, 2025): coordinating cross-departmental resources to institutionalize summer learning planning as part of the districts’ the district’s core work; using data on program outcomes and visits to summer learning sites to build buy-in for summer learning; building diverse partnerships with organizations outside of the district; and pursuing a broad mix of public and private funding.

The district summer leaders in our study described efforts to sustain progress on summer learning that largely matched these research-based strategies. They organized district resources to support collaborative planning and leader and staff development for summer learning, and built a shared commitment to summer learning to advance district goals. They marshalled data on summer learning outcomes, brought leaders to see summer in action, and invited students and families to speak directly to decisionmakers about their experiences. They built and sustained partnerships outside the district to enhance programming and broaden buy-in. While they did not have budgeting power in their districts, they worked to identify potential funding sources, pursued private grants, and made the case for continued investment in summer. In this section we describe four key sustainability strategies used by district summer learning leaders in our study and provide examples of how leaders in different contexts implemented each one.

KEY SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGIES:

1. Building internal capacity & commitment

PLANNING FUNDING STAFFING

2. Building broad demand & buy-in

COMMUNITY DECISION-MAKER DISTRICT LEADER

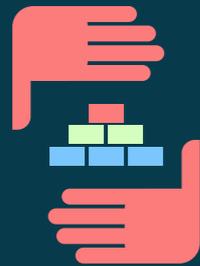
3. Building diverse & durable partnership networks

4. Leveraging multiple funding sources

SUMMER LEARNING FUNDING POST-ESSER STRATEGIES

#1

Building Internal Capacity & Commitment to Sustain Summer Learning



School districts that have sustained real progress on effective summer learning build systems for cross-departmental planning (Augustine & Thompson, 2017). Early, collaborative planning serves two main functions vis-à-vis sustainability: it improves the quality and efficiency of summer learning programs,

helping to make the case for summer learning as a worthwhile investment of staff time, resources, and funding; and it builds shared commitment to summer learning as a core part of how districts work toward their vision.

JUMP TO:

[PLANNING](#)

[FUNDING](#)

[STAFFING](#)

Institutionalizing summer planning

District summer leaders worked to institutionalize summer planning, ensuring it began early enough – often in the fall – to allow thoughtful preparation for instructional, enrichment, and logistical needs, and to build in time to reflect on successes and challenges and adjust course. Most large districts in our study built cross-departmental planning committees that met at regular intervals and included staff with sufficient authority to make decisions about summer learning content, which students to serve, and logistics. In smaller districts, this often happened more informally with fewer departments and more direct access to district leaders.

From the start, summer learning leaders invited curriculum and instruction teams, student support teams, and leaders with expertise in multi-lingual learning, career and technical education, and college readiness to the planning table. These collaborations improved the quality and relevance of summer programming, strengthened continuity between the school year and summer, and ensured that summer planning benefited from the full range of expertise present in the district.

Summer learning leaders were also deliberate about engaging their districts’ non-instructional teams such as transportation, communications, nutrition, and family engagement in planning, empowering those teams to ask questions, offer advice, and proactively plan, rather than constantly responding to demands from site staff. In one large urban district, the technology team was able to change its yearly maintenance schedule so that summer sites could use the school-year learning management system, simplifying record-keeping and data collection for summer outcomes. The leader for a large suburban eastern district reflected:

“The non-instructional parts of the organization feel greater ownership over the summer programs as a whole. They’re actually understanding what the fruits of their labor are going into. A person doing transportation routes is going to maybe work that much harder - or just have a better understanding of what the needs are if they’re part of the process from the beginning.”

Leveraging cross-departmental relationships for new funding sources

In addition to institutionalizing summer within district planning processes, summer learning leaders leveraged cross-department relationships to broker new sources of summer learning funding. In a suburban southern district, the summer leader noted that collaboration with other departments like transportation prompted department leaders to be more willing to allocate funds from their own department budgets to support summer programs. In other districts, college readiness and career and technical education teams helped summer learning leaders think creatively about how to tap college and career readiness funds for summer learning.

“Everybody has made a commitment to be at the table and be student-focused. They haven’t been dragged kicking and screaming into summer learning. I think there’s a big shift to being a partner within summer learning and to it not just being the little summer-school pushed-aside thing.”

Summer learning leader of a large Northwestern district

Making intentional staffing decisions to advance broader district goals

Early collaborative planning for summer learning allowed districts to make more intentional decisions about hiring and preparing site staff and leaders. This also enabled leaders to connect summer programs and staffing choices to broader district goals. Several summer leaders noted that summer hiring had traditionally been done by informal, word-of-mouth outreach in the spring. By bringing human resources teams to the planning table, they were able to hire earlier and ensure that staff and leaders' expertise matched site needs.

Earlier hiring facilitated more thoughtful and efficient professional development and instructional planning for site staff and leaders. Rather than the typical few days of classroom management-focused professional development, several summer learning leaders tapped their districts' curriculum and instruction, multilingual learner, and student support teams to lead professional learning for summer site staff. Other districts prioritized summer site staff for statewide professional learning opportunities on topics like the Science of Reading or extended learning time program quality. Leveraging these existing learning opportunities allowed districts to prepare staff efficiently and strengthened continuity between school-year and summer instructional approaches.

Several districts with longer-standing commitments to evidence-based summer learning used summer site leader roles as part of their leadership pipeline, positioning summer principal and assistant principalships as a step towards school-year leadership positions. A few district leaders also framed summer as a time for teacher professional growth: staff could experiment with new instructional strategies in a smaller, more contained environment before applying them in their school-year classrooms. In the same way that collaborative planning fostered district central office staff investment in summer as “part of what we do,” thoughtful hiring and professional development built school staff and leader investment in summer as a resource and opportunity.

#2

Building Broad Demand & Buy-in for Summer Learning



The district summer leaders in our study understood that, to sustain funding and capacity for their work, they had to build buy-in for a vision of summer as an opportunity for academic acceleration, enrichment, and engagement. As discussed above, much of the work to build buy-in happened when district staff, school leaders, and teachers were brought in as real partners in planning and carrying out summer learning and afforded rich opportunities to grow professionally.

Family, student, and community buy-in for the summer program was also key to making the case for the value of summer to decisionmakers who control district-level funding allocations for summer programming.

JUMP TO:

[COMMUNITY](#)

[DECISION-MAKER](#)

[DISTRICT LEADER](#)

Building community buy-in for summer learning

District leaders built opportunities for families and students to weigh in on summer learning design, to ensure their priorities and interests were reflected in programming. This engagement helped build demand among students, families and community members, leading to a shared sense of investment in summer learning. As a leader in a small rural district put it: “How else do you create ownership if you just say, ‘This is what you’re doing,’ versus, ‘What would you like to do, and how can we make this work for everybody?’”

Family and student engagement took different forms. A few districts in our sample invited families and community-based organizations to participate in summer planning committees. Some districts embedded opportunities for students taking part in summer to offer feedback and contribute to the design of programming. Most districts conducted outreach to students, families, and communities to solicit their feedback and ideas to inform the following year’s planning, often through end-of-summer surveys. Some districts also invited parents and students to participate in focus groups about their experiences.

Some districts built in opportunities for families and community members to see summer programming and play roles in program activities. Family members were guests at showcases, learning celebrations, outdoor learning experiences and field trips. Community members hosted field trips and internships, taught cooking classes, and volunteered in classrooms. One district leader noted that when the summer program invited community members to participate in career days or read to classes, “They go back to their businesses, and they sing our praises.” These relationships sometimes generated new grants or offers of in-kind support. District leaders hoped they would also solidify community support for ongoing district and state investment in summer.

Building decisionmaker buy-in for summer learning

While the district summer learning leaders in our study led decision making about the specifics of summer programming, final decisions about summer learning budgets and the scope of summer learning programs were outside of their control. The summer learning leaders used multiple strategies to demonstrate the value of summer learning to superintendents, school board members, and state education officials to make the case for continued funding for summer programs.

District leaders marshaled data – student academic performance indicators, social-emotional skills assessments, parent and student survey data – to demonstrate the value of summer learning in advancing district goals. In several larger districts, citywide out-of-school-time intermediaries and youth development intermediaries provided key infrastructure for consistent data collection and analysis, which districts used to improve programming and make the case to funders and district decisionmakers that summer learning is a worthwhile investment. Some documented this evidence in annual reports and in presentations to superintendents and school boards.

Most district summer leaders also invited superintendents, school board members, state education officials, and leaders of partner organizations to visit summer sites and see learning in action. Spending time at summer sites helped make visible the paradigm shift away from academic remediation and towards fun, enrichment, and academic acceleration. Site visits also provided opportunities for decisionmakers to hear directly from teachers and students.

Evidence of public demand for enriching, engaging summer learning carried weight with district decisionmakers. Several district summer learning leaders invited students and teachers to speak at school board meetings about the impact summer learning had on their lives. Summer leaders highlighted feedback from families about how excited their children were to attend summer programs, the relationships they saw their children building with staff and peers, and how much they valued a free or low-cost, full-day, safe, and engaging place for their children to be – particularly in smaller and more rural districts with fewer resources. One district leader aimed to build programming that, “if the district cut it, the community would demand they put it back.”

“Our summer program is a popular programming option. To be able to offer seven weeks of free academic and enrichment programming for kids in this community is significant, and I think it bears a lot of positive goodwill in the district...I think from a political standpoint too, there’s also a recognition of the value of it as well.”

Summer leader of a rural midwestern district

Taking the time to cultivate district leader buy-in

Looking across the 13 districts, we note that superintendents' and school boards' embrace of summer learning as a key strategy roughly tracked with when each district started their work to adopt evidence-based practices.

The four districts in our sample of thirteen where summer leaders saw the firmest commitments from decisionmakers began their work to adopt evidence-based practices well before ESSER. In these districts, superintendents and board members had time to study data demonstrating the impacts of summer learning, adopt research-based recommendations, and pursue grant funding or reallocate general funds toward summer. The superintendents in these four districts, according to the summer learning leaders, publicly positioned summer learning as a key means of advancing district goals and regularly reiterated their commitments to summer.

In one medium-sized midwestern district, leaders had mapped out a plan to redesign summer learning but lacked funding to implement it. When ESSER funding became available, they had already built consensus on the importance of summer and were able to put forward a well-formed plan:

“Part of it was timing and part of it was having a voice at the table. At the time those dollars came down and there was a mention of summer, we had been wanting for years to update our summer model – more than update it, redesign it. As soon as [ESSER] was there, we said, ‘Let’s use those dollars for this redesign.’”

That was critical. I think they could have easily gotten eaten up in other areas, but because we already had this unfunded idea swirling, as soon as the money was available, then it was a natural fit to really protect it and set it aside for it.”

By contrast, in districts where ESSER funding had been the prompt for new efforts to redesign summer learning, decisionmaker commitment to sustaining progress was more tepid. For example, decisionmakers in a small midwestern district were willing to continue to fund summer learning as an academic recovery strategy but not yet entirely convinced about the importance of maintaining enrichment and hands-on learning as they approached the ESSER sunset. The summer leader of a small southern district observed leadership commitment to improving program quality for students who were mandated to receive services under the state literacy law but saw less enthusiasm for continuing to offer programming to other students who could benefit once ESSER funds were spent.

These patterns demonstrate the challenge of using short-term funding mechanisms to spark longer-term changes. Even in districts where summer leaders were conscientious about documenting the impact of redesigned summer learning, demonstrating community buy-in, and connecting summer learning to larger district goals, the three-year timeline of ESSER may not have been long enough for those efforts to translate into firm ongoing commitments on the part of district leaders.

#3

Building Diverse & Durable Partnership Networks



In addition to building internal capacity, districts relied on a range of partners to help them provide enriching, engaging summer learning experiences and full-day programming. Most frequently, youth development organizations like Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCAs provided afternoon enrichment programming. Museums, nature centers, and cultural institutions often hosted field trips. In some districts, libraries, universities and nonprofits collaborated with classroom teachers to develop hands-on learning experiences.

Districts often partnered with local agencies like health departments to coordinate mental health, counseling, and other support services for summer learning students and their families.

Partners support summer learning sustainability by supplementing district staff capacity and expertise, providing in-kind resources and supports, and collaborating with districts to pursue new resources. All district summer leaders mentioned partnerships as one of their strategies for sustaining progress in their summer programming, particularly enrichment activities and experiential learning.

School districts had a range of funding relationships with partners. Some partners brought their own public and private funding to support summer learning. In several rural western districts, tribal nations funded contracts with Boys and Girls Clubs for afternoon enrichment in the summer and school year. Some partners provided in-kind support including staff time, guest speakers, student meals and snacks, and books and materials for students to take home. Several summer learning leaders in small districts noted that their districts' cumbersome procurement processes meant that they relied on community partners to cover costs like snacks, project materials, and field trips.

In some instances – particularly in larger and better-resourced districts – districts paid community-based organizations and other partners to provide daily enrichment programming. A mid-size southern district that funded scholarships for students to participate in camps run by partners intentionally reduced scholarship funding levels each year, to ensure partners were building sustainable funding sources outside of the district; they

saw this as a way to ensure the ongoing availability of summer programs in the community even if district programs were scaled back when ESSER funding ended. In a mid-sized northeastern city, the district asked community partners to cover 20% of the cost of summer learning programs they hosted out of their organizational budgets; the district's summer leader considered this requirement a way to stretch other funds and ensure a commitment to collaboration over the long haul.

District leaders saw partnerships as an important avenue for pursuing new lines of funding and tapping into local funding networks. Evidence of strong district-community collaboration and community partner buy-in can help make summer learning programs more attractive to funders, and community-based organizations often have development staff or grant writers with experience developing collaborative proposals. Several district leaders had begun conversations with partners about jointly pursuing grant funding to continue ESSER-initiated collaborations.

Several districts had long-standing relationships with local chambers of commerce, which helped coordinate grant applications and built public awareness of summer learning programs and their impact. A large southwestern district planned to collaborate with a citywide out-of-school-time intermediary organization to tap into federal community block grants to fund enrichment and wrap-around services during summer.

#4

Leveraging Multiple Funding Sources to Sustain Summer Learning Programming



Designing and sustaining evidence-based summer learning programs that provide academic acceleration and enrichment requires substantial resources. Given the time-limited nature of ESSER funding, district summer leaders were acutely aware of the need to identify and secure ongoing funding streams.

They strategized about summer learning funding and worked to make the case inside and outside their districts for sustained investments.

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[SUMMER LEARNING FUNDING](#)

[POST-ESSER STRATEGIES](#)

Districts draw on a broad mix of federal, state, and local funding sources to support summer learning programs.

Titles I, II, IV, and V of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act formula funding have historically provided dollars that can be used for summer, often to support specific student subgroups such as low-income, migrant, and rural students; the Extended School Year program under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) has funded summer learning for students with disabilities. The 21st Century Community Learning Center (21CCLC) program, which is typically distributed to states via formula and then through competitive processes to districts, has also been a major federal source for afterschool and summer learning for schools serving vulnerable students (Augustine and Thompson, 2020).

The state landscape for summer learning funding is quite variable. Some states, including California, Texas, and Vermont, provide dedicated formula or competitive funding for afterschool and summer programming, often targeted to districts serving vulnerable students (Fitz, et al., 2025). Others, including Alabama, South Carolina, and Tennessee, have passed legislation mandating that districts offer academic summer programs for students not meeting grade-level standards in reading and/or math, though such legislation is not always accompanied by funding appropriations sufficient to cover the full costs of the programs.

Districts also pursue private funding sources for summer, including grants from national and local foundations, corporate grants and in-kind support, and citywide public-private partnerships.

ESSER provided \$189B in three allocations, in March 2020, December 2020, and March 2021. ESSER funds were intended to help stabilize districts, support students' academic recovery, and help address students' significant social-emotional needs in the wake of the pandemic. The third and largest allocation included mandatory 1% set-asides at the state level for summer learning and afterschool programs, respectively, and required districts to devote 20% of their award to evidence-based academic recovery interventions.

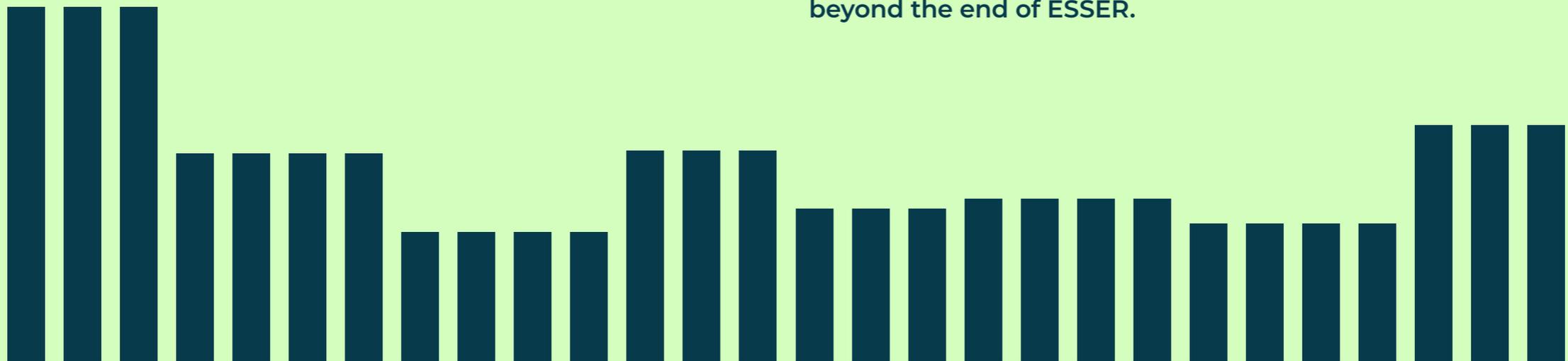
During the period of our study, which coincided with the availability of ESSER funds, the districts in this brief used a range of funding strategies for summer learning:

A large subset of districts used 21CCLC funds in combination with ESSER and other sources.

One large urban western district continued to fund summer from Title monies and other programs such as career and technical education and did not rely on ESSER funds. Another urban northeastern district used Title I money plus matching city funds, rather than relying on ESSER.

Several districts in a state with formula funding for targeted services, which funds extended learning for vulnerable students on a per-pupil basis, used ESSER to supplement this state funding. By braiding targeted services reimbursement and ESSER funding, they were able to bank funds for future years, beyond the end of ESSER.

Districts also allocated varying amounts of other state formula and competitive grant funds, private grants, and in-kind donations, plus tuition for high school credit recovery (generally waived for low-income students) and for some enrichment camps.



As district summer leaders confronted an increasingly unstable federal funding climate, they strategized to expand state, local, and private resources for summer learning.

Maintaining or increasing district allocations

As noted above, district summer leaders worked to make the case to decisionmakers that summer learning was an important ongoing investment meriting allocations from district budgets. While most summer leaders observed progress in building district buy-in for summer, only one leader was confident that their district would fully replace ESSER dollars with other allocations from the district's general fund. This was in part because their superintendent had prioritized summer as a key strategy for achieving the district's vision of improving student achievement and social-emotional skill development across the board, with a focus on students below the academic benchmark, students with special needs, and English language learners. In several other districts, where summer learning had already been funded at least in part through Title or general fund allocations, district summer leaders anticipated that those funding commitments would be sustained but likely not increased to replace ESSER monies.

Several districts were grappling with budget shortfalls that meant school closures and significant staff reductions were on the table. Summer learning leaders worried that these pressures meant that any summer learning programming not mandated by law was vulnerable post-ESSER. The summer learning leader of a large southern district reflected that despite strong support for summer learning among families and work to cultivate district buy-in, the district was facing budget shortfalls steep enough to contemplate increasing class sizes and cutting other popular programs. Given these realities, the summer leader was not confident that summer would stay high on the list of priorities.

“In general, people want their kids in our program, which is great. Do I think we could get someone that would speak in front of the school board? Absolutely. Do I think some school board members are pretty in the loop and know that our programming is good? Yes, I do think so. I just think at the end of the day, it’s not required. We aren’t required as a district to provide this programming. If it’s going to cost the district \$500,000 a year to maintain it ... it’s going to be on the block.”

District summer learning lead in a mid-sized Midwestern district

Seeking or maintaining 21CCLC grants

All but two district summer leaders described 21CCLC grants as part of their post-ESSER funding strategy. Most districts with active 21CCLC grants anticipated relying on the grants for their core summer learning funding once ESSER ended. One small district without a current grant was explicitly working to align its summer programming with its state's 21CCLC program requirements to compete for a grant to replace ESSER monies; other districts were working to more intentionally pair 21CCLC and ESSER monies to stretch their budgets and reduce redundancies.

One district leader without 21CCLC funding noted that because the districts with previous grants tend to win renewals, it could be hard to break into the program. For districts that had long histories of receiving and renewing 21CCLC grants, the predictable funding and accompanying implementation resources from state departments supported their sustainability strategies.

Working to increase state funding

Through the DSLN, most of the districts in our sample participated in state-level cohorts alongside staff from their State Education Agency (SEA) responsible for supporting summer learning. District leaders invited SEA leaders to visit summer learning sites and see programs in action to build buy-in for increased state funding. They also collaborated with other districts in their state to advocate for increased funding and implementation support for summer.

In one state cohort, an experienced district summer learning leader walked other leaders through a detailed breakdown of their summer funding strategy, explaining how they took advantage of flexibility in state funding lines that many districts weren't aware of. In another state, a state-level extended learning intermediary worked with district leaders to compile a state-specific funding guide for summer learning and advocated for recalibrating the formula for targeted services funding to better reflect student needs. State leaders can also work to maximize flexibility and minimize the administrative burden of state grant programs. And we know from other research that statewide coalitions including state and local agency leaders, intermediary organizations, and philanthropies have won new legislative appropriations, tax revenue allocations, and state-level grant programs for summer learning (Fitz, et al, 2025).

Pursuing private funding

Beyond 21CCLC, districts discussed other grant funding as an existing or potential way to sustain summer programming. A few districts had long-standing relationships with foundations or corporations headquartered in their cities that provided substantial summer learning funding, leaving them less reliant on ESSER and other public sources, and they expected those relationships to continue. One district summer leader in a rural southern district described an extensive and varied mix of competitive state grants, private grants, in-kind donations from businesses, and funds from individual donors. The district won a grant to fund a multi-week STEAM-focused camp and used individual donations, in-kind support, and small grants from partners such as the teachers' association to fund enrichment activities, book fairs, and student attendance incentives.

Successful grant writing requires staff time, capacity, and experience. At the time of the interview of the district leader above, she counted ten grant applications in progress. In contrast to the flexibility of ESSER, private grants sometimes required shifts in program focus to match the priorities of the grantor. A district leader from a suburban midwestern district, who had a track record of winning grants, reflected,

“Just because I know how to write and get grants and manage grants, doesn’t mean that the program down the road isn’t as good or better than ours but can’t get funded that way. We’re all competing with each other, honestly, for the same monies, and they’re pretty limited. A lot of these monies haven’t grown.”

One district leader reflected that as her team shifted their summer planning earlier in the year, they were able to do more proactive and successful outreach to private funders. As we noted above, partnerships and networks can position districts to compete for private grants and leverage community-based organizations' relationships and fundraising capacity. In several districts, key partners that provided enrichment and experiential learning opportunities were working to raise private funds to replace ESSER dollars that had covered their work in summer learning.

Anticipating Choices & Trade-offs in an Unstable Funding Climate

In Fall 2024, when we concluded our data collection, most district summer leaders didn't have a clear vision of what funding for summer learning would look like in future years. We asked them to project what parts of summer programming they would be able to maintain and what would likely need to be cut or scaled back.

The commitment to summer as an opportunity for acceleration and enrichment was universal among summer leaders. None anticipated going back to the “old way” of summer-as-remediation only. Though specific hands-on learning experiences or field trips might be out of reach, no districts planned wholesale cuts to experiential learning or enrichment. Several district leaders made a point of noting that they planned to maintain transportation, despite its significant expense, because they saw transportation as a key investment in removing barriers to access.

That district leaders viewed the shift from remediation to acceleration, engagement, and enrichment as durable is a testament to their success in building district capacity, buy-in, and partnerships. Still, without predictable funding, many elements of progress were at risk. Across districts, staff were anticipating having to choose between reductions in three broad categories: program size, staffing, and curriculum and enrichment.

Program size reductions

Some districts that had expanded access to summer programming, either by creating new programs or expanding participation in existing programs, anticipated reducing enrollment or had already taken steps to reduce enrollment. For example, one suburban district in a western state with 21CCLC summer programs at several schools used ESSER to create new seats for students from other district schools; they anticipated that after the ESSER sunset they would have to eliminate those seats. A suburban southern district had already begun shrinking its program in summer 2024, issuing fewer invitations to summer programming. That district conducted extra outreach to families about their summer plans to ensure that the limited seats would go to students who could attend all weeks of programming, in order to maximize the academic benefits of summer. In states with summer learning mandates for students below grade level in reading and/or math, district leaders anticipated that they'd prioritize continuing to provide high-quality programming for those students and for high school students in need of credit recovery. They would have to cut seats for other students who could benefit from summer learning.

Staffing cuts

Another set of districts anticipated that student enrollment would stay steady but staffing would be reduced. These districts funded summer in part through state targeted-services reimbursement funds linked to enrollment, and reducing seats in summer learning would compound funding cuts. A district leader in a small midwestern city reflected on how staffing cuts could jeopardize small classes, key to ensuring that summer staff could provide individualized supports and build strong relationships:

“The problem isn’t just, ‘Will we be able to serve the same number of kids?’ Probably, but then you’re making the class sizes bigger and bigger, and bigger, right? It used to cost 10 kids to pay a teacher, then 11, now 12, then 13. It’s going to soon cost 15 kids to just pay a teacher, but we still need to pay for all the other things, and then suddenly, you are not having classrooms that are smaller than the regular school year.”

At least two midwestern districts were set to lose AmeriCorps volunteers, who provided one-on-one and small group tutoring support during summer, and a rural southern district planned to cut back the special summer stipend they provided to attract highly effective teachers. Another small southern district provided extra physical therapy, occupational therapy, and language support for students with disabilities in summer, beyond what IEPs required, and worked closely with partners to design adaptive dance and music classes. All of these positions were slated to be cut.

Curriculum and enrichment changes

Several districts anticipated that the end of ESSER funding would limit experiential learning and field trip visits to museums, cultural institutions, and natural spaces. District leaders saw these off-site experiences as an important benefit of summer learning, especially for children whose families have less access to these kinds of spaces. One leader whose district’s summer learning program had received national recognition for its blend of academics and hands-on enrichment, reflected:

“We would still be able to offer a quality program and quality experience, but the extra things that added to the total experience, I don’t know if we would be able to sustain that, making those connections with real life through offsite learning.”

Other projected cuts would limit districts’ ability to provide as many rich, well-rounded academic and enrichment opportunities. For example, one district used ESSER funds to pay for teachers’ time to design multidisciplinary thematic projects and purchase specialized materials for hands-on STEM projects to support accelerated learning. ESSER funding allowed a small rural midwestern district to pay for partnerships with the local 4H, science center, and a museum, which supported integration of hands-on learning experiences. Without ESSER, they will need to cobble together grant funding or find district staff with the skills to provide some of those experiences.

For small districts, ESSER’s flexibility allowed summer leaders to avoid bureaucratic obstacles that had constrained their vision for summer learning. A summer leader in a small southwestern district had struggled to arrange field trips: her district’s budget year closed midway through the summer program and there was no mechanism for paying for field trip tickets. ESSER removed these hurdles and allowed her to plan an aquarium trip that supported learning and enrichment goals.

How District Summer Leaders Balanced Trade-offs

District summer learning leaders and their teams undertook a challenging project: they moved quickly to develop, refine and scale up high-quality summer learning programs in the aftermath of a pandemic, while simultaneously laying the groundwork to ensure that their progress on summer learning could be sustained. As they looked forward, they

contemplated difficult trade-offs, often weighing their ability to meet broad demand for summer learning programs against their capacity to implement evidence-based summer practices that make for high-quality experiences.

A few examples illustrate how district leaders in various contexts anticipated moving forward:

A mid-sized southern district that had embraced summer as a key district strategy before ESSER anticipated that funding cuts would mean a plateau in summer enrollment far short of their goal of 75% of district students. They foresaw some staffing cuts and potential cuts to the number of summer learning sites. They did not plan to cut any of the program elements – longer day, daily enrichment, meals, and transportation – that were core to their vision of summer, but they anticipated cutting back on field trips.

A large southwestern district used ESSER to shift from a traditional summer school model focused on remediation to summer learning blending academic acceleration and enrichment. They used ESSER funds to serve more students and adopt evidence-based practices, such as providing meals and transportation, paying instructional staff for summer planning time, and expanding their work with enrichment partners. If forced to reduce their budget, they planned to shrink enrollment – prioritizing students in need of credit recovery and those mandated by state legislation to receive summer programming – and maintain their investment in enrichment activities that keep student engagement high.

A small midwestern district used ESSER funding to build in extensive supports for social-emotional learning, including hiring extra staff to reduce class sizes, bringing in specialist staff to provide SEL programming, and hiring extra paraprofessionals to support inclusion for students with IEPs. They had a longstanding partnership with Ojibwe organizations to provide cultural education to Native students; ESSER allowed them to include all summer learners in Ojibwe education. They anticipated that they'd need to make substantial staff cuts and scale back cultural education. Since they also relied on enrollment-based state funding, they planned to maintain current enrollment levels.



Implications & Recommendations

District summer leaders and their teams undertook a challenging project: they moved quickly to develop, refine, and scale up high-quality summer learning programs in the aftermath of a pandemic, while simultaneously laying the groundwork to ensure that their progress on summer learning could be sustained. They drew on sustainability strategies advocated in earlier research: they instituted cross-departmental planning practices and made investments in staff and leader development that served broader district goals while cultivating partnerships to tap into capacity and support. They used student and family feedback to refine programming and used data, stories, and visits to summer programs to make the case for summer to families, communities, staff, and district leaders. They worked creatively to identify a mix of potential funding sources to sustain progress.

Most districts faced tough trade-offs around how to continue summer learning as ESSER ended. Only in a few districts did summer learning leaders feel relatively optimistic about maintaining current funding levels; these districts had embraced evidence-based summer learning prior to the pandemic, and their superintendents had made summer a central part of their vision. It may be that even with deliberate efforts to build district leader buy-in, cementing real commitment among district decisionmakers takes more time than some district leaders had. Even in districts with strong leadership commitment to summer, budget pressures often mean that key priorities go unfunded, and summer learning that isn't mandated remains vulnerable.

Still, districts made real progress in laying the foundations of summer as a time for acceleration and enrichment.

Their success in building central office, staff, and leader buy-in to a vision of summer framed around acceleration and enrichment positions them to make good use of whatever resources they are able to maintain. None of the district leaders planned to revert to the “old way” of summer-as-remediation. Many districts will likely serve far fewer students moving forward, but they have made durable investments in the quality of programs for students they are able to serve. In districts that plan to maintain enrollment while cutting staffing or curricular resources, district leaders will be in a position to make thoughtful decisions about how to blunt the impact of those cuts.

States play an important role in creating the conditions necessary to sustain progress on summer learning. State leaders can build buy-in for summer among district leaders and communities by articulating a clear vision of how evidence-based summer learning advances statewide education goals. State education agencies can help districts use resources efficiently by providing clear guidance on state funding sources and technical assistance and professional development to support high-quality programming.

In an uncertain federal funding climate, states and private funders take on a larger responsibility for resourcing summer learning. Stable, predictable, and multi-year funding sources allow districts to plan strategically, scale up sustainably, and build buy-in over time. Besides direct funding for programming, states and private funders should consider ways to strengthen district and community capacity for high-quality summer learning by funding collaborative planning, partnership models, and networks and intermediary organizations.

More than a decade of research tells us that high quality summer learning programs have real benefits for young people’s learning, well-being, and positive relationships. Many more young people than those currently served stand to benefit from rich summer learning experiences, and access to hands-on, experiential summer learning is important for all students. In addition to federal dollars, districts need local government, state legislatures, businesses, and private funders to support summer learning, or many young people will miss out on critical opportunities for learning and development.

#1

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Build Internal District Capacity and Commitment to Summer Learning

Plan early and collaboratively.

Work across departments starting in the fall to coordinate curriculum, logistics, staffing, and enrichment, ensuring summer is integrated into the district's core work rather than treated as an add-on.

Engage non-instructional departments.

Plan collaboratively with transportation, technology, nutrition, and human resources teams so they become invested in summer, share relevant expertise, and allocate resources toward summer programming.

Leverage summer for staff development.

Use summer as a professional growth opportunity by supporting teachers in piloting new instructional strategies and creating pathways for emerging school leaders through summer site leadership roles.

#2

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Build Broad Buy-In Among Community Members and District Leaders

Center student and family voice. Use input gathered through surveys, focus groups, and advisory committees to improve program design. Invite families and community members to observe or participate in summer activities.

Showcase impact. Share stories, data, and site visit opportunities with superintendents, school board members, and community leaders to reinforce the value of summer as more than remediation.

Cultivate champions. Encourage students, parents, and teachers to speak at board meetings and community forums about how summer programs have supported academic growth, enrichment, and well-being.

Articulate a clear vision for how summer learning advances district goals and a set of “must haves” to guide tough decisions about allocating limited resources.

#3

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Build Strong and Diverse Partnerships Outside the District

Tap into local expertise.

Collaborate with youth-serving organizations, cultural institutions, libraries, and higher education partners to provide enrichment, mentoring, and hands-on learning.

Share resources and responsibilities.

Develop cost-sharing models with community partners, including in-kind contributions of staff, space, or materials.

Form local, regional, and state networks to coordinate resources and opportunities, advocate for summer programs and pursue new funds. Work with intermediary organizations where possible to share data and strategies.

Invest in durable relationships. Move beyond one-off agreements toward long-term partnerships by setting clear expectations, agreeing to shared goals, and creating structures for ongoing collaboration.

#4

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Leverage a Mix of Funds for Summer Learning Programs

Draw on multiple funding streams. Strategically direct funding streams to support both academic and enrichment components of summer programs.

Pursue local, state-level and private investments alongside federal funding. Strengthen relationships with foundations, businesses, and civic organizations that can provide grants, sponsorships, or in-kind contributions. Consult with district and state budget experts to identify potential resources and understand requirements for braiding and blending funds.

APPENDIX A: About this research brief

This brief draws on data collected between 2021-24 as part of a larger three-year multi-method research study funded by The Wallace Foundation. That study includes 44 districts in 21 states, and four State Education Agencies as they participated in the District Summer Learning Network between 2021 and 2025 and documents how districts plan for high-quality summer learning.

For this brief, we draw mostly on semi-structured interviews conducted during Fall 2024 (the third and final year of data collection), which included a set of questions about sustainability strategies, anticipated impacts of the ESSER sunset, and priorities for summer learning programs beyond 2024. Participants in that round of data collection were district central office staff responsible for leading summer learning in 13 districts across eight states. These staff, who we call “district summer learning leaders,” had a range of formal roles in their districts. Most coordinated summer learning alongside other core responsibilities and had varying titles such as Director of Extended Learning, Director of Strategic Initiatives, or Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning. These summer learning leaders had substantial authority over the design and implementation of summer programming but did not control larger district strategy or budget allocations.

These districts represent a mix of rural, town, suburban, and urban districts of various sizes, located in the Northeast, South, Southwest, Midwest, and West. They had varying histories with summer learning prior to 2021. Several districts had embraced summer learning as a core strategy prior to ESSER and had adopted many evidence-based practices; others had more limited summer learning programs largely focused on remediation. During the period of our research, all districts made changes to their programming, whether expanding enrollment, extending program length, reducing barriers to participation, building supports to address specific student needs, adding academic acceleration, expanding enrichment options, or some combination of these.

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