

# How to Get the Most out of a Summer Learning Program



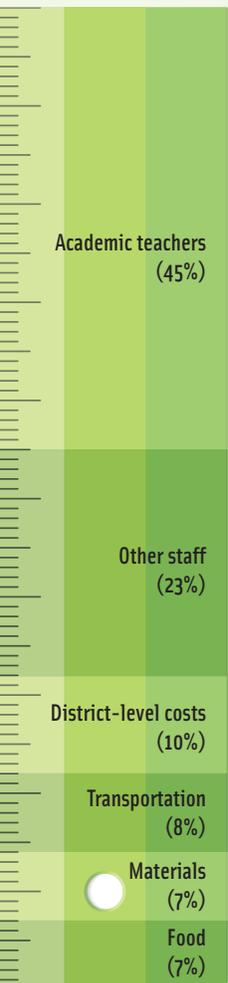
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During long summer breaks, most students forget some of what they learned during the school year. But research shows that low-income students experience the greatest learning loss over the summer and that those losses accumulate from school year to school year. In this context, is it possible for school districts to create strong summer learning programs that mitigate summer learning loss and promote achievement gains?

# How much do summer learning programs cost?

- Costs ranged from **\$8 to \$19 per student per hour** (total cost per hour divided by the average number of students present per day).
- Teacher wages were the main cost (See figure), but cost variations across districts were influenced by program design and attendance policies.

## Average Expenditures by Category, Summer 2011



Summer learning programs may help close the achievement gap between low- and higher-income children if done well, but they are sometimes an afterthought or not offered at all, especially when education budgets are tight. The Wallace Foundation is funding a five-year demonstration project in six urban school districts to determine ways schools can create more effective summer learning programs. The districts selected for the study—Boston, Cincinnati, Dallas, Duval County (Florida), Pittsburgh, and Rochester (New York)—have been pioneers in offering full-day voluntary programs for five to six weeks free of charge to large numbers of struggling elementary students, not just those facing grade retention (see table). These programs provide academic instruction in reading, writing, and math, taught by certified teachers, as well as a range of enrichment activities, many provided by community-based organizations that partner with the district.

### Characteristics of the Six Districts' Voluntary Summer Learning Programs in 2011

Characteristic	Boston	Cincinnati	Dallas	Duval	Pittsburgh	Rochester
Eligibility	Rising fourth grade students in 13 schools	Students in 16 low-performing schools	Bilingual, 21st Century, and students at risk of grade retention	Students in 21 low-performing schools (excluding lowest-level readers)	All students	All low-performing students
Number of rising fourth grade students who attended at least one day	301	160	1399	224	579	557
Number of summer sites	8	16	17	6	8	3
Leadership structure	District-intermediary partnership	District	District-intermediary partnership	District	District	District

To help the districts address difficulties and strengthen their programs, the foundation asked RAND to conduct evaluations of the six programs over two summers (2011 and 2012) so that the programs would be as strong as possible by 2013, when they would be rigorously evaluated to demonstrate the programs' effects on student performance. The new report, *Getting to Work on Summer Learning*, draws lessons from the initial evaluations to help district leaders across the country provide strong summer programs to students who need them. Subsequent reports in the series will describe whether these programs improve student learning and, based on these findings, propose best practices.





## Recommendations for Launching Summer Learning Programs

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### Q. When should planning begin and what should it cover?

1. Start early and be inclusive.
  - Commit to having a summer program by January.
  - Include both district and site-level staff in the planning process.
  - Centralize some decisionmaking.
  - Deliver planning templates to site leaders.
2. Meet regularly and be comprehensive in scope.
  - Conduct regular and productive meetings before the program starts.
  - Plan for enrichment activities as well as academics.
3. Clearly delineate roles.
  - Among program leaders, external partners, and summer site leaders, determine who will plan for what and who will be responsible for what during the summer.
4. Establish firm enrollment deadlines and keep electronic student records.

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### Q. How should districts hire and train teachers?

1. Recruit and hire the right teachers.
  - Develop rigorous selection processes to recruit motivated teachers.
  - Take teachers' school-year performance into consideration.
  - Hire teachers with grade-level and subject matter experience and, if possible, familiarity with the students.
  - Negotiate with teachers' unions, if necessary, to establish a competitive selection process.
2. Give teachers sufficient training and ongoing support.
  - Familiarize teachers with the summer curriculum and how to teach it.
  - Help teachers tailor the curriculum for students with different aptitudes.
  - Provide ongoing support to implement the curriculum.
  - Include all instructional support staff in academic training sessions.
  - Give teachers time to set up their classrooms in advance.

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### Q. What are the best techniques for boosting attendance?

1. Set enrollment deadlines.
2. Establish a clear attendance policy.
3. Provide field trips and other incentives for students who attend.
4. Keep in mind that it is not necessary to disguise academics to boost attendance.

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### Q. How can districts and funders get the greatest value for their investment?

1. Design the summer program with costs in mind.
  - To control fixed costs, avoid assigning small numbers of students to many sites.
  - Use enrichment providers to help leverage additional funds and provide a full-day program.
  - Hire staff to achieve desired student-to-adult ratios based on projected daily attendance, not the initial number of enrollees.
  - Operate full-day programs for five to six weeks.
2. Put resources into tracking and boosting attendance.
3. Use effective cost-accounting practices.
  - To understand costs per student served, express costs on not just a per-enrollee basis, but also on a per-attende, per-hour basis.
  - Set up data procedures to enable cost tracking on a per-attende, per-hour basis.

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### Q. How should districts choose a curriculum and provide instruction?

1. Anchor the program in a commercially available and evidence-based curriculum.
2. Standardize the curriculum across district sites.
3. Include strategies for differentiation in curriculum materials to accommodate at least two ability levels.
4. Structure the program to ensure sufficient time on task.
5. Instruct students in small classes or groups.
6. Provide support to students with special needs.

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### Q. How can districts provide fun, enriching activities?

1. Keep class sizes small and select enrichment providers with well-qualified staff who have experience in behavior management.
2. Conduct careful planning if enrichment is supposed to be integrated with academics.

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### Q. How much time should be spent on academics?

1. Operate the program for five to six weeks.
2. Schedule three to four hours a day for academics and focus on academic content during those hours (see table).

The ultimate goal of summer learning programs is to improve academic achievement, and that requires that students spend a sufficient amount of time on academic tasks. This table – which reflects program structure prior to 2012—displays the factors within a district’s control that can increase that time. The district with the most time on task (Example 1) had the longest program, showed strong attendance, and made good use of instructional time.

	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
Scheduled days	30	16	23
Minutes of daily scheduled academic instruction	310	240	180
Average daily attendance rate	82% (or 25 days)	93% (or 15 days)	66% (or 15 days)
Percentage of scheduled instructional time actually spent on academics	91%	85%	83%
Average hours of academic instructional time per student per summer	121	51	37

Although the recommendations from this study are not proven practices—student outcome data from the randomized controlled trial is not yet available—they are based on an enormous data-gathering effort that included more than 1,800 surveys, 325 interviews, and about 400 hours of direct observations of classroom and enrichment activities. Because they are evidence-based, they offer the best guidance on summer programs currently available.



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