

SUMMER SUCCESS

Challenges and Strategies in Creating Quality Academically Focused Summer Programs

Harvard Family Research Project's (HFRP) Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation briefs highlight current research and evaluation in the out-of-school time field. These publications draw on HFRP's research in out-of-school time in order to provide practitioners, funders, evaluators, and policymakers with information to help them in their work. This brief looks at evaluations of 34 academically focused summer programs in order to distill challenges and compile promising strategies for creating quality summer programs.

Introduction

Schools play an obvious and critical role in promoting learning, but we know that children and youth spend the majority of their time outside of school (Larson & Verma, 1999). A large portion of this nonschool time occurs in the summer, which for many youth constitutes approximately a quarter of the year. Summer represents an opportunity for experiences that enrich and complement the school year and promote learning and development. It is well-documented, however, that during the summer, low-income and other disadvantaged youth fall further behind academically than their more advantaged peers—in part, due to a lack of enriching opportunities (Heyns, 1978; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001; Burkam, Ready, Lee, & LoGerfo, 2004; Downey, von Hippel, & Broh, 2004).

Academically focused summer programs can meet parents' needs and desires to support youth with fun and enriching opportunities (LeMenestral, 2003) and promote learning when school is not in session (Fairchild, 2006). Given the

potential benefits of summer programs, practitioners and policymakers are looking for ways to provide quality academically focused summer programs, particularly for disadvantaged and academically at-risk youth. In December of 2005, Senator Barack Obama of Illinois introduced the STEP UP Act, which would provide children with the opportunity to participate in summer programs specifically designed to increase the academic performance of poor and minority youth. Because of the opportunities inherent in summer programs, it is important to understand *how* providers can implement the highest quality programming possible.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT: THE BENEFITS OF SUMMER SCHOOL PROGRAMS

In a meta-analysis of 93 studies of summer school programs, Harris Cooper and his colleagues (2000) found that they led to increases in participants' knowledge and skills. In particular, Cooper and his colleagues concluded that:

- Programs aimed at remediation of learning deficiencies and programs focused on learning acceleration both produced positive impacts on youth's knowledge and skills.
- Programs had more positive benefits for middle class youth than they did for more disadvantaged youth, perhaps because more resources are devoted to supplementing programs in middle class families and communities.
- Impacts were greater when programs were run for a small number of schools or in a small community.
- Impacts were greater when programs provided small-group or individual instruction.

LEARNING WHAT WORKS: THE IMPORTANCE OF FORMATIVE EVALUATION

Formative, or process, evaluations are conducted during program implementation in order to provide information that will strengthen or improve the program being studied. Formative evaluation findings typically point to aspects of program implementation that can be improved for better results, such as how services are provided, how staff are trained, or how leadership and staff decisions are made.

Funders and policymakers typically use outcome evaluations to understand whether a given program is achieving its intended outcomes. While this information is useful and critical, it is also important for program leaders and staff to understand how their program is working, what works well, and what needs improvement. Only with this knowledge can programs make the necessary improvements in program delivery to achieve their intended outcomes. This ongoing process of integrating lessons learned from evaluation into programming is commonly referred to as *continuous improvement*.

Formative evaluation is also useful in helping programs identify *why* they have achieved certain patterns of outcomes. For example, while an outcome study might help funders understand that a science program improved grades but not attitudes toward science, this type of study would not help program personnel understand why that result might have occurred. Collecting formative data could help the program find that youth who participated in the program were successfully exposed to a wide variety of science concepts (thus improving their science grades) but that this exposure occurred in a relatively dry and unengaging way (thus failing to improve youth's positive attitudes toward science).

To date, little research has synthesized the large amount of implementation data from existing evaluations of academically focused summer programs. This issue brief fills that gap by assessing the formative, or implementation, data from evaluations of 34 academically focused summer programs listed in HFRP's Out-of-School Time Program

Evaluation Bibliography. From these evaluations, the brief identifies seven common challenges to implementing high quality summer programs:

1. Developing programming with intentionality
2. Building positive and individualized connections with youth
3. Recruiting and developing highly skilled staff
4. Developing ongoing, mutually supportive relationships with schools
5. Building strong, positive connections with participants' families
6. Engaging community members, groups, and institutions in programming
7. Incorporating a variety of fun and engaging program activities

While none of these challenges are unique to summer programming, the rich implementation evaluations of summer programs offer a number of promising strategies to meet them. This brief articulates successful strategies for overcoming common programming challenges, with a particular focus on strategies implemented by academically focused summer programs.

The 34 evaluations¹ that were analyzed for this review met three criteria: The evaluations a) evaluated a summer program, or the summer component of a year-round program; b) reported formative/implementation evaluation findings; and c) evaluated a program with a focus on improving learning and school performance. This last criterion was defined broadly to account for the tremendous diversity of summer programs and to capture information from many different program models.

As a result, some of the programs reviewed were traditional academic summer programs that provided instruction in subjects like English/language arts or mathematics, while others targeted specific academic areas, such as science, oceanography, or book making. Other programs offered academic enrichment activities, such as arts, science, literacy, and field trips. These different types were not mutually exclusive; some programs combined remediation with enrichment or targeted instruction in specific academic areas. By examining a range of academic summer programs, this issue brief aims to document common challenges, recommend promising strategies, and illustrate how specific programs implemented successful practices to promote learning and development in the summer months.

1. The Appendix contains a complete list of evaluations that were included in the review.

Challenges to & Strategies for Successful Academic Summer Programming

A review of the 34 program evaluations from our Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Bibliography identified seven common challenges to creating and supporting a successful summer academic program—challenges, which, if addressed, can strengthen summer programming. This review also uncovered strategies that programs have used to successfully address these challenges. This brief presents both the challenges and strategies as examples of best practices for implementing summer programs. The categories are not mutually exclusive, and the list does not attempt to address every challenge a program might face during implementation.

Challenge 1: Developing programming with intentionality

Many summer programs aim to realize a variety of benefits for youth and their families, but programs are likely to be more successful if they are developed and implemented with intentionality from the outset. Improving the effectiveness of out-of-school time (OST) programs requires the *intentional* linking of program goals, program elements, participant outcomes, and evaluation (C. S. Mott Foundation Committee on After-School Research and Practice, 2005). Specifically, Halpern (2003) examined which after school literacy programs were most effective and found the only difference between effective and ineffective programs was intentionality in planning and program design.

For example, if a program's goal is to improve literacy outcomes for participating youth, the program director and staff should continuously plan and design programming with this goal in mind. Across many of the evaluations in this review, programs were less successful when they were not developed or implemented according to expressed goals and mission with intentional planning. Though maintaining intentionality may be difficult due to tight implementation schedules and unexpected problems, the evaluations revealed a number of promising strategies for ensuring that intentionality is achieved.

Build in program planning and development time before the start of the program.

Many program evaluations reported that challenges accrued because of a lack of initial planning. For instance, the Summer of Challenge program in the Emery Unified School District in California found that a lack of lead time for pro-

gram planning was a major implementation barrier. This need was even more pronounced in programs with many stakeholders. In particular, programs that incorporated the goal of involving parents and youth in the program planning process required additional planning time.

To ensure sufficient planning time to achieve intentionality, program leaders at the District of Columbia 21st Century Community Learning Centers summer program recommended that program planning should (a) include

PROMOTING LEARNING: DIVERSE APPROACHES TO COMMON CONCERNS

When many people think of “academics,” they conjure a set of standard images: teacher at the front of the room, students at their desks, and teacher-directed instruction in key areas like math or English/language arts. But with the exception of some strictly remedial summer programs, very few programs reviewed in this brief embodied this model of academic instruction. Even when programs incorporated teacher-led instruction, effort was often made to select curricula that would be fun, interactive, and engaging for youth. Below are some of the diverse ways that, alone and in combination, programs in this review promoted youth's learning and school performance.

Academic Remediation: Some programs promoted learning through academic remediation. For instance, programs serving youth who did not meet certain minimum levels on standardized tests and remedial academic summer programs often offered instruction in core academic areas like math and English/language arts.

Specialized Curricula: Some programs used curricula especially designed for after school and summer programming, such as KidzLit, which targets literacy by exposing youth to engaging books and by encouraging them to express their feelings and grapple with big ideas through discussion, drama, art, movement, and writing.

Educational Field Trips: Many programs offered educational field trips to places like museums or aquariums to complement the learning taking place in the program.

Hands-On, Project-Based, and Thematic Learning Projects: Many programs sought to enhance learning by offering hands-on, project-based, or thematic learning projects. For instance, one program used book making to build participants' literacy skills. Others used hands-on science projects to spark interest in science and learning more generally.

HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM EVALUATION BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation Bibliography contains citations for all the out-of-school time (OST) program evaluations that HFRP has identified to date. HFRP provides basic program information as well as links to relevant evaluation reports.

Types of Programs Included in the Bibliography

Evaluations in the bibliography meet the following criteria:

1. The evaluated program or initiative operates during out-of-school time.
2. The evaluation aims to answer a specific evaluation question or set of questions about a specific program or initiative.
3. The evaluated program or initiative serves children between the ages of 5 and 19.

How Programs Are Categorized in the Bibliography

Programs are categorized by program type. Program type can refer to a method of service delivery or a primary program goal. For example, a program promoting health (a program goal) might use recreational activities to achieve this goal (service delivery). Since programs may fall into more than one category, the same programs may appear in different lists; the program types that are most applicable to a particular program (with a maximum of three, although more may apply) are listed in parentheses following the program description.

How to Use the Bibliography

The bibliography is located in the OST section of the HFRP website at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/bibliography/index.html. Users may click on any of the 19 program types or see a list of the most recent entries and updates.

multiple planning meetings, (b) include time to train staff, and (c) begin at least 3 to 4 weeks before the program's launch date. Other summer program experts recommend a longer planning period, of approximately 6 months. While the exact length and design of planning time will vary according to program needs and activities, all programs should take care to build in planning time adequate to their program prior to the launch date.

Build program planning and development time into daily program operations.

Planning time is critical not just at the beginning of a program but throughout implementation. Ongoing planning allows programs to adjust to unforeseen events, assess progress in meeting youth's needs, and design activities based on what has worked and not worked so far. One of the strategies employed by the BELL Accelerated Learning Program in Boston, New York City, and Washington, DC, was to build in weekly assessments of participating youth. Staff used the results of these assessments during ongoing planning time to tailor instruction and activities for upcoming sessions in order to maximize each youth's learning. Similarly, the Summer of Challenge evaluation noted that planning time built into the fabric of day-to-day program operations allowed for collaboration between staff to improve future programming.

Design activities and instruction purposively to achieve program goals.

Designing activities with program goals in mind is a critical part of building a more intentional program. For example, if the program's mission is to keep youth from failing in school or to ensure their proficiency in certain subjects, activities should be purposively designed to achieve these goals. This does not need to mean "teaching to the test" or dry instruction in core academic areas. It could, instead, mean aligning activities and curricula to school-district, state, and/or national standards.

The Verilette Parker Science Intervention Program in rural Georgia employed an inquiry-based, active-learning instructional methodology to promote critical thinking and cooperative learning, while intentionally aligning the curriculum to national goals for science education. Similarly, the evaluation of an Oceanography Camp in St. Petersburg, Florida—designed to increase girls' interest in science and science-related careers—found that activities worked best when they were as active as possible. A common theme in the evaluations was the importance of using methods like hands-on learning to spark interest and excitement.

Challenge 2: Building positive and individualized connections with youth

The majority of programs reviewed serve a diverse population of youth, even within the particular groups some programs target for recruitment. For example, a small summer program targeting African American students who are all behind in math in a specific underperforming elementary school could serve participants likely to be highly diverse in terms of a host of factors, including how far behind they are academically, their learning styles, and

their family situations. To be successful in working with wide-ranging groups of youth, staff must learn about participants' situations and needs and use this understanding to build positive connections with them.

Many program evaluations found building positive, individualized connections with all youth to be a major challenge. However, when programs were able to build these connections, the benefits were manifold. Positive and individualized connections can facilitate trust between staff and youth, make youth more excited about and engaged in the program, and allow staff to tailor programming to youth's interests and needs. Below are a few strategies that the evaluations found to be promising ways to make connection-building easier.

Utilize preexisting connections with youth.

Some programs found it helpful to hire some teachers and staff who had preexisting positive connections with youth. In Chicago's Summer Bridge program, teaching staff were more likely to adapt the curriculum to meet students' needs and to work closely with students outside of class when they knew a larger proportion of their students before the start of the program. Across a number of the evaluations, staff reported not having enough information on participating students' backgrounds and needs. Hiring at least some staff with preexisting relationships with youth could help deal with that challenge.

Create opportunities to ensure individualized connections with youth.

Many evaluations reported that daily operations ran more smoothly when programs maintained smaller staff-to-youth ratios or provided opportunities for small-group or individualized interactions between staff and youth. For example, in the GEAR UP program in Austin, Texas, college students worked in small groups or one-on-one with youth, which allowed for the identification of learning needs and academic strengths of individual youth. Similarly, the evaluation of the Camp Invention program of the National Inventors Hall of Fame found that small groups allowed staff to spend more individualized time with each participant. However, when determining appropriate staff-youth ratios, it is important to consider the nature of the activity as well as the age of the participants. For some activities, such as sports programs, a high staff-youth ratio may be acceptable (e.g., one coach for a team of 10); similarly, some programs for older youth may want to consider having slightly higher staff-youth ratios that promote youth-to-youth bonding and interaction, rather than lower ratios that could promote more intensive staff-youth relationships.

Develop mechanisms to provide staff with accurate information on students' needs and backgrounds.

Programs found it easier to design and adapt programming if they had sufficient information about students' needs and backgrounds. As noted above, the BELL program conducted weekly assessments of youth in order to provide staff with data on youth's status and needs and to determine areas in which they should concentrate through the summer. In contrast, staff at the Summer Opportunity to Accelerate Reading program designed their application forms to collect information on the special needs of participating youth.

Challenge 3: Recruiting and developing highly skilled staff

Developing positive and individualized connections with youth is likely to be much easier when program staff are highly skilled at working with youth. Indeed, most strategies for implementing high-quality summer programming identified in this issue brief would be facilitated by identifying, recruiting, and developing a highly skilled workforce. However, many programs found recruiting and developing highly skilled staff to be a major implementation challenge. Programs in this review employed the following strategies for overcoming this challenge.

Recruit qualified and experienced school-year teachers for academic components of the summer program.

Most teachers have the summers off and therefore present a large pool of talented potential summer staff. This strategy is not without its challenges, however. The Wake County Summer Academy's evaluation found that more skilled and experienced teachers often prized their summers as a time for vacation and relaxation, leaving an available pool of teachers younger and less experienced. To address this challenge, programs may target more experienced teachers through special incentive packages, such as extra compensation for experience, letters of acknowledgement for teachers' personnel files, and professional development opportunities. As noted above, in the example of Chicago's Summer Bridge program, programs can also target potential staff who have preexisting relationships with youth.

Tap into the talents of parents, community members, high school students, and college students.

Each of these types of staff brings different strengths and assets to summer programs. Parents possess knowledge of youth's strengths and needs and often enjoy working with youth. Community members bring topical expertise in a variety of areas, such as science, dance, or art, which can be harnessed to create exciting programming.

College students are a particularly promising source of quality staff, as they often relate well to youth and are sufficiently easy to recruit during their summer vacations. The Summer Career Exploration Program in New Jersey and Pennsylvania found that most site coordinators had little trouble recruiting college students, and often had many more applicants than slots to fill. They were able to successfully recruit college students through local newspapers, college placement offices, work-study programs, newsletters, and word of mouth.

Program evaluations reveal that, when utilizing these diverse types of staff, it is important to pay attention to

INNOVATIONS IN STAFFING: THE ASCEND SUMMER YOUTH PROGRAM

Limited resources make recruiting and retaining talented staff an ongoing challenge for many youth programs. The Ascend Summer Youth Program in Washington, DC, has tackled this problem head-on through an innovative approach to staffing that both complements and improves the program: employing former graduates of the Ascend program.

The Ascend Summer Youth Program was initiated in 2001 to develop youth leaders in the field of information technology. Program components include mentoring, workforce readiness awareness, and project-based learning experiences. Staff use information technology to address a variety of social, affective, cognitive, and academic outcomes necessary for postsecondary success.

According to Joseph Davis, president of Ascend, the program has found that recruiting former program graduates—now usually college students—as staff helps the program accomplish its goals. Former graduates know the program well and are more immediately ready to guide activities adeptly because of their familiarity with the technology and the program structure. In addition, the presence of former graduates shows current youth participants what they can achieve. This in turn helps participants develop self-efficacy and succeed within and after the program.

Former graduates demonstrate a commitment to the program's goals and philosophy and often share and recognize the attitudes and cultures of current participants. While not a magic bullet to the problem of staffing, employing former program graduates can provide a meaningful boost to program quality.

issues of roles and responsibilities, lines of communication, and proper staff training. The evaluation of Kids on Campus in Ohio, for example, revealed that although parents and high school students brought strengths to the program's workforce, they were often less capable than other staff in effectively managing youth discipline and behavior. More training was necessary to most effectively utilize these less-experienced staff members. The same evaluation found that high school and college students sometimes clashed with each other over issues of respect and power relationships, as the roles and responsibilities of each were not always clearly drawn.

Provide adequate and timely training to staff members.

Though a majority of program evaluations found the lack of adequate training time for staff members to be a program barrier, some identified training and professional development opportunities as a program strength. One such program was the Extended Learning Opportunities Program in Montgomery County, Maryland, which provides staff training before the start of the program, focusing on understanding the content and structure of the summer curricula, instructional planning and strategies, and monitoring what students know and/or their progress. Staff also receive reading and math guides to help with these types of activities over the course of the program. Meanwhile, the evaluation of the Summer Opportunities to Accelerate Reading program in Austin, Texas, found that training worked best when it was responsive to the preexisting level of knowledge among the program's staff. Many program evaluations found a need for increased or improved training for staff in working with youth with behavioral challenges and special needs.

Challenge 4: Developing ongoing, mutually supportive relationships with schools

Many evaluations found that one challenge to developing quality academically focused summer programming was building solid relationships with the schools that educate their participants during the school year. Developing these relationships is important for many reasons. First, programs need schools' help in order to identify and recruit potential youth and staff for their programming. Second, schools can provide summer programs with critical information about youth's academic and social situations. This information is integral to creating summer programming that addresses participants' unique needs. Third, many academically focused summer programs are based in schools and need to establish strong lines of communication with schools to operate effectively. School-based summer programs need to communicate with schools to ensure adequate facilities and

supplies and to clarify roles and responsibilities.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, schools and academically focused summer programs share the same mission—promoting the education and development of program participants. Developing ongoing, mutually supportive relationships is crucial to ensuring that schools and summer programs work collaboratively to best accomplish this mission. Schools' missions are hampered when youth fall behind academically during the summer months, just as summer programs' missions are hampered when schools do not build on what youth have learned in summer programs.

Relationships with schools were more often described as a program weakness than a program strength. However, one specific OST–school linkage strategy emerged from the review:

Creating formal partnerships with schools through early planning and transfer of information.

The Break-Aways Camps in New York City created formal partnerships between summer camps and schools. Together, the partners collaborated to plan literacy activities in the context of camp experiences. These partnerships were able to enhance the quality of the summer program because working with the school's teachers allowed the program to identify potential participants, plan the curriculum in a way that would best serve the needs of participating youth, and better align activities with state standards.

Evaluators also recommended a number of potential strategies to make partnerships with schools stronger. These recommendations generally fell under two overarching strategies. First, programs should *work with schools early*, so as to ensure that students and potential staff are recruited more easily and to allow enough time to build relationships and engage in program planning. Second, programs should *develop formal mechanisms* that will allow schools to transfer academic and social information regarding students' academic and personal needs. Though it is not always easy, through planning and partnerships, summer programs can build strong relationships with schools to enhance the quality of youth's experiences.

Challenge 5: Building strong, positive connections with participants' families

Establishing and developing strong, positive connections with participants' families can provide academically focused summer programs with numerous advantages. Getting to know youth's families can help programs understand the needs of the youth they are serving. Programs can also encourage and facilitate families' support of

COMPLEMENTARY LEARNING: LINKING MULTIPLE SUPPORTS FOR YOUTH

Summer programs can be a critical component of what Harvard Family Research Project calls a *complementary learning* strategy. Complementary learning occurs when two or more institutions intentionally link with each other to improve learning and developmental outcomes for children and youth. These institutions include families, early childhood programs, schools, out-of-school time programs and activities, higher education, health and social service agencies, businesses, libraries, museums, and other community-based institutions. HFRP calls this network of supports complementary learning. Complementary learning is characterized by discrete linkages that work together to encourage consistent learning and developmental outcomes for children.

Many evaluations reported that forging such linkages was both a priority and a challenge for summer programs. Academically focused summer programs strove to link with schools, community members and organizations, and families in order to strengthen their programming. The strategies discussed in this brief under Challenges 4 through 6 can be viewed through a complementary learning lens.

More information and resources on complementary learning, including a guide on engaging families in after school programs, are available at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/complementary-learning.html.

youth's learning and development. Because families are critical to ensuring youth sign up for and attend programs, relationships with families can help programs to recruit and retain youth (Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004).

Linkages between families and OST programs may also benefit parents' involvement in children's education and schools and parents' relationships with their children and may also improve implementation outcomes (Kakli, Kreider, & Little, 2006). Just as importantly, these linkages can help parents better support their children's learning and development at home.

Many OST program evaluations have noted that they have found it challenging to engage participants' families, and the academically focused summer programs in this review were no exception. Programs, however, can adopt a number of strategies to facilitate the development of connections with participants' families.

MAKING IT FUN AND EDUCATIONAL: NATIONAL INVENTORS HALL OF FAME CAMP INVENTION

Camp Invention provides a series of programs that reflect a mission of inspiration, teaching, and outreach through innovative hands-on enrichment programs for students rising to grades 2 through 6. A summer day-camp program offered in 5-day sessions, Camp Invention combines learning and fun in modules that integrate science, math, history, and the arts. According to Brenda Wojnowski of the National Inventors Hall of Fame, making the program fun and engaging is a big priority for the Camp Invention program staff.

The program development team of Inventive Education, a subsidiary of the National Inventors Hall of Fame, keeps the curriculum strong, fun, engaging, and fresh. The team works to develop a large number of varied modules, so that youth can participate in the program for up to 6 years without ever having to repeat a module. While developing these modules, the team brainstorms about each basic concept in order to build a unique and fun curriculum.

After developing activities for the curriculum, the program staff engage in the activities themselves and test the program in local schools near the National Inventors Hall of Fame. If they do not find the activities both fun and educational for students, the staff go back to the drawing board. All modules are piloted and observed and only used when the education staff feel confident that the program is fun and educational and can be easily implemented by local teachers at the camps. Furthermore, modules are continuously reviewed to see if they have become outdated and are pulled if they are no longer current and engaging.

The formula seems to be working; this summer, there were 900 camps in 47 states. While the modules are designed to be fun, they are also aligned with national, state, and district education standards. External consultants and an advisory board of nationally recognized educators and scientists review and revise all curriculum modules to ensure alignment with these standards. The end result of all this effort is fun, engaging, and educational programming that keeps youth excited about attending Camp Invention, while at the same time learning valuable educational skills.

Programs can create opportunities for parents to get involved.

Inviting parents and families to participate in program events and opportunities can make parents more likely to be engaged and involved. For example, the Emery Summer of Challenge, the evaluation of which found strong parent engagement, provided an open invitation to parents to visit the program at any time. The program also held several events—including a 2-hour parent orientation session at the beginning of the program, an open house toward the end of the program, a Parent Night featuring exhibitions of youth's work, and an end-of-program barbecue celebration—to encourage parent involvement. Parent attendance at such events can facilitate communication about children's learning and development to families and create engagement of parents in the program, which in turn can support youth's active participation and engagement in the program.

Create strategies for coping with parents' schedules and child care situations.

Regular attendance by participants is critical to the success of academically focused summer programs. However, attendance often suffers when families have scheduling conflicts and child care challenges involving participants' siblings. Many programs devised strategies to cope with these problems. Some found it helpful to provide program slots for participants' siblings. The All-Around-the-Neighborhood program in St. Paul, Minnesota, discovered that by incorporating siblings into the program, it removed the barrier of some youth needing to care for their younger siblings. As a result, the program was better able to serve the needs of youth and their families.

The District of Columbia 21st Century Learning Center similarly found that parents appreciated the opportunity to have multiple children attend the same program. Such strategies can improve not just youth attendance, but also parent involvement. Some evaluations also suggested providing on-site babysitting as a strategy for enabling parents to attend parent events.

Develop communication channels with parents to support their children's learning.

Programs can be more successful if they work directly with parents to support their children's learning. For example, the GEAR UP program in Austin, Texas, makes developing connections with families a top priority. In this program, each site employs a parent support specialist who is responsible for maintaining consistent and frequent communication with parents. Parents are formally asked to be partners in supporting their children's learning and development and sign contracts with the program pledging

their participation. These communication channels have allowed the program to better support youth and have led to increases in meetings with parents, home visits, personal phone calls, and referrals of families to a variety of support services. Developing effective communication channels between programs and families can mutually benefit both families' and programs' abilities to serve the needs of youth.

Challenge 6: Engaging community members, groups, and institutions in programming

Since summer programs often have limited resources and capabilities, linking with other community entities can help them maximize the beneficial experiences they offer to youth. By engaging actors in the community, programs can leverage resources not usually at their disposal and thereby facilitate enhanced quality programming. Busi-

HOW BELL SUMMER PROGRAM STRIVES TO MEET THE SEVEN CHALLENGES

The BELL (Building Educated Leaders for Life) Summer Program continuously strives to meet all the challenges articulated in this brief. It offers full-day, 5-day-a-week summer programs in Baltimore, Boston, and New York City. One hundred percent of the teachers conducting academic instruction are state certified and receive an additional 32 hours of training from the program. For outside enrichment, the program hires specialists who bring knowledge, talent, and dedication to their areas of programming.

In the morning, youth learn core reading, writing, and math skills from a staff of professional teachers and teacher's assistants. In the afternoon, youth focus on strengthening social skills through daily enrichment activities like art, music, drama, and dance. On "Mentor Fridays," youth learn from guest speakers and cultural presentations, visit museums and parks, and engage with their communities in service projects.

BELL operates with intentionality by conducting an evaluation every year to assess program strengths and weaknesses and then taking steps to address any areas in need of improvement. Recently, an internal evaluation led the program to select a new curriculum that was as academically intensive as the former curriculum but less labor intensive for staff. At the same time, BELL develops individualized connections with youth by conducting continuous assessments of youth's progress so that staff can see where youth are excelling and where they need help. BELL follows up on these assessments with thoughtful planning about how to make upcoming activities responsive to the results of the assessments.

One of the biggest challenges BELL has faced is in working with school systems to identify and secure facilities for program use. Partnering with charter schools, pri-

vate schools, and local colleges, however, has reduced the need for reliance on traditional public schools. BELL also develops linkages to families and community entities. The program requires parents to sign "reading logs" to ensure that families regularly support and engage in their children's learning and development at home. In addition, the program provides an orientation that explains program elements and requirements to families.

Throughout the summer, staff make calls to students' homes, issue progress reports, and invite families to attend conferences. At the end of the program, BELL holds a closing ceremony with food, student performances, a choral presentation, and the culmination of a summer-long "jingle contest" between different BELL campuses. The program works with community-based organizations to connect alumni with high-quality programs after they graduate from BELL and with other community agencies to connect families with special services like health. Youth also complete community service projects, which the program finds to be a critical component in enhancing the program.

BELL makes sure to provide consistent fun enrichment activities in the afternoons, as well as regular field trips on Fridays. These activities are educational, but they also generate excitement from participants and keep them engaged in the program, all of which makes accomplishing the program's goals possible.

A recent random assignment evaluation of BELL found that, as compared to students who did not participate, students in the treatment group who received the 6-week program improved their reading skills by about a month. The evaluation also showed positive effects on hours of academic activities, books read, and the degree to which parents encouraged children to read (Chaplin & Capizano, 2006).

nesses, colleges and universities, museums, and other community institutions all possess valuable resources that can add to the format, content, and location of programming. Coordinating with other community entities can also help ensure a more seamless web of support for youth in the summer months, as well as minimize conflicts between competing summer opportunities in the community.

However, engaging and coordinating with other community settings requires commitment and work and thus emerged as a sixth implementation challenge. Program evaluations pointed toward some promising strategies for meeting this challenge.

Create linkages to colleges and universities.

Colleges and universities generally have more resources available for use in the summer months than during the academic year, and many youth programs take advantage of this opportunity to form partnerships with universities in the summer. As noted above, college students, most of whom are not in class during the summer, can provide an excellent source of program staff. College and university resources also include classroom space and laboratory facilities.

Linking with the local university allowed the Summer Science Academy in Rochester, New York, to gain access to modern lab equipment and technology, which in turn enabled the program to provide exposure to advanced science topics and lab techniques that youth could not get in school. One evaluation noted that the university setting helped youth and their families to experience the college environment, thereby contributing to their increased comfort with and excitement about the idea of attending college.

Link and align with other complementary summer programs.

There are a variety of summer programs and activities available to youth. Such overlap in programming can lead to competition for resources, staff, and student attendance. Linking and aligning with other summer programs by forming community partnerships can help reduce competition and maximize program potential. For instance, the GEAR UP program in Austin collaborated with other academic summer programs, referring youth between programs, sharing resources, and ensuring that programs did not provide duplicate services.

Challenge 7: Incorporating a variety of fun and engaging program activities

The summer has historically been a time of fun and relaxation for many youth, and programs in this review reported greater success when they incorporated a “summer vacation spirit” into their programming and attempted to avoid remedial instruction-based activities. Indeed, some program evaluations found that when programs emphasized remediation and conducted it in a dry, rote manner, youth tended to become disengaged and attendance flagged. Since youth engagement and attendance are critical to program success, finding strategies to ensure a “vacation spirit” is of the utmost importance for summer programs. The program evaluations revealed the following strategies.

Offer a variety of engaging and educational field trips.

Many evaluations indicated that field trips provided fun, engaging educational experiences that generated enthusiasm among participants. Field trips are a major component of the BELL program, which finds that trips to places such as children’s museums, zoos, and planetariums provide enriching experiences and keep youth excited about attending the program week after week. Such field trips can be an opportunity for summer programs to provide experiences that school-year classes cannot or do not offer.

Design activities that are hands-on and focused on active learning.

Hands-on activities can also help keep youth excited, engaged, and learning. The University of Virginia Summer Enrichment Program in Charlottesville, Virginia, found that the active learning component of their program was critical, as youth stressed the importance of “actually doing something.” The program employed active learning approaches such as laboratory work, visits with experts in science, or use of computer technology. An Oceanography Camp for Girls in St. Petersburg, Florida, also found that its hands-on experiential learning activities led participants to become excited about science. In some evaluations, participants reported that they learned more about science in summer programs than during the entire school year. Taking a thematic approach to hands-on learning, such as focusing on oceanography, can also boost engagement in summer programs.

SUMMING UP FOR SUMMER: THE CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

<p><i>Challenge 1: Developing programming with intentionality</i></p>	<p>Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build in program planning and development time before the start of the program. • Build program planning and development time into daily program operations. • Design activities and instruction purposively to achieve program goals.
<p><i>Challenge 2: Building positive and individualized connections with youth</i></p>	<p>Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize preexisting connections with youth. • Create opportunities to ensure individualized connections with youth. • Develop mechanisms to provide staff with accurate information about students' needs and backgrounds.
<p><i>Challenge 3: Recruiting and developing highly skilled staff</i></p>	<p>Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit qualified and experienced school-year teachers for academic components of the summer program. • Tap into the pool of talent available from parents, community members, high school students, and college students. • Provide adequate and timely training to staff members.
<p><i>Challenge 4: Developing ongoing, mutually supportive relationships with schools</i></p>	<p>Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create formal partnerships between summer programs and schools. • Work with schools early. • Develop formal mechanisms that will allow schools to transfer information regarding students' academic and personal needs.
<p><i>Challenge 5: Building strong, positive connections with participants' families</i></p>	<p>Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create opportunities for parents to get involved. • Create strategies for coping with parents' schedules and child care situations. • Develop communication channels to work with parents to support their children's learning.
<p><i>Challenge 6: Engaging community members, groups, and institutions in programming</i></p>	<p>Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create linkages to colleges and universities. • Link and align with other complementary summer programs.
<p><i>Challenge 7: Incorporating a variety of fun and engaging program activities</i></p>	<p>Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer a variety of engaging and educational field trips. • Design activities that are hands-on and focused on active learning.

Putting It All Together to Implement High-Quality Summer Programming

While many summer programs face similar implementation challenges, each program has different components and needs, and not every strategy is feasible or even desirable for every program. Rather, the strategies presented in this brief are intended to offer “food for thought” about how best to develop and refine quality programming. Three major themes cut across the seven challenges and accompanying strategies identified in this brief.

First, many evaluations identified the important role of *linkages, relationships, and partnerships*. Most program goals can best be achieved through coordination, leveraging resources, and building relationships and partnerships. These connections can take many forms, from linking programs to families, to building and leveraging relationships with community-based entities, to developing partnerships with schools. Establishing such linkages can help ensure that youth experience a more seamless network of supports that works toward consistent learning and development.

A second theme that cuts across many strategies is *youth engagement*. For academically focused summer programs to achieve their goals, youth need to attend regularly and stay engaged in the program’s instruction and activities. Engagement can help youth become more invested in the learning process and therefore achieve more positive outcomes. The goal of youth engagement drives many of the strategies identified here, including intentional and ongoing program planning, selecting and training staff members to work effectively with youth, and linking with community members and institutions to provide active learning experiences.

A final theme common to most of these strategies is the importance of operating with *intentionality*. Though this brief identified intentionality as one of seven unique challenges, all six of the other challenges in fact depend on a high level of intentionality and planning. This is consistent with current thinking in the after school arena, which promotes a theory of change approach to program design and implementation—in particular, an approach that intentionally links program goals, program elements, participant outcomes, and evaluations in order to best develop effective OST programs (C. S. Mott Foundation Committee on After School Research and Practice, 2005). Practitioners can use the challenges and strategies identified here to think about similar strategies that they can intentionally adopt in their own programs to maximize the quality and potential of their summer programming.

Out of the scope of this brief, but nonetheless key challenges facing the after school arena today, are sustainabil-

ity of funding and responding to the increasing demands for accountability with more and better ways to demonstrate program results. However, the seven research-derived themes presented in this brief are consistent with an emerging consensus about what constitutes quality in after school and other out-of-school time programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996; Miller, 2003). The specific strategies outlined here are tailored to the needs and experiences of summer programs, but this set of research-based best practices adds to the mounting evidence base that all quality OST programming should include opportunities for youth engagement, skill-building experiences, practices that support positive relationships with peers and adults, and connections with other settings such as schools and families. Taken together, the quality indicators and the strategies identified in this brief provide a framework for programs to continue moving toward providing the highest quality services possible.

Widening achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged youth over the summer months are a major impetus for efforts to improve the accessibility and quality of academically focused summer programming. Our review of program evaluations builds on the findings about the academic benefits of such programs to illuminate how programs can produce these meaningful outcomes. By assessing the common challenges identified in our review and applying the appropriate research-based strategies, programs can make the summer months an opportunity for growth, rather than a time when at-risk youth fall further behind.

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Appendix: Program Evaluations Included in This Review

References available at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/bibliography/index.html

- 21st Century Community Learning Centers—
District of Columbia
- 21st Century Community Learning Centers—
Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union, Vermont
- All-Around-the-Neighborhood
- Arlington Public Schools Summer School
- Ascend Summer Youth Program
- Baltimore City Public School System Summer School
- BELL Accelerated Learning Summer Program
- Boys & Girls Clubs of Metropolitan Phoenix—
ArtWeb
- Break-Aways Partnerships for Year-Round Learning
- Chicago Summer Bridge
- Extended Learning Opportunities Summer Program
- Gain the Edge
- GEAR UP—Austin, Texas
- Gevirtz Summer Academy
- Girls Math and Technology Program
- InfoLink
- Jobs for Youth—Boston PLATO Summer
Transition Program
- Louisiana State Youth Opportunities Unlimited
- National Society of Hispanic Masters of Business
Administration’s Summer Enrichment Program
- National Inventors Hall of Fame Camp Invention Program
- New York City Summer School
- Oceanography Camp for Girls
- San Juan Unified School District Summer
Intervention Programs
- Summer Career Exploration Program
- Summer of Challenge
- Summer Opportunity to Accelerate Reading
- Summer Science Academy
- Summer Training and Education Program
- University of Arizona SEEK Book Making and
Writing Course
- University of Virginia’s Summer Enrichment Program
Invention and Design
- Verilette Parker Science Intervention Program
- Voyager Summer Program
- Wake County Summer Academy
- Washington Reading Corps

Related Resources

Making the Most of Summer School: A Meta-Analytic and Narrative Review.

This meta-analytic review of 93 studies of summer school programs examines the effectiveness of summer school programs, as well as features of programs associated with larger estimated program effects. Cooper, H., Charlton, K., Valentine, J. C., & Muhlenbruck, L. (2000). Making the most of summer school: A meta-analytic and narrative review. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 65(1), 1–118. Summary available at: www.summerlearning.org/resourcesresearch/sumschool.html

Making the Most of Summer: A Handbook of Effective Summer Programming and Thematic Learning.

Making the Most of Summer is a resource for providers who want to improve the quality of their summer programs by meeting the academic and youth development needs of their participants. The handbook contains a variety of easy-to-use planning tools designed to help summer programs a) incorporate the characteristics of effective summer learning programs; b) implement engaging thematic units that meet challenging academic and youth development standards; c) improve the quality of summer staff development opportunities; d) evaluate the success of their programs and services; and e) develop a long-term strategy for sustaining their work. Fairchild, R., McLaughlin, B. & Brady, J. (2006). *Making the Most of Summer: A Handbook on Effective Summer Programming and Thematic Learning*. Baltimore, MD: Center for Summer Learning. Available at: www.summerlearning.org/productsservices/index.html

Summer Learning: Research, Policies, and Programs

This book brings together up-to-date, research-based evidence concerning summer learning and provides descriptions and analyses of a range of summer school programs. The chapters present theory and data that explain both the phenomenon of summer learning loss and the potential for effective summer programs to mitigate loss and increase student achievement. Borman, G. D., & Boulay, M. (Eds.) (2004). *Summer learning: Research, policies, and programs*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. Available at: www.erlbaum.com/ME2/dirmod.asp?sid=28807ECF50FE49F0837125BE640E681F&nm=Books&type=eCommerce&mod=CommerceProductCatalog&mid=CD22EA0F118949C09A932248C040F650&tier=3&id=B8F7686A95CF4448B071C957DBA0A68C&itemid=0-8058-4223-3

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Founded in 1983, HFRP's mission is to promote more effective educational practices, programs, and policies for disadvantaged children and youth by generating, publishing, and disseminating our and others' research. We believe that complementary learning is essential for children to be successful from birth through adolescence. Complementary learning occurs when two or more institutions intentionally link with each other to improve learning and developmental outcomes for children and youth. These institutions include families, early childhood programs, schools, out-of-school time activities, higher education, health and social service agencies, businesses, libraries, museums, and other community-based institutions.



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