

How Can Teachers Make the Most of Professional Learning in the Summer?

Teachers are never done with learning. Even years into the job, high-quality professional learning (PL) opportunities help teachers improve instructional practice. In spring 2020, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic caused widespread school building closures and disruption of instruction and teacher PL. Better understanding of when and how to offer PL opportunities so that teachers can maintain, improve, and acquire new skills is a clear area of need.

One way that schools and districts can maximize teacher learning is through academic summer programs for students that also offer PL opportunities for teachers. Yet, to date, little is known about how summer can best help teachers improve their school-year classroom practices. Do teachers already use the summer months to take part in PL? Do teachers find summer PL helpful for their work in the classroom during the regular school year? Can teaching students during a summer program provide unique opportunities for PL?

Researchers from the RAND Corporation conducted a multipart study to address these questions. First, the team sought to understand the extent of teachers' participation in summer PL by conducting a nationally representative survey through RAND's American Teacher Panel (ATP). Second, the team surveyed teachers who taught in a BellXcel Summer

(BXS) program, which uses BellXcel's model for academic summer programming for students, to understand if and how teachers' PL opportunities through the program influenced their classroom practices. The team also conducted case studies at several BXS sites, involving observations, interviews, and focus groups with BXS teachers, instructional coaches, and site leaders. The team then compared BXS teachers' survey responses about their PL experiences with those of teachers nationally.

The findings from this study can assist school and district leaders in understanding how summer can be leveraged as a setting for teachers' PL.

What Does Summer PL Look Like for Teachers Across the Nation?

To address this question, the research team analyzed survey responses from teachers across the United States who completed a survey about their PL experiences in summer 2019. Details about the survey and analytic methods can be found in the main report and its technical appendix.

Nearly all teachers reported participating in at least one type of PL activity in summer 2019. Ninety-nine percent of teachers nationally reported

that they participated in at least one PL activity in summer 2019. About 60 percent of teachers reported participating in one to five PL activities during the summer. Some activities, such as reading books or articles related to education, collaborating with colleagues to plan for the upcoming year, and attending in-person sessions, were more widely reported than others.

About a quarter of teachers were employed in a summer program in 2019. Twenty-three percent of teachers nationally reported employment in a summer program for students in 2019. Most of the teachers employed in such programs (70 percent) worked in programs that focused on teaching students academic content (e.g., mathematics, English language arts) and that may have included enrichment or recreational activities, such as field trips or athletics.

Most teachers felt that their summer PL activities were of high quality and helped them improve their instruction in the following school year. Nationally, between 79 and 93 percent of teachers—regardless of their employment in a summer program for students—reported that their summer PL activities made clear connections between topics and sessions, provided opportunities for reflection and practice, and were relevant to their instruction. Eighty-six to 96 percent of teachers, depending on the activity, agreed that the summer PL activities in which they participated were somewhat or very helpful for improving their instruction in the following school year. Teachers perceived collaboration with colleagues, one-on-one coaching, and opportunities to observe other educators' classrooms to be most helpful in this regard.

Teachers employed in academic-focused summer programs reported that their summer PL helped them improve in some teaching practices. Teachers who were employed in academic summer programs for students were more likely than teachers who participated in summer PL but were not employed in such programs to report that their summer PL activities helped them use data to inform instruction, promote students' social and emotional skills, employ positive behavior management techniques, and teach collaboratively. Teachers who were employed in academic-focused summer programs were also more likely to report receiving opportunities for instructional feedback than those who were not employed in such programs.

What Does Summer PL Look Like for Teachers in the BXS Model?

A key feature of the BXS model is the PL available to participating teachers (see “Teacher PL in the BXS Model” on p. 3). The research team surveyed teachers who worked in a BXS program site in the summer of 2019 and conducted focus groups and interviews with teachers and administrators in three BXS sites.

Nearly all teachers agreed that their BXS sites were supportive, positive environments for teaching. Several case study teachers suggested that the voluntary nature of summer programs, such as BXS, contributed to a positive environment because students and staff alike wanted to be there. Large majorities of surveyed BXS teachers agreed that teachers supported each other to improve student learning, that BXS site leaders were highly supportive of teachers, and that teachers had enough classroom materials. Case study teachers echoed this sentiment, saying that the availability of resources and close contact with program administrators and coaches made them feel valued as teachers.

BXS provided an opportunity for teachers to practice student-centered classroom practices. Large majorities of teachers reported that their BXS PL covered the key classroom practices (see “Teacher PL in the BXS Model” on p. 3) and that they felt prepared to use the practices. Nearly all teachers reported that their PL through BXS covered strategies to develop students' social and emotional skills and support positive student behavior, and large majorities of teachers felt prepared to use each of these practices.

Most case study teachers believed that BXS supported experimentation. Case study teachers consistently reported that the positive, supportive, lower-pressure BXS environment helped them feel free to experiment with new classroom strategies. Some case study teachers described BXS as a “learning lab” for teachers, where they could experiment with new classroom strategies in ways they could not during the school year because of pacing, testing, or time constraints.

Teachers believed that their PL through BXS improved their use of certain student-centered practices in the fall. Most teachers believed that, compared with other student-centered practices, their PL through BXS improved their use of positive behavior management techniques and their capacity to promote students' social and emotional skills during the school year (see

How Teacher PL Is Defined in the Study

In the study, PL was defined as:

opportunities to incorporate new resources or strategies into your practice, help you develop as an educator, and practice instructional strategies. Professional learning opportunities can come in many forms, including seminars, professional development sessions, workshops, formal and informal collaboration with colleagues, professional learning communities (PLCs), instructional coaching, mentoring, feedback from an administrator or supervisor, and others.

This definition was presented to survey respondents, including teachers who worked at a BXS program site and teachers nationally, when asking about PL experiences.

Teacher PL in the BXS Model

BXS is a model for summer programming created by the nonprofit organization BellXcel, which partners with schools and youth organizations that license and implement the model in sites across the country. The BXS model provides high-need pre-K to grade 8 students with a full-day experience that incorporates academic instruction, enrichment, social and emotional development, and community engagement. Teachers at BXS sites are encouraged to emphasize six student-centered classroom practices: (1) social and emotional learning; (2) collaborative teaching; (3) data-driven instruction; (4) positive behavior management; (5) differentiated instruction, and (6) center-based learning, which entails using data on student learning strengths and needs to form them into groups that rotate through a series of activities, or *centers*. Teachers who work in BXS program sites also receive ongoing opportunities for PL through

- **Training in student-centered practices:** Teachers had regular access to webinars and other training modules emphasizing student-centered classroom practices. In summer 2019, many teachers also participated in in-person training.
- **Aligned curricula and classroom resources:** Teachers were provided with curricula in math and English language arts that were aligned to the student-centered practices emphasized in teacher training and a positive behavior management plan.
- **Instructional coaching:** Instructional coaches and/or program site administrators were expected to regularly observe teachers' classrooms, review lesson plans, and provide developmental feedback to support improvement of teachers' instructional skills.

Figure 1). Case study teachers shared that some practices, such as using centers and collaborative teaching, would be especially difficult without the additional BXS resources and class time.

Teachers who received instructional coaching found it useful. Survey and case study data indicate that instructional coaching varied across BXS sites. Slightly less than half of surveyed teachers reported receiving one-on-one instructional coaching. This could be because some coaches had additional administrative duties beyond coaching, or that some BXS teachers may not have recognized coaching when it occurred informally. However, majorities of surveyed BXS teachers who participated in instructional coaching believed it helped them use key classroom practices during the summer. All case study teachers perceived their instruc-

tional coaches as a helpful support for connecting to resources and providing informal feedback.

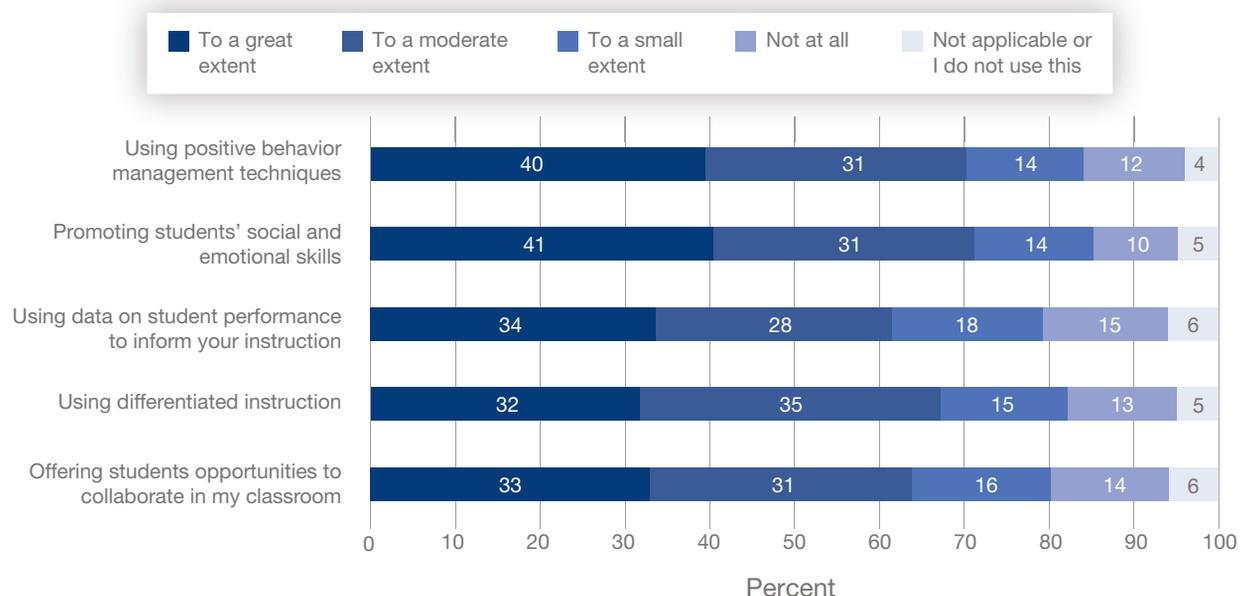
How Do Teachers' PL Experiences in BXS Programs Compare with the PL Experiences of Teachers Nationally?

To address this question, the research team compared survey responses from BXS teachers with those from ATP teachers who were employed in other academic-focused summer programs for students.

BXS teachers were more likely than teachers nationally to report receiving PL activities that

FIGURE 1

Extent to Which BXS Teachers Reported That Summer PL Improved Their Practice in Various Instructional Strategies During the School Year



NOTES: Survey question text: "Please indicate the extent to which the PL opportunities you received in your summer 2019 BellXcel program helped you improve your practice in each of these instructional strategies this school year?" Response options: "Not at all"; "To a small extent"; "To a moderate extent"; "To a great extent"; "I do not use this strategy in my school year instruction"; and "Strategy not applicable to my role." Some rows may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding. N = 393–395.

offered opportunities for developmental feedback.

When asked about their summer PL activities, 79 percent of BXS teachers reported receiving observations of their summer classrooms followed by feedback, compared with 38 percent of teachers nationally. Almost half of BXS teachers reported receiving one-on-one coaching as a part of their summer PL, compared with less than a third of teachers nationally. In addition, more BXS teachers reported opportunities to analyze student work as a part of their summer PL.

BXS teachers felt less pressure in their summer environments than teachers nationally. BXS teachers and teachers employed in academic summer programs nationally held similarly positive opinions about the supports and resources—such as sufficient classroom and curriculum materials and manageable class sizes—in their summer programs. However, BXS teachers were slightly less likely to report feeling pressure to achieve certain outcomes for students and to cover certain material in their instruction. Fifty-seven percent of teachers nationally who worked for academic summer programs agreed or strongly agreed

that they felt pressure to achieve certain outcomes for students in their summer programs, compared with 48 percent of BXS teachers.

BXS teachers were more likely than teachers nationally to report that summer PL helped improve their use of student-centered practices during the school year. Table 1 shows how a larger majority of BXS teachers reported that their summer PL helped them improve in student-centered instructional practices during the school year than teachers in other academic summer programs. These differences were all statistically significant. The differences were largest for using questioning strategies to promote students' critical thinking, using positive behavior management techniques, and using differentiated instruction.

Recommendations

Finding time for teacher PL is always challenging but has increased in importance as schools and districts strive to make up for time lost due to COVID-19 clo-

TABLE 1

Extent to Which BXS Teachers and Teachers Employed in Academic Summer Programs Nationally Reported That Summer PL Helped Improve the Use of Key Instructional Practices

Instructional Strategy	To a Moderate or Great Extent	
	Percentage of BXS Teachers Who Responded	Percentage of Teachers Nationally Who Responded
Offering students opportunities to collaborate in my classroom*	82	70
Using differentiated instruction**	82	66
Using positive behavior management techniques**	82	63
Using questioning strategies to promote students' critical thinking**	79	60
Promoting students' social and emotional skills through your instruction*	78	68
Using a variety of strategies to check for students' understanding**	80	65

NOTES: BXS Survey question text: "Please indicate the extent to which the professional learning opportunities you received in your summer 2019 BellXcel program helped you improve your practice in each of these instructional strategies this school year?" ATP Question text: "Please indicate the extent to which the professional learning opportunities you received during summer 2019 helped you improve your practice in each of these instructional strategies this school-year?" Response options for both questions: "Not at all," "To a small extent," "To a moderate extent," and "To a great extent."

Our national teacher data are based on results from a subset of teachers who reported summer employment with an academic program on ATP. This table presents dichotomized results adjusted for sample differences. Responses of "Not at all" and "To a small extent" are not shown here. BXS $N = 326$ – 337 ; ATP $N = 78$ – 93 . Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences in percentages: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

tures. Together, the study findings suggest ways that districts and schools can leverage summer to offer meaningful PL opportunities for teachers.

Consider capitalizing on academic summer programs for students as a setting for teacher PL.

School and district leaders should consider how they might utilize summer programs for students to provide teachers with PL opportunities by partnering with academic summer programs, or by incorporating opportunities for developmental feedback in their summer school programs.

Work to develop low-pressure, positive, and supportive summer programs and PL environments.

BXS teacher survey and focus group respondents suggested that the absence of school-year pacing and testing requirements, support from instructional coaches, and easy access to curricula and resources created a

low-pressure, positive, and supportive environment. School and district leaders may benefit from fostering low-pressure environments in summer teaching settings to enable teachers to experiment and build confidence in classroom practices.

Consider summer teaching as a setting to focus on student-centered practices. BXS teachers believed their summer PL helped them to improve their use of student-centered practices during the school year—specifically, promoting students' social and emotional skills and using positive behavior management strategies. Those who design academic summer programs at the district and school levels should consider how these environments might be used to focus on helping teachers develop strategies to support student social and emotional learning and enact positive behavior-management techniques.

This brief describes work done in RAND Education and Labor and is documented in *The Promise of Summer as a Time for Teacher Professional Learning: Findings from a National Survey and Implications from the BellXcel Program*, by Elizabeth D. Steiner, Laura Stelitano, Andy Bogart, and Sophie Meyers, RR-A196-1, 2021 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A196-1). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA196-1.

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country. We are extremely grateful to the U.S. public school teachers and leaders who have agreed to participate in the panels. Their time and willingness to share their experiences are invaluable for this effort and for helping us understand how to better support their hard work in schools. This study was sponsored by BellXcel. A national nonprofit, BellXcel partners with youth organizations and schools to license its K-8 summer and afterschool programming. With nearly 30 years of experience innovating education solutions, BellXcel empowers educators and youth development staff to reach tens of thousands of scholars and families each year. BellXcel's work is made possible through the support of national and local investors, including Ballmer Group, Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, The Deerbrook Charitable Trust, The New York Life Foundation, and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation (CLSFF), among others. For more information, visit www.bellxcel.org.

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