RAND
AMERICAN SCHOOL DISTRICT PANEL
CRPE REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION
Research Report

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School Was in Session This Summer, but Less Than Half of Eligible Students Enrolled

Selected Findings from the Fall 2023 American School District Panel Survey

Summer programming (along with high-intensity tutoring) is one of the main ways school districts have sought to help students recover academically from coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic–related setbacks (Arundel, 2023; Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022; DiMarco and Jordan, 2022; Lehrer-Small, 2022). In fact, when we asked districts to identify in a fall 2023 survey which, if any, of their offerings they deemed most effective at helping students recover academically, summer programming was the second most common answer behind tutoring (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2024). Because school districts are the leading provider of the summer programming to which parents send their children (America After 3PM, 2021), the quality of districts' summer program offerings likely matters for students' pandemic recovery. Importantly, prior research shows that different types of summer programs have been shown to be effective for different student outcomes, such as academic achievement, mental health, and avoidance of risky behavior (McCombs et al., 2019).

Of particular relevance to this report is the National Summer Learning Project (NSLP) study (RAND, undated). The NSLP was a randomized controlled trial that examined the effectiveness of voluntary five- to six-week–long summer programs for 3rd and 4th graders in five school districts. This study yielded a series of recommendations to districts about how to operate effective summer programs (Schwartz et al., 2018). The Biden administration referenced the NSLP results when advocating that school districts offer summer programs to help students recover from the pandemic (Miller, undated; White House, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

We used the recommendations from the NSLP study to inform development of a survey that we fielded to a nationally representative sample of districts in fall 2023. Our goal in administer-

KEY FINDINGS

- Eighty-one percent of districts offered summer programs in 2023, typically to both elementary- and secondary-grade levels.
- Every urban district surveyed indicated offering programming in summer 2023, and these districts typically offered four or more summer programs.
- Districts' largest summer programs were typically free of charge, ran for four weeks, offered about four hours of academic instruction per day, and hired district teachers for at least some, if not all, of academic instruction.
- However, districts' largest summer programs typically enrolled less than half of eligible students. This was true regardless of whether programs had eligibility restrictions.
- Furthermore, less than one in five districts' largest elementary summer programs met the minimum recommended hours of academic instruction found to academically benefit students.
- Four in ten districts anticipated funding decreases for summer 2024.

ing this national survey was to investigate with the most extensive detail to date the features of districts' summer programming during this era of pandemic recovery. The districts that we invited to participate in the survey were the 1,167 districts that RAND selected at random and that previously agreed to enroll in the American School District Panel (ASDP). The ASDP is a research partnership between RAND and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. The panel also collaborates with several other education organizations, including the Council of the Great City Schools and Kitamba. A total of 231 districts completed our fall 2023 survey, which is a 19.8 percent survey completion rate. We weighted these districts' responses to our survey to make them representative of public school districts across the country.

In the first section of this report, we describe the prevalence of district-offered summer programming in 2023. We examine how many districts offered summer programming and for which students and whether programs were run solely in-house or in collaboration with external partners. In the second section, we provide more detail about the districts' largest elementary and secondary programs, in terms of their eligibility criteria, length, and academic and nonacademic offerings. In the third section, we focus explicitly on how these districts approached their academic instruction: how many hours of academic instruction their programs provided, who provided this instruction, and how lesson plans were determined. We conclude with a brief look at districts' expectations about funding for summer 2024.

Because experiences with summer learning programming can vary by district context, we examined differences in districts' survey responses by locale (urban, suburban, rural), poverty status (low poverty, high poverty), student racial and ethnic composition (majority White students, majority students of color), and enrollment size (small, medium, large). Throughout this report, we describe only those differences among district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5-percent level, unless otherwise noted. Additional details about our methods (including how we defined these subgroups) and the survey are in the "How This Analysis Was Conducted and Limitations" section at the end of this report.

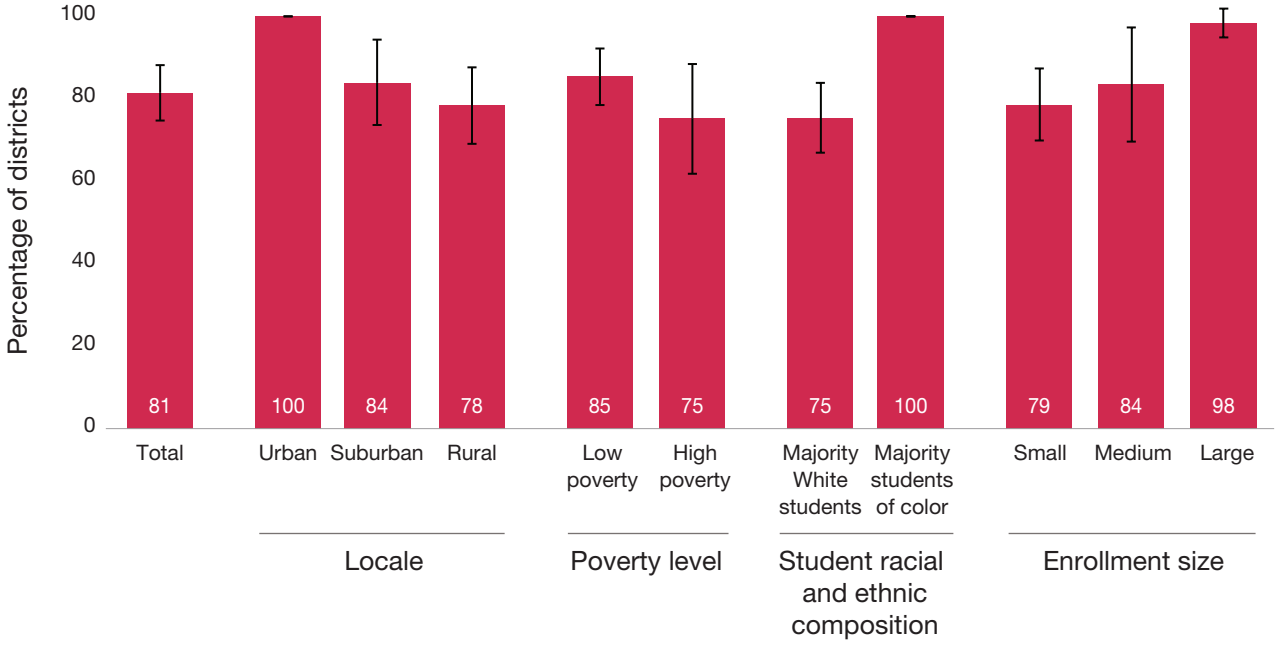
Prevalence of Programming in Summer 2023

Most Districts Across the United States Offered Summer Programs in 2023

Eighty-one percent of districts nationwide offered programming in summer 2023 (see Figure 1). We expected this high level of summer programming because three-quarters or more of districts have reported since summer 2021 that they offered summer programming (Schwartz and Diliberti, 2021; Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022). Notably, all (or almost

FIGURE 1

Percentage of Districts That Offered Programming for Students in Summer 2023, by District Subgroup



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "Did your district offer programming for students in summer 2023?" (*n* = 216). Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

all) urban districts, large districts, and districts serving mostly students of color offered at least one summer program in summer 2023.

We suspect there are several reasons that summer program offerings were more common in urban districts than in suburban and rural districts in summer 2023. First, urban districts are typically large enough to reach economies of scale to host summer programming—that is, there are enough teachers and enrichment program partners to enlist to work in the program, enough forms of transportation (whether public transit or busing services) for students to reach the programming, enough facilities that are not shut for maintenance in the summer to host the programming, and enough potential student enrollees to fill classrooms. Furthermore, these districts tend to serve greater shares of students performing below grade level—a population that might have among the greatest need for summer programs.

How We Defined *Summer Program* on Our Survey

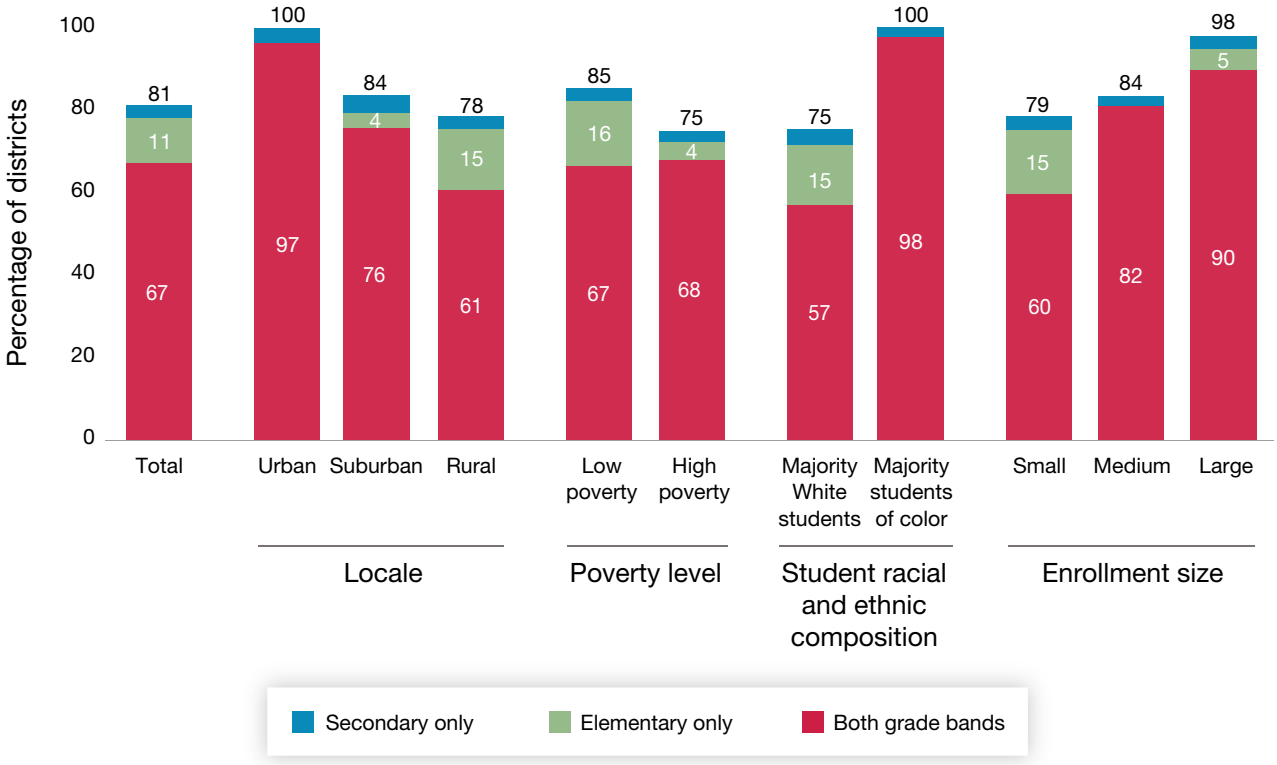
The term *summer program* refers to any summer 2023 program that districts partially or fully funded from any source. Districts, contractors, and/or one or more community partners might have run the programs. Summer programs can have any academic or other focus.

Districts Typically Offered Summer Programming to Both Elementary and Secondary Grades

Nationally, 78 percent of districts had a summer program for elementary students (i.e., one that served any grades pre-kindergarten [pre-K]–5), and 70 percent had a summer program for secondary students (i.e., one that served any grades 6–12). Sixty-seven percent of districts nationally, or most, had summer programs that served both grade levels (see Figure 2). In the cases in which districts served only one of these two grade levels, it was more common for districts to serve only elementary grades than to serve only secondary grades: 11 percent of districts nationally had a program only for elementary students

FIGURE 2

Percentage of Districts That Offered Programming for Students in Summer 2023, by District Subgroup and Grade Level



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "Did your district offer programming for students in summer 2023?" and "Which grade ranges did the district-offered summer programs serve in summer 2023?" (n = 216). Respondents were asked to select all that apply from the following grade ranges: "Any of the grades PK–5" and "Any of the grades 6–12." Bars might not sum to totals because of rounding. We omitted data labels for some bars for readability purposes.

and 3 percent had a program only for secondary students.[1] As shown in Figure 2, this pattern held in almost all types of districts that we examined.

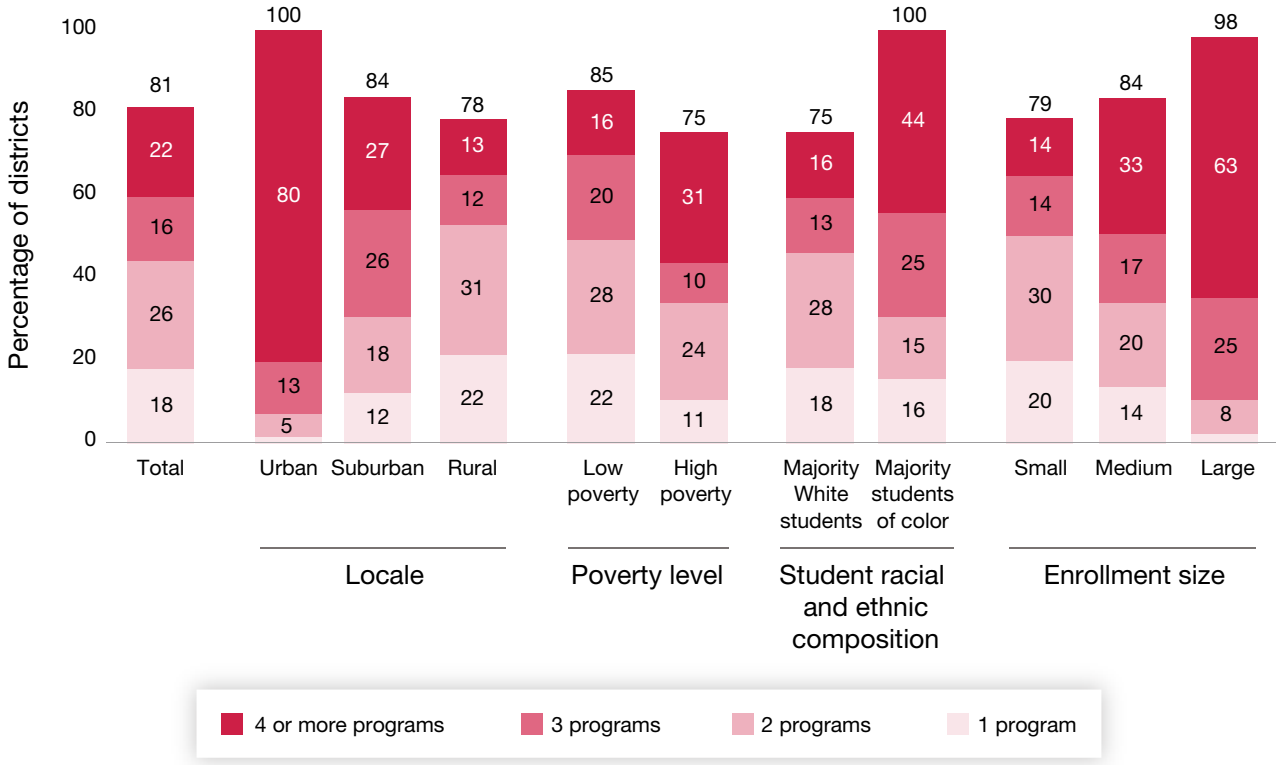
We asked the 70 percent of districts nationally that offered summer programming to secondary grades for more detail about what specific grades these programs served.[2] (We did not ask a parallel question about specific grades served in the elementary summer programs.) Of those districts with at least one secondary summer program, 82 percent had a program that served at least one middle school grade and 86 percent had a program that served at least one high school grade. In fact, three-quarters or more of those districts that offered secondary summer programming offered it to students in each of the grades 6 through 11. Meanwhile, 66 percent of districts offered programming for 12th graders. In other words, districts did not narrowly target their secondary summer programs to specific grades.

Urban Districts Typically Offered Four or More Summer Programs, Suburban Districts Offered Three, and Rural Districts Offered Two

Districts tended to offer multiple summer programs in summer 2023 rather than just a single program. As shown in Figure 3, 63 percent of districts nationally offered two or more programs in summer 2023, including 16 percent that offered three and 22 percent that offered four or more. Only 18 percent offered just one summer program (and the remaining 19 percent offered none).

FIGURE 3

Percentage of Districts That Offered Programming for Students in Summer 2023, by District Subgroup and Number of Programs Offered



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "Did your district offer programming for students in summer 2023?" and "How many different summer programs did your district offer in summer 2023 in total to students in any grades PK–12?" (n = 216). Bars might not sum to totals because of rounding. We omitted data labels for some bars for readability purposes.

Districts' enrollment size closely tracked the number of summer programs offered. Most urban districts (80 percent) and most large districts (63 percent) offered four or more summer programs in 2023. In contrast, only 13 percent of rural districts offered four or more summer programs. The typical (median) rural district offered two summer programs, and the typical suburban district offered three. We presume district size closely tracks with demand for programming, the availability of program partners to help host it, the availability of facilities in the summer, and sufficient staffing options. Therefore, we expect that the largest districts are the ones that likely have the most capacity to offer many summer programs.

Importantly, our survey did not ask districts why they offered more than one summer program. And we do not know whether the districts that offered multiple summer programs had programs that served the same or different student populations, had different focuses, or operated at the same or staggered times during the summer.[3] We do know, however, from prior research that school districts have designed summer programs for a variety of needs, including mandatory programs for students at risk of being held back in a grade, programs to pass individual courses that a student had failed or did not complete, voluntary (and often more comprehensive) summer programs for the general student population, and extended school year services with specialized instruction for some students with disabilities.

In summary, our survey data show that the norm is for districts to offer multiple, rather than one general, summer programs for their students. And the

Longer planning time offers districts greater ability to plan academic instruction, develop or obtain curriculum, hire and train staff, secure food contracts for meal service, and set up bus routes.

larger the district, the more likely it is to offer more than two programs.

About Half of Districts Partnered with Community-Based Organizations for One or More Summer Programs

We asked those districts that offered at least one summer program in summer 2023 whether any of their programs involved partnership(s) with community-based organizations (CBOs). In results not shown, about half of the districts (48 percent) that offered summer programs did *not* partner with a CBO. The other half did. Forty-four percent of those districts that offered at least one summer program partnered with a CBO to provide *some* of their summer programming, while 6 percent of districts partnered with a CBO to provide *all* of their summer programming. (The remaining 2 percent of districts were not sure whether their summer programs involved partnerships with CBOs.) We do not know, however, for which particular summer programs or which focuses districts engaged with CBOs.

Among districts that offered summer 2023 programming, large districts (81 percent), urban districts (79 percent), and high-poverty districts (68 percent) were most likely to have partnered with CBOs to operate some or all their summer programs. This aligns with prior research that has found that urban areas have more youth-serving organizations than suburban or rural areas (America After 3PM, 2021). We believe this is, among other reasons, because urban areas' larger populations provide a sufficiently large number of students to make it more financially viable for youth-serving nonprofits to operate.

Only One-Quarter of Districts Had Begun Planning for Their Summer Programs by January

The NSLP recommends that districts begin planning their summer programs no later than January of the preceding school year. This is because districts that start planning for summer programs early can offer programs that have fewer disruptions to instruction (Schwartz et al., 2018). Longer planning time offers districts greater ability to plan academic instruction, develop or obtain curriculum, hire and train staff, secure food contracts for meal service, and set up bus routes.

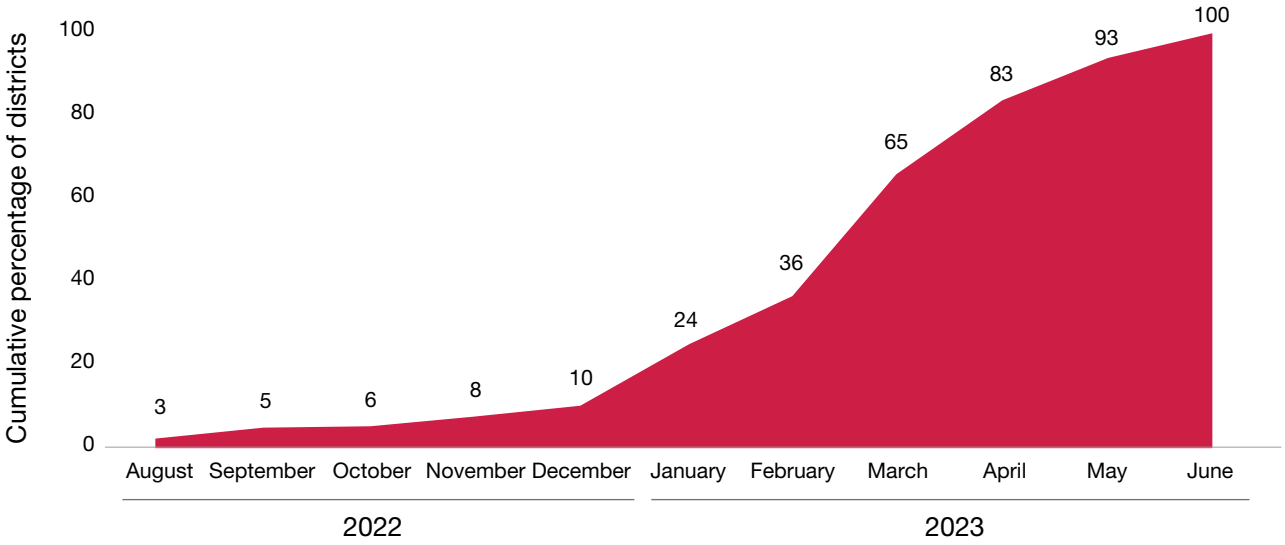
We asked districts when they first started to select staffing, class scheduling, and programming for summer 2023. We acknowledge that districts might begin planning for each of these aspects at different times. We assume that they responded to our survey item based on the earliest time at which they began to plan for any of these aspects of their summer programs.

As shown in Figure 4, only one-quarter of districts (24 percent) had begun selecting staff, schedules, and programs for summer 2023 by January 2023. Instead, districts generally began planning for their summer programs in February or March. By February, slightly more than one-third of districts (36 percent) had begun planning, and, by March, two-thirds had done so (65 percent). The last third of districts, however, did not begin planning until late in the spring, including 7 percent that did not begin planning until June.

As shown in Figure 5, the time that districts started making plans for their summer programs varied by locale. Urban districts (which ran the largest number of summer programs) started planning for

FIGURE 4

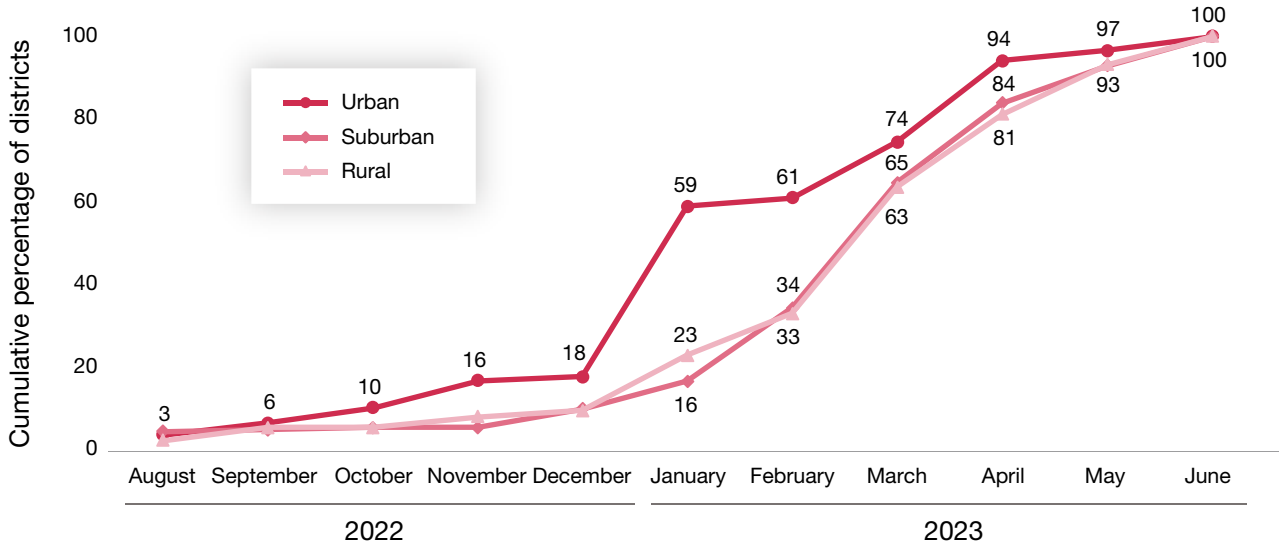
Cumulative Percentage of Districts That Had Started Planning for Summer 2023, by Month



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "In what month and year did your district start to first select summer 2023 staffing, class scheduling, and programming? If your district offered more than one summer program, select the earliest month your district started planning for any one of them." (*n* = 185). Only those districts that said their district offered summer programming in summer 2023 saw this question. Data points might not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

FIGURE 5

Cumulative Percentage of Districts That Had Started Planning for Summer 2023, by Month and District Locale



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "In what month and year did your district start to first select summer 2023 staffing, class scheduling, and programming? If your district offered more than one summer program, select the earliest month your district started planning for any one of them." (*n* = 184). Only those districts that said their district offered summer programming in summer 2023 saw this question. Data points might not sum to 100 percent because of rounding. We omitted some data labels for readability purposes.

summer programs several months sooner than their suburban and rural counterparts. Fifty-nine percent of urban districts reported that they had started planning for summer programs by January, compared with 23 percent of rural districts and 16 percent of suburban districts. Looking month by month, suburban and rural districts persistently lagged behind urban districts' summer program planning. By March, for example, two-thirds of suburban and rural districts had begun planning for summer—which was roughly the proportion of urban districts that had already started back in January.

We hypothesize that there are several reasons that urban districts begin planning sooner than their counterparts. As shown in Figure 3, these districts tend to offer more summer programs and they more frequently engage in partnerships with CBOs to offer these programs. We presume that having more programs and coordinating with CBOs means that these districts might need more time to get their programs off the ground. Urban districts also likely enroll more students in their summer programs (if not a greater share of students), necessitating the hiring of more staff and the coordination of logistics at multiple summer locations, not just one. Finally, a typical urban district central office employs more people than a typical nonurban district central office. Although urban district staff are likely capacity constrained, they tend to have greater specialization in their staff roles, and thus a staff member is more likely to be fully or partly devoted to directing summer programming.

Profile of Districts' Largest Summer 2023 Learning Programs

In this section, we dive deeper into districts' offerings in summer 2023. To do so, we first restrict our sample to include only the 81 percent of districts that provided at least some summer programming in summer 2023. Furthermore, to limit the burden of our survey, we asked district respondents a series of detailed questions about only their program that offered the largest number of slots and that was held primarily in-person. (Districts that offered only virtual summer programs were asked to respond based on their largest virtual school program.) Districts were asked separately about their largest programs at the elementary versus secondary level. Throughout the rest of this report, we refer to these programs as districts' "largest" elementary or secondary summer programs. In this section, we build a profile of what these largest programs looked like in summer 2023.

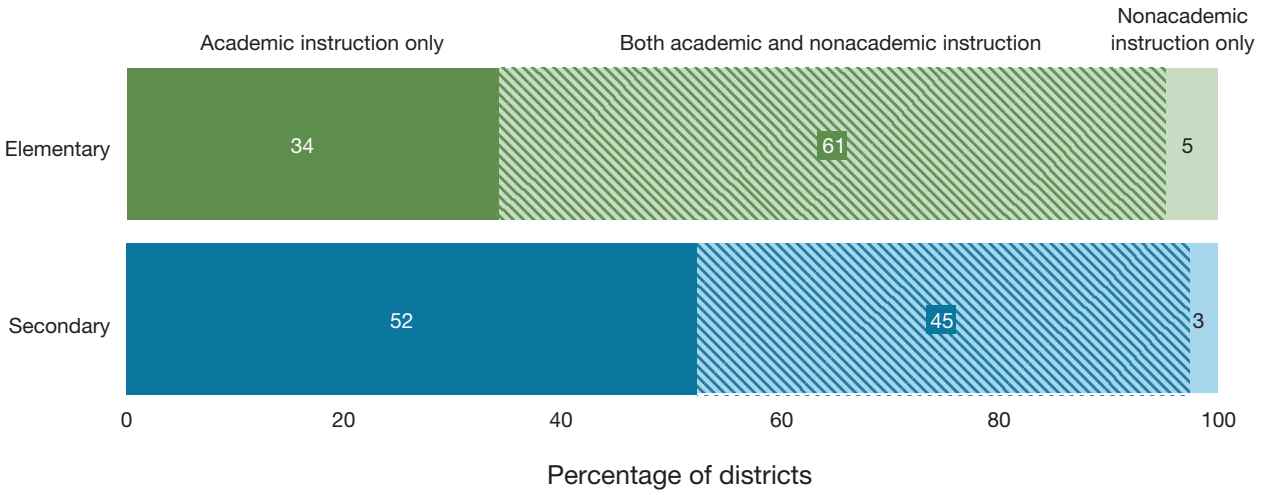
Virtually All Districts' Largest Summer Programs Included Academic Instruction

To better understand the focus of districts' largest summer programs, we asked them, "What activities did the [elementary/secondary] summer 2023 program offer on a daily basis, excluding field trips or similar special days?" We listed a handful of instructional activities and asked respondents to select all that applied. In Figure 6, we include in the category *academic instruction* districts that selected either (or both) of two survey response options: "academic instruction specifically designed to address unfinished learning (e.g., tutoring, credit recovery)" and "academic instruction not specifically designed to address unfinished learning (e.g., robotics, science camp, accelerated instruction)." We include in the category *nonacademic instruction* districts that selected any of three survey response options: "nonacademic instruction (e.g., arts programming, outdoor skills, social and emotional skill building)," "instruction in a sport (e.g., soccer, baseball, basketball, track, tennis, swimming)," and, for secondary grades only, "instruction in career or college readiness (e.g., apprenticeship, service learning, mentoring)." These categories are admittedly crude because they do not signal the extent to which academic and nonacademic instruction was the *primary* focus of districts' summer programming, nor the specific content included as part of this instruction.

With these caveats in mind, we find that virtually all districts' largest summer programs in summer 2023 included academic instruction daily (see Figure 6). That is, 95 percent of districts said that their largest elementary summer program included academic instruction daily, and 97 percent said the

FIGURE 6

Percentage of Districts Whose Largest Summer Programs Offered Academic and/or Nonacademic Activities on a Daily Basis, by Grade Level



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "What activities did the PK–5 summer 2023 program offer on a daily basis, excluding field trips or similar special days?" and "What activities did the secondary grade level summer 2023 program offer on a daily basis, excluding field trips or similar special days?" (n = 177). Only those districts that said their district offered summer programming in summer 2023 saw these questions.

same about their largest secondary summer program. A little more than half of districts said that their secondary-grade largest summer program focused *only* on academics daily, whereas about one-third said similarly about their elementary-grade largest summer programs. Most districts said that their elementary-grade largest summer programs included both academic and nonacademic instruction daily, and a little less than half of districts said the same about their secondary-grade largest summer programs. Fewer than five percent of districts at either grade level indicated that their largest summer program included only nonacademic instruction.

Urban Districts Were Most Likely to Offer Both Academic and Nonacademic Activities in Their Largest Elementary Summer Programs

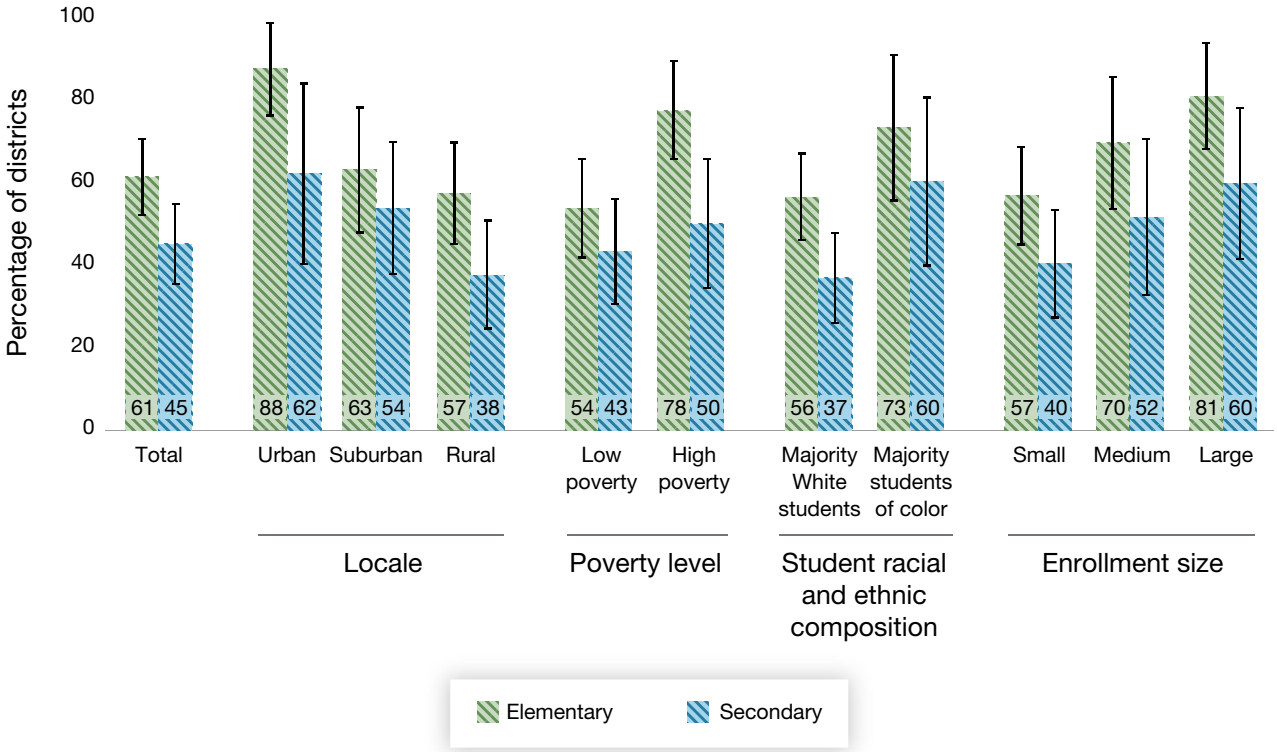
Because virtually all districts offered summer programs that included academic activities daily, we next examine whether certain types of districts were more likely than others to offer nonacademic instruction daily in addition to academic instruction.

Virtually all districts' largest summer programs in summer 2023 included academic instruction daily.

The share of districts offering summer programs that included both academic and nonacademic activities varied by district context, although more so at the elementary level. For example, 88 percent of urban districts indicated that their largest elementary summer program included both academic and nonacademic activities daily, compared with 63 percent of suburban districts and 57 percent of rural districts (see Figure 7). Similarly, 78 percent of high-poverty districts indicated that their largest elementary summer program included both academic and non-

FIGURE 7

Percentage of Districts Whose Largest Summer Programs Offered Both Academic and Nonacademic Activities on a Daily Basis, by District Subgroup and Grade Level



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "What activities did the PK–5 summer 2023 program offer on a daily basis, excluding field trips or similar special days?" and "What activities did the secondary grade level summer 2023 program offer on a daily basis, excluding field trips or similar special days?" (n = 177). Only those districts that said that their district offered summer programming in summer 2023 saw these questions. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

academic activities daily, compared with 54 percent of low-poverty districts. At the secondary level, a greater share of districts serving mostly students of color than of districts serving mostly White students said that their largest secondary summer program included both academic and nonacademic activities daily (60 versus 37 percent, respectively). We observed this same pattern at the elementary level too, although differences were not statistically significant.

We have two hypotheses about the discrepancy in nonacademic offerings between urban districts—which tend to be high poverty and to serve larger shares of minority students—and other districts. The first is that the discrepancy stems from the greater availability of youth-serving organizations in urban areas and the fact that youth-serving organizations, such as a Boys and Girls Club or a nonprofit arts organization, are more likely to lead the nonacademic portions of a district's summer program. The second is that large districts typically have a larger teacher population from which to recruit staff. This larger scale might enable these districts to offer more specialty services, such as those for arts, social and emotional learning, or outdoor activities, than their smaller counterparts.

Roughly Half of Districts Offered Their Largest Summer Programs to All Grade-Eligible Enrollees

We asked districts whether they restricted eligibility for their largest elementary and secondary programs in summer 2023 to certain categories of students or whether any grade-eligible district enrollee could enroll. About half of districts (53 percent) indicated that their largest elementary summer program

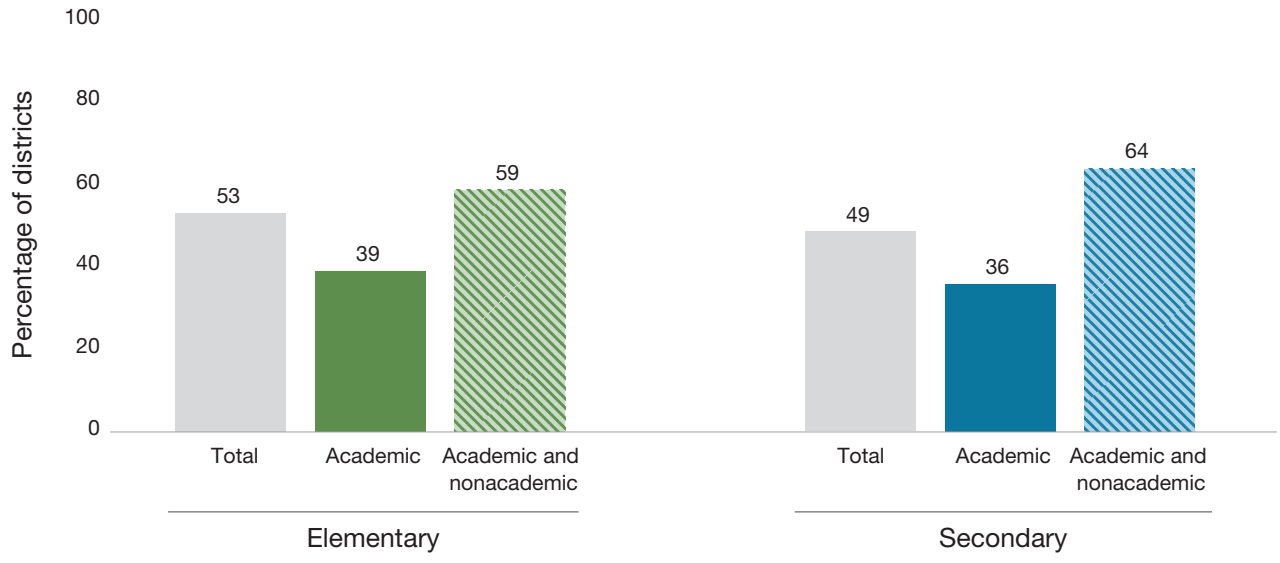
was open to all (that is, it had no eligibility restriction), and 49 percent of districts said similarly about their largest secondary summer program (see Figure 8). We did not observe significant differences in districts' likelihood of operating summer programs without eligibility restrictions by district characteristics.

However, districts' likelihood of having a program that was open to all students depended on the daily activities included in the program. At both the elementary and secondary levels, districts that operated academic-only summer programs were less likely than their counterparts that operated programs that included both academic and nonacademic instruction to indicate that these programs were open enrollment (see Figure 8). For example, 59 percent of districts whose largest elementary program included both academic and nonacademic instruction daily said that this program did not have an eligibility restriction (that is, that the program was open to all), compared with 39 percent of districts whose largest summer program included academic instruction only.

The half of districts whose largest elementary and secondary programs did not include eligibility restrictions recruited specific categories of students for even their open-enrollment summer programs. In results not shown, among the districts that offered unrestricted secondary summer programs, 73 percent recruited students performing below grade level, 50 percent recruited frequently absent students, 24 percent recruited English learners, and 12 percent recruited students eligible for free or reduced-price meals (a rough proxy for low-income students). Districts recruited the same sets of students at similar rates for their unrestricted elementary programs. Only 26 percent of districts with no restrictions on their largest elementary programs and 23 percent of districts with no restrictions on their largest secondary programs said that they made no efforts to recruit specific groups of students.

FIGURE 8

Percentage of Districts Whose Largest Summer Programs Did Not Restrict Eligibility, by Program Focus and Grade Level



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "What activities did the PK–5 summer 2023 program offer on a daily basis, excluding field trips or similar special days?," "What activities did the secondary grade level summer 2023 program offer on a daily basis, excluding field trips or similar special days?," "Did your district restrict eligibility for your largest PK–5 summer 2023 program for children in any grade level PK–5?," and "Within these grade levels, did your district restrict eligibility for your largest summer 2023 program for children in any grade level 6–12?" (n = 177). Only those districts that said that their district offered summer programming in summer 2023 saw these questions.

When Restricting Eligibility, Districts Typically Targeted Students Performing Below Grade Level or Needing to Recover Course Credits

We asked the remaining half of districts that restricted eligibility for their largest summer programs which student population(s) was eligible to attend. We listed several student subgroups—students performing below grade level, English learners, and students with an insufficient number of course credits to graduate on time—and asked them to select all the student populations for which the eligibility restrictions applied. (We also listed an "other" option.)

As expected, when districts restricted eligibility to their largest summer programs, they most often restricted eligibility to include students performing below grade level. Eighty-nine percent of districts that restricted eligibility in their largest elementary summer programs made this restriction, as did 71 percent of districts that offered restricted secondary programs. Meanwhile, 67 percent of districts whose largest secondary programs restricted eligibility made a restriction to include students with insufficient course credits to graduate on time. It was uncommon for districts to restrict eligibility to only English learners at both the elementary and secondary levels.

Fifteen percent of those districts whose largest elementary programs had restrictions mentioned "other" restrictions, as did 21 percent of those whose largest secondary programs had restrictions. In open-ended responses, these districts mentioned restricting eligibility to low-income students (e.g., those in Title I schools), special education students, students who failed particular courses, or certain grade levels.

When districts restricted eligibility to their largest summer programs, they most often restricted eligibility to include students performing below grade level.

Even Districts' Largest and Restricted-Eligibility Summer Programs Enrolled Fewer Than Half of Eligible Students

To gauge how many students theoretically benefited from summer 2023 programming, we asked districts what share of students who were eligible to attend their largest elementary and secondary programs in summer 2023 enrolled.[4] We say "theoretically benefitted" because the number of students who enroll in summer programs can be substantially larger than the number of students who actually attend (Augustine et al., 2016).[5] This is because students or families who originally enrolled might never show, or students who do show might attend for fewer than all of the offered summer program days. The NSLP study found this to be the norm across the five districts' elementary-grade summer programs pre–COVID-19 pandemic (Augustine et al., 2016). But attendance in summer programs might be even lower now; media reports suggest that attendance—both in summer programs and in schooling generally—has been lower during the pandemic recovery period (Meisner and Heubeck, 2023; Modan, 2023, St. George, 2023; White House, 2023). In short, summer program enrollment rates (including the ones we present below) represent the maximum share of students that might have benefitted from programming in summer 2023. We asked districts to provide enrollment rates rather than attendance rates for two reasons: (1) districts measure attendance differently and (2) enrollment counts are typically easier for districts to obtain and, therefore, are less burdensome for them to provide.

To gauge what shares of students potentially obtained academic instruction in summer 2023 programming, we looked at enrollment rates only in districts' largest summer programs that included at

least some academic instruction. (Recall that 5 percent of districts said that their largest elementary summer programs had no academic instruction, as did 3 percent of districts about their largest secondary programs.) We looked at enrollment in districts' academic summer programs by grade level and by whether the program had an eligibility restriction.

We expected the share of eligible students who enrolled to be higher in districts that restricted eligibility in their largest summer program because that restriction by definition reduces the potential pool of students who can enroll. Consider, for example, two districts that each serve 2,000 elementary-grade students in a typical school year. One district restricts eligibility in its largest summer program to only 200 students while the other does not impose an eligibility restriction. If 100 students enroll in each of the summer programs, the first district will have an enrollment rate of 50 percent while the second district will have an enrollment rate of 5 percent—even though these programs serve the same number of students.

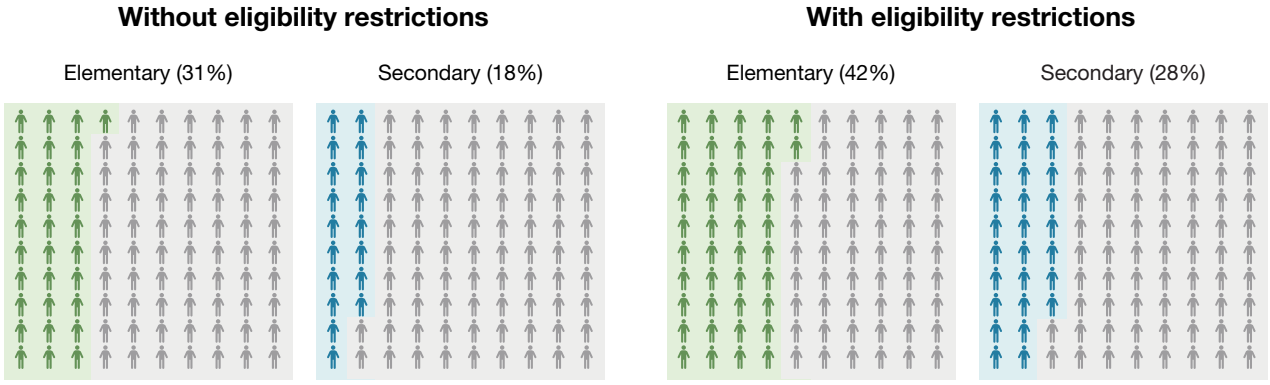
Figure 9 confirms this intuition. At both the elementary and secondary levels, enrollment rates were higher, on average, among districts that operated programs with eligibility restrictions than among districts that operated open enrollment programs. For example, districts whose largest elementary programs were restricted enrolled 42 percent of students on average, while districts whose largest elementary programs were unrestricted enrolled 31 percent of students on average. Furthermore, districts' largest elementary summer programs—whether restricted or not—enrolled larger shares of students than their largest secondary summer programs. This is also as expected because, presumably, parents have greater need for supervised care during a summer workday for elementary students than for secondary students.

Figure 9 also shows that districts reached a minority of their students via their academic summer programming. Most concerningly, those districts that operated restricted summer programs—where restrictions were overwhelmingly made to focus on students performing below grade level as described previously—enrolled fewer than half of their eligible elementary students and only about one-quarter of secondary students. And this is the best-case scenario because enrollment rates overcount students who do not actually attend the program regularly or at all.

In fact, only one in ten districts that offered unrestricted (open enrollment) secondary programs and two in ten districts that offered unrestricted elementary programs enrolled more than 50 percent of eligible students (see Figure 10). That said, 37 percent

FIGURE 9

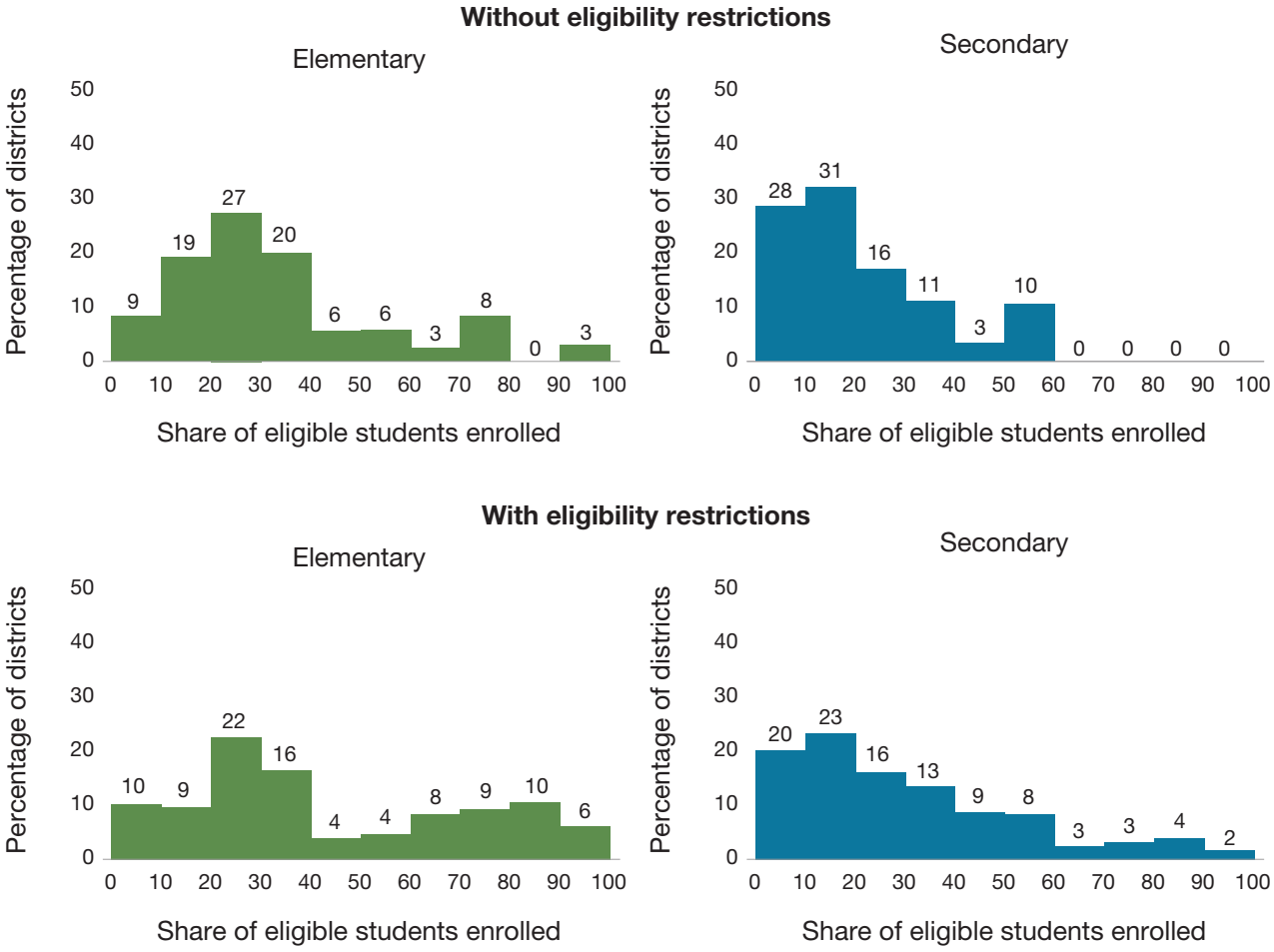
Average Percentage of Eligible Students Who Enrolled in Districts' Largest Summer Programs, by Whether Program Had an Eligibility Restriction and Grade Level



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "Approximately what percentage of your students who were eligible to attend the PK–5 2023 summer program enrolled? For example, if all 2nd and 3rd graders could potentially enroll, what percent of them did?" and "Approximately what percentage of your students who were eligible to attend the secondary grade level 2023 summer program enrolled? For example, if all 6th and 7th graders could potentially enroll, what percent of them did?" (n = 175). Only those districts that said their district offered summer programming in summer 2023 saw these questions. This figure excludes a small share of districts (less than 5 percent at each grade level) whose summer programs included nonacademic instruction only.

FIGURE 10

Variation in the Share of Eligible Students Enrolled in Districts' Largest Summer Programs, by Whether Program Had an Eligibility Restriction and Grade Level



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "Approximately what percentage of your students who were eligible to attend the PK–5 2023 summer program enrolled? For example, if all 2nd and 3rd graders could potentially enroll, what percent of them did?" and "Approximately what percentage of your students who were eligible to attend the secondary grade level 2023 summer program enrolled? For example, if all 6th and 7th graders could potentially enroll, what percent of them did?" (n = 175). Only those districts that said their district offered summer programming in summer 2023 saw these questions. This figure excludes a small share of districts (less than 5 percent at each grade level) whose summer programs included nonacademic instruction only.

of districts with restricted elementary programs and 20 percent of districts with restricted secondary programs enrolled half or more of the eligible students. It was more common for districts' largest programs—regardless of whether they were restricted—to enroll small shares of eligible students. For example, about three in ten districts with an unrestricted (open enrollment) secondary summer program enrolled 1 percent to 10 percent of their eligible students and another three in ten enrolled 11 percent to 20 percent of their eligible students.

Almost All Districts Offered Their Largest Summer Programs Free of Charge, and Many Provided Additional Services for Free Too

In summer 2023, 94 percent of districts said that they covered the operating cost of their largest elementary program so that the program would be free of charge to enrollees. Ninety-two percent said the same about their largest secondary program.

We asked districts what other services, if any, they provided free of charge to enrollees as part of their

largest summer programs. As shown in Figure 11, about six in ten districts or more also offered such services as transportation and meals for free too. Fewer, but a still sizeable minority of districts, offered mental health services to students—a need that has increased dramatically since the pandemic began (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022; Schwartz and Diliberti, 2021). As we discuss in more detail later in this report, about four in ten districts nationally said that they anticipated a decrease in funding for summer 2024. If these anticipated funding decreases do come to pass, these districts might need to downsize or eliminate some of these summer programming services.

Furthermore, as shown in Figure 11, districts' free summer school offerings depended somewhat on district type. Although there were some exceptions to the rule, urban districts, high-poverty districts, and districts serving mostly students of color were more likely to offer free transportation and free meals as part of their summer programming. For example, 95 percent of high-poverty districts offered free meals as part of their secondary summer programming, compared with only 35 percent of low-poverty districts.

The Typical District Operated Its Largest Summer Programs for Four Weeks

We asked districts for how many total days their summer program operated. The median district said its largest elementary and secondary summer programs operated for 20 days. If we assume districts' summer programs operated for five days per week,[6] this means the typical district operated their largest elementary and secondary program for four weeks.

Typical program length, however, masks substantial variation in program length, as shown in Figure 12. According to district reports, districts' largest summer programs varied in length from less than one week all the way up to ten weeks at both the elementary and secondary levels. At both grade levels, most districts operated programs that ran somewhere between two and five weeks. Notably, 19 percent of districts said that their largest elementary summer program ran for five or more weeks, and 23 percent of districts said similarly about their largest secondary summer program. (Five weeks is the minimum length

FIGURE 11

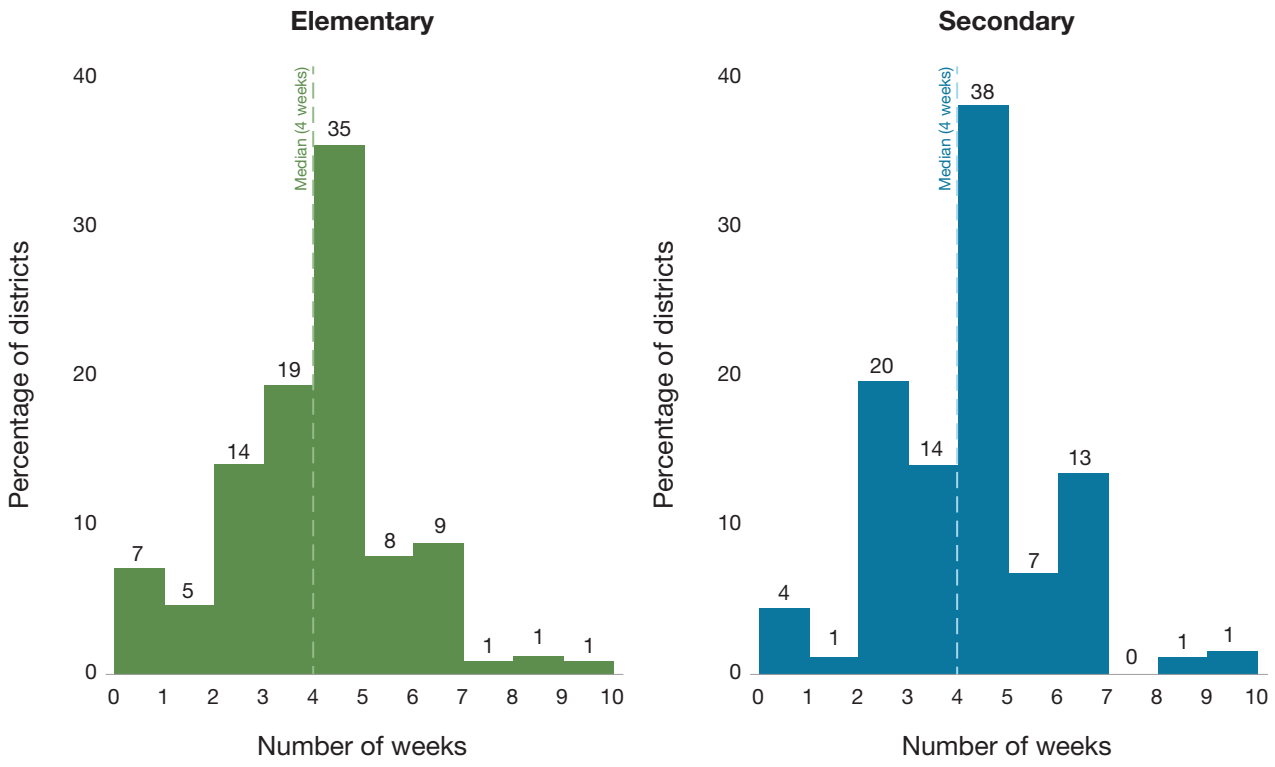
Percentage of Districts That Offered Various Services to Families for Free as Part of Their Largest Summer 2023 Program, by District Subgroup and Grade Level

			Locale			Poverty level		Student racial and ethnic composition		Size		
		Total	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Low poverty	High poverty	Majority White students	Majority students of color	Small	Medium	Large
Elementary (Pre-K–5)	Transportation to and from the summer program	69	**93**	66	66	63	77	**59**	**89**	**62**	79	**87**
	Breakfast and/or lunch	66	**99**	59	63	**46**	**97**	**51**	**98**	**56**	**79**	**98**
	Mental health services	38	**68**	42	32	32	48	**31**	**57**	**30**	53	53
Secondary (6–12)	Transportation to and from the summer program	62	**83**	51	63	**54**	**75**	**53**	**77**	58	66	71
	Breakfast and/or lunch	58	**91**	**41**	61	**35**	**95**	**44**	**86**	**51**	61	**91**
	Mental health services	37	**59**	44	**29**	33	42	31	49	31	44	50

NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "Did your district offer any of the following services for free to families who enrolled in the PK–5 summer 2023 program?" and "Did your district offer any of the following services for free to families who enrolled in the secondary grade level summer 2023 program?" (n = 180). Respondents were instructed to select all that apply. Only those districts that said their district offered summer programming in summer 2023 saw these questions. Shading corresponds to the percentage of districts that picked the response option, where darker colors mean a greater percentage of districts. Values shown in bold indicate that the subgroup percentage of districts reporting that they offered that service for free is statistically significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from the remainder of districts not in that subgroup who said the same.

FIGURE 12

Variation in the Number of Weeks That Districts' Largest Summer Programs Operated, by Grade Level



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "How many total program days did the PK–5 summer program operate in summer 2023?" and "How many total program days did the secondary grade level summer program operate in summer 2023?" (*n* = 174). Only those districts that said their district offered summer programming in summer 2023 saw these questions. We converted districts' responses about number of operation days into weeks by dividing by five (assuming the typical program operates five days per week). Dashed lines represent the national median.

recommended by the NSLP, although we note that the NSLP recommendations were based on voluntary elementary summer programs.)

How Districts Approached Academic Instruction

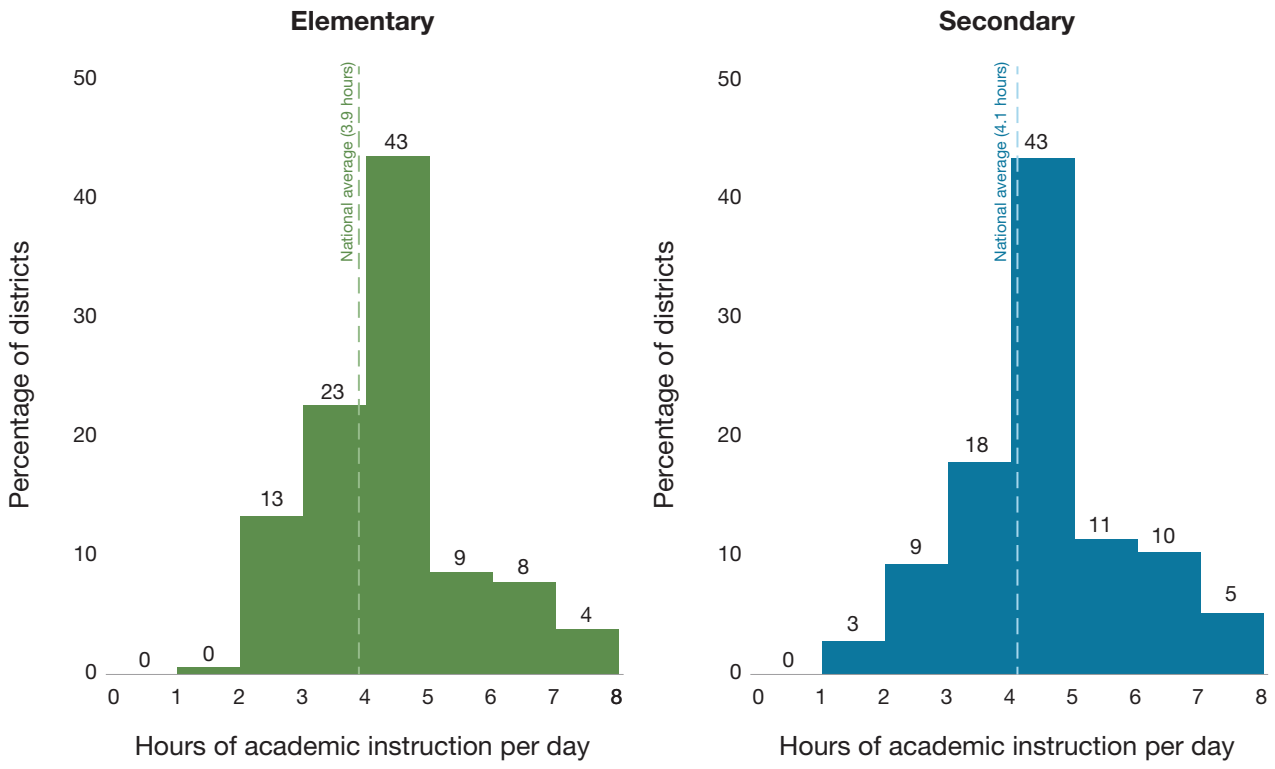
In this section, we examine how districts approached academic instruction in their largest summer 2023 programs. Specifically, we examine how much time districts' programs spent on academic instruction, who delivered this instruction, and who made decisions about lesson plans. To do so, we further restrict our sample to only those districts whose largest summer programs offered academic activities daily in summer 2023. Many districts' programs also offered such nonacademic activities as sports or arts (as shown in Figure 6). We did not ask the same detailed questions about the nonacademic programming. As a reminder, if districts offered more than one summer program at the elementary level and at the secondary level, we asked districts to respond to our survey questions based on the one that was primarily in-person and offered the largest number of slots.[7]

Fewer Than One in Five Districts Met the Minimum Recommended Hours of Academic Instruction in Their Largest Elementary Summer Programs

As shown in Figure 13, districts' total hours of academic instruction per day varied anywhere from one hour up to eight hours at both grade levels. On average, districts reported that their largest elemen-

FIGURE 13

Variation in the Number of Hours of Academic Instruction Per Day That Districts' Largest Summer Programs Offered, by Grade Level



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "How many total hours of academic instruction did the PK–5 summer 2023 program offer per day?" and "How many total hours of academic instruction did the secondary grade level summer 2023 program offer per day?" (*n* = 174). Only those districts that said their district offered summer programming in summer 2023 saw these questions. Dashed lines represent the national average.

tary summer program offered 3.9 hours of academic instruction per day and their largest secondary program offered 4.1 hours. Most districts operated summer programs that offered between three and five hours of academic instruction per day.

Notably, high-poverty districts and districts serving mostly students of color operated elementary and secondary summer programs that offered more academic instructional hours per day than their low-poverty and majority-White counterparts. For example, high-poverty districts said that their largest secondary programs offered 4.6 hours of academic instruction per day on average, compared with 3.7 hours of academic instruction in low-poverty districts (results not shown).

The NSLP study found that elementary students who had received at least 25 hours of math and 34 hours of language arts instruction in the voluntary summer program that they attended performed better on subsequent spring state exams (Augustine et al., 2016). This study also found that students can obtain this amount of instruction by attending programs that operate for at least five weeks with 90 or more minutes of math and 120 or more minutes of English language arts (ELA) per day. This program length is to allow a typical student who attends 75 percent of program days to obtain the 25 hours of math and 34 hours of ELA instruction that the NSLP study found was correlated with improved achievement on subsequent state exams. The NSLP simplified this finding into a recommendation that elementary summer programs offer three or more hours of academic instruction per day in a five- to six-week summer program (Schwartz et al., 2018).

Here, we examine whether districts' largest summer programs met these thresholds. We focus

on elementary programs because the NSLP examined voluntary elementary programs. We include in this brief analysis only those districts whose largest elementary summer program included at least some academic instructional activities per day, but districts could have offered nonacademic instructional activities daily as well.

Looking first at the minimum recommended number of hours of academic instruction per day (3 hours), we find that most districts met this threshold. As shown in Figure 13, about nine in ten districts said that their largest elementary summer program included three or more hours of academic instruction per day. When we look just at whether districts met the minimum recommended threshold for number of weeks, we find that many fewer districts had summer programs that operated for at least five weeks (see Figure 12).

We then examined whether districts' largest elementary summer programs met both these recommended thresholds. We found that only 18 percent of districts that operated elementary summer programs offered a program that operated for at least five weeks and offered at least three hours of academic instruction per day.[8] Looking at the subset of districts that restricted eligibility to their largest elementary program (most often to students performing below grade level), only 15 percent of districts met the recommended thresholds.

Almost All Districts Hired District Teachers for Academics in Their Largest Summer Programs; Few Hired Only Teachers with Grade and Subject Expertise

The NSLP study recommended that teachers who deliver academic instruction during summer programs should ideally have both relevant content knowledge and grade-level expertise (Schwartz et al., 2018). For example, it is ideal to hire a district 5th grade science teacher to teach 5th grade science during summer instead of having a 1st grade teacher cover that content. This is because teachers who currently teach (or have recently taught) the same content and grades in their regular teaching schedule are likely to be more up-to-date on academic standards, know what content is and is not covered during the school year, and know how to deliver instruction that is appropriate to the age level.

To learn whether districts are approaching this ideal in their largest summer programs, we asked "Who delivered the academic instruction in your [PK–5/secondary grade] summer program?" We listed various types of staff (e.g., district teachers with and without grade and subject knowledge, paraprofessionals, community partner staff, contractors, volunteers) and asked them to select all that applied.

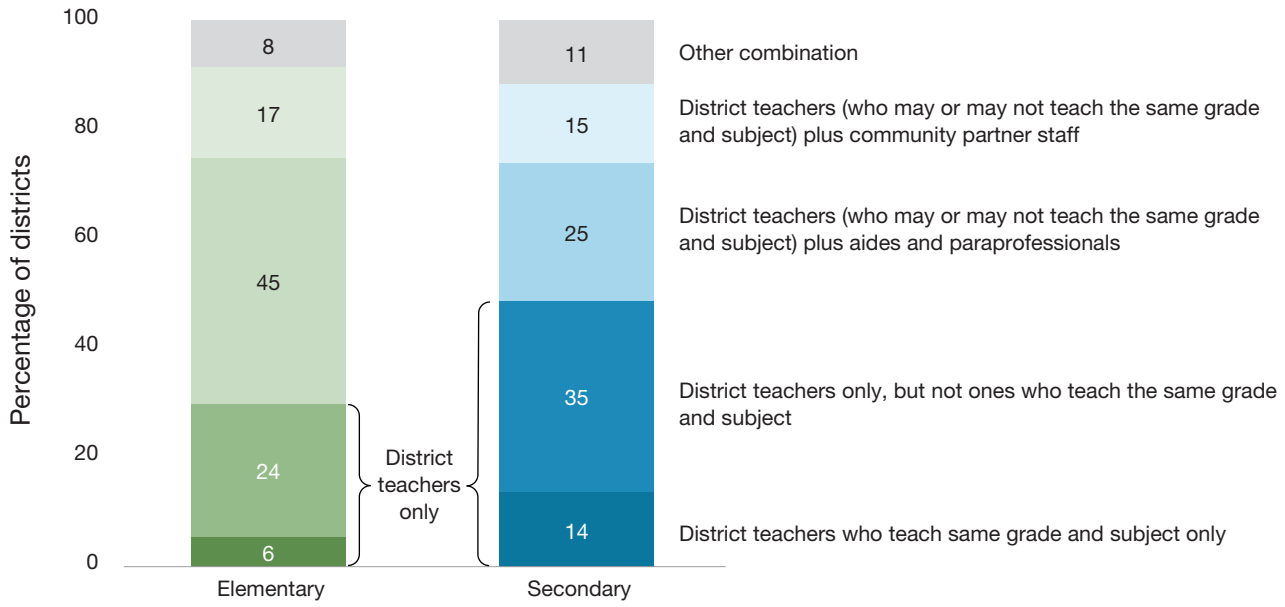
Virtually all the districts in our sample (about 98 percent) relied on district-employed teachers to some extent to provide academic instruction in their largest summer programs (results not shown). But most districts selected multiple types of staff, meaning they selected other staff in addition to district-employed teachers. When districts selected, say, paraprofessionals and district teachers, we are not certain whether those paraprofessionals were themselves leading academic instruction solo, whether they were helping lead classroom teachers, or some combination. But to investigate the extent to which districts relied on teachers with subject and grade expertise, we separated districts' answer sets into mutually exclusive categories as shown in Figure 14.

Few districts indicated their largest summer program employed solely teachers with subject and grade expertise to deliver academic instruction. Six percent of districts said academic instruction in their largest elementary summer program was delivered solely by teachers who taught the same grade level and subject during the school year as they taught in the summer, and 14 percent said the same about their secondary program. However, a notable share of districts had solely district-employed teachers delivering academic instruction, just not necessarily those with subject and grade expertise. Thirty percent of districts said that their largest elementary summer programs and 49 percent of districts said that their largest secondary programs employed *only* district teachers (and not also paraprofessionals, etc.) to deliver academic instruction.

What additional staff districts relied on to provide academic instruction depended somewhat on the grade level of the summer program. Forty-five percent of districts relied on teacher aides and paraprofes-

FIGURE 14

Percentage of Districts That Indicated Various Types of Staff Delivered Academic Instruction in Their Largest Summer Programs in Summer 2023, by Grade Level



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "Who delivered the academic instruction in your PK–5 summer program?" and "Who delivered the academic instruction in your secondary grade level summer program?" (n = 173). Only those districts whose largest summer program included academic instruction on a daily basis saw these questions.

sionals in addition to district teachers (regardless of whether these teachers had grade and subject experience) to provide academic instruction in their largest elementary programs. In comparison, 25 percent of districts said they relied on these staff for their largest secondary programs. About one in six districts relied on community partner staff—presumably from partnerships with CBOs—in addition to district teachers to provide academic instruction.

Furthermore, districts whose largest secondary summer programs were focused solely on academics were more likely to rely on district-employed teachers (results not shown). That is, 63 percent of districts said that only district-employed teachers delivered academic instruction in their secondary programs that included only an academic focus. In comparison, only 32 percent of districts whose secondary programs included both academic and nonacademic instruction said this instruction was delivered solely by district-employed teachers. These secondary academic-only programs were also somewhat more likely to hire only district-employed teachers that had subject and grade expertise. But the difference was small: 21 percent of districts with academic-only secondary summer programs relied solely on teachers with subject and grade expertise to deliver academic instruction, compared with 6 percent of districts that operated programs with both academic and nonacademic instruction.

At the elementary level, 38 percent of districts whose programs focused only on academics said that they relied solely on district-employed teachers to deliver academic instruction. This includes 10 percent of districts that indicated that this academic instruction was delivered only by teachers who have subject and grade expertise. However, in contrast with their secondary programs, districts' likelihood of relying solely on district-employed teachers did not depend on the program focus: Districts whose largest elementary summer program focused only on academics were just as likely statistically to employ district teachers to deliver this instruction as districts whose largest program included both an academic and nonacademic focus.

Instructors Picked Their Own Academic Lesson Plans in About Half of Districts' Largest Summer Programs

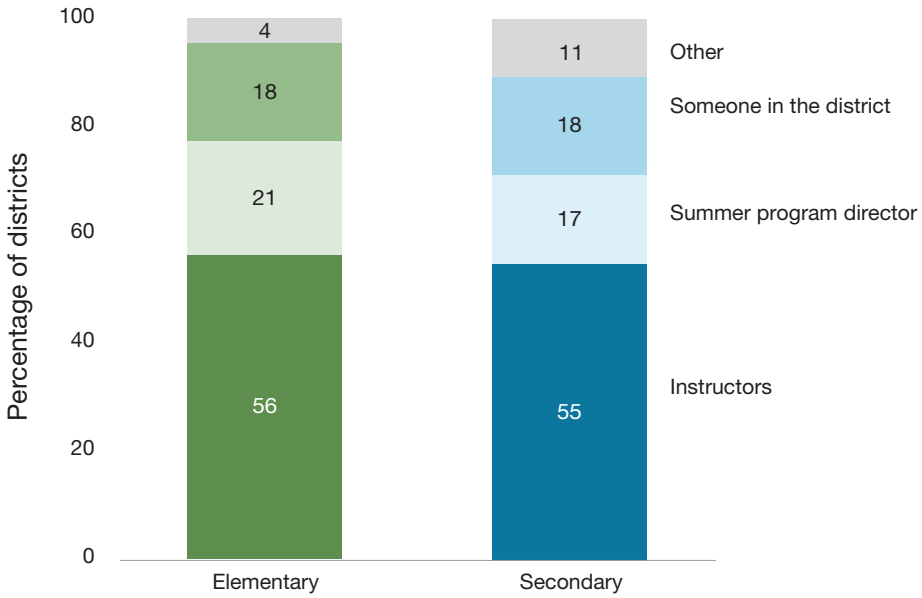
The NSLP study recommended that districts provide academic lesson plans for summer teachers rather than teachers developing or selecting their own (Schwartz et al., 2018). Having a common district-wide set of lessons for each grade and subject—whether purchased from a commercial vendor or developed in-house—is one way to prevent fragmentation in students' academic learning, increase the quality of lessons, and reduce burden on teachers to develop their own lessons (Schwartz et al., 2018).

We therefore asked districts who selected the lessons for the academic instruction delivered during their largest summer programs. In slightly fewer than half of elementary and secondary summer programs did a summer program director or another district staff person select the lessons (see Figure 15). Instead, districts said it was slightly more common for instructors themselves to select or develop their own lessons.

We found more centralized decisionmaking in urban districts and districts serving mostly students of color (results not shown). This is similar to results from a separate survey about math curricula in fall 2022, in which urban districts were much more likely than their suburban and rural counterparts to indicate that district administrators made decisions about curricula (Diliberti et al., 2023). We hypothesize that the centralization of decisionmaking in urban districts is a byproduct of central district office capacity. Urban districts have much larger enrollments and more schools and, therefore, a larger central office with greater ability to specialize. Small districts have very few central office staff, by comparison, which we hypothesize limits their ability to direct summer programming centrally.

FIGURE 15

Percentage of Districts That Indicated That Lesson Plans Were Chosen by Various Staff in Summer 2023 for Their Largest Summer Programs, by Grade Level



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "Who selected the lessons for academic instruction in the PK–5 summer 2023 program?" and "Who selected the lessons for academic instruction in the secondary grade level summer 2023 program?" (n = 175). Only those districts that said that their district offered summer programming in summer 2023 and that their main summer program included academic instruction on a daily basis saw these questions. Bars may not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

Looking Ahead to Summer 2024

Half of Districts Expected Funding for Summer 2024 Programs to Remain the Same, and Four in Ten Expected a Decrease

Districts' COVID-19 relief funds—which districts' plans indicate are funding summer programming by and large (DiMarco and Jordan, 2022)—are set to expire in September 2024. Therefore, the impending expiration of stimulus funds raises the specter of scaling summer programming (and other academic interventions implemented for COVID-19 recovery) in the years to come. For example, virtually all districts offered summer programming free of charge to families in summer 2023, and many provided other services free of charge too (see Figure 11). This ability to offer these services free of charge might change considerably in the coming years.

To gauge districts' expectations, we asked about their anticipated funding levels for summer 2024 programs relative to summer 2023. We found that most districts did not anticipate funding decreases for summer 2024. As shown in Figure 16, slightly more than half of districts (53 percent) expected that funding for summer 2024 will be about the same as for summer 2023. However, a sizeable minority of districts (39 percent) did expect their program funds to decrease for summer 2024. Another 4 percent expected their funding to increase, and the final 4 percent did not know.

Other recent surveys of district leaders have revealed even greater concern about funding for summer programs in the coming years than ours did. A recent survey conducted by the School Superintendents Association found that 57 percent of districts plan to decrease or end summer programs by September 2024 to coincide with the end of federal stimulus funds (Arundel, 2022). We hypothesize that perhaps most of our districts did not anticipate funding decreases for summer 2024 because summer 2024 is still within the time frame that districts have access to federal stimulus funds. Districts might instead experience funding drops for summer 2025—the first summer that will occur after federal stimulus funds expire.

Districts' COVID-19 relief funds—which districts' plans indicate are funding summer programming by and large—are set to expire in September 2024.

We did not observe statistically significant differences in the percentage of districts that anticipate funding decreases by district subgroup. However, we did observe a pattern of higher shares of urban districts and high-poverty districts—that is, the districts that received the greatest shares of COVID-19 federal aid—indicating anticipated funding decreases for summer 2024. Furthermore, these districts are the same ones whose students' learning took the largest setbacks during the pandemic. Put another way, the very districts that are most likely to expect funding decreases in summer 2024 are those whose students likely have the greatest need for academically infused summer programming.

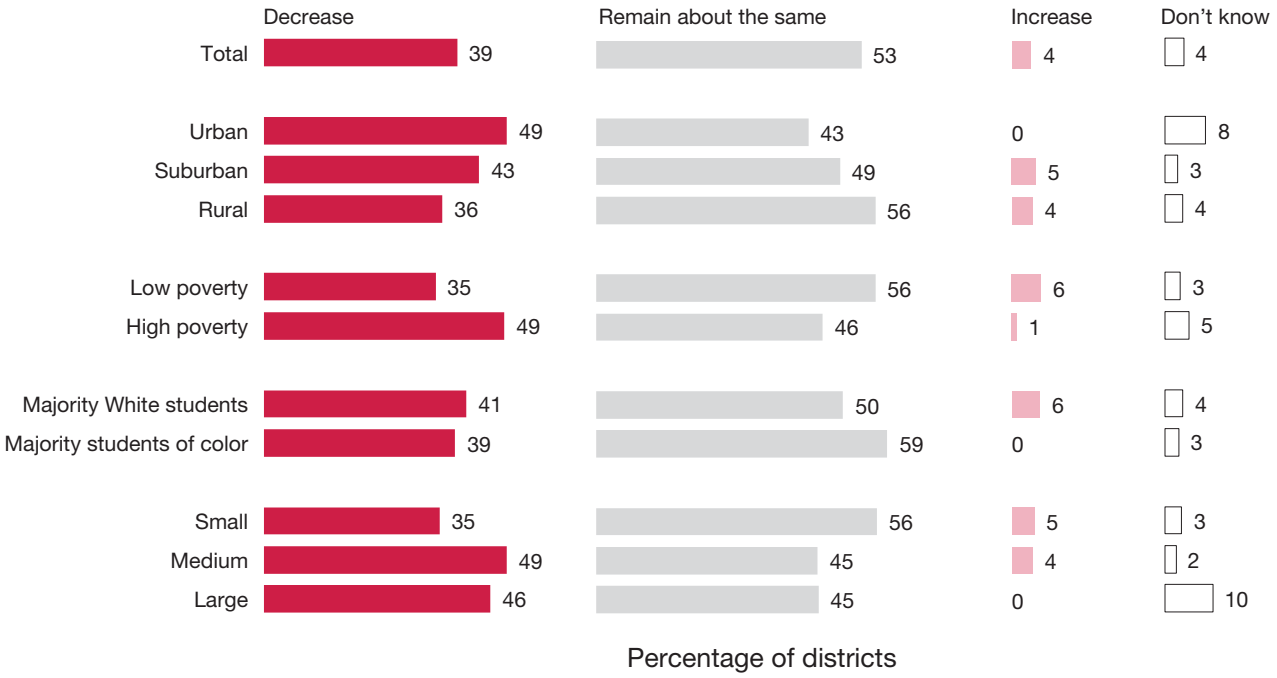
Implications

Results from our nationally representative survey of public school districts conducted in fall 2023 confirm that many districts have invested in summer programs, and many targeted those programs to the students with the greatest academic needs. Eighty-one percent of districts operated summer programs in summer 2023, and most of these districts offered summer programs to both elementary (Pre-K–5) and secondary (6–12) students.

Looking in more depth at districts' largest summer programs, we found that they were robust in the sense that they typically lasted four weeks; offered about four hours of academics per day; hired district

FIGURE 16

Percentage of Districts That Anticipated Changes in Funding Levels for Summer 2024 Relative to Summer 2023



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "What kind of change, if any, do you anticipate in your district's funding level for summer programs for summer 2024 compared with summer 2023?" (*n* = 185). Only those districts that said that their district offered summer programming in summer 2023 saw this question. Bars might not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

teachers to deliver at least some, if not all, of academic instruction; and were offered free of charge to families.

Urban districts' summer offerings tended to be the most extensive. They universally offered summer programming in 2023. They tended to offer more summer programs and to partner with CBOs to do so. They were more likely to offer such additional services as transportation and meals for free in addition to the summer program itself. Their largest summer programs tended to include a focus on both academic and nonacademic instruction, although more so at the elementary level. Urban districts were also more likely to select the lesson plans that summer teachers should use, and they started planning for summer programs earlier during the school year. Because urban districts serve the greatest number of students in need of academic recovery from COVID-19, the robustness of urban districts' summer programming in 2023 is cause for celebration.

There are still some significant areas for improvement if summer programming is likely to make a substantial contribution to pandemic recovery.

1. To reach a majority of academically struggling students, districts' summer programs will need to significantly increase enrollment. This is no simple task. Even the largest summer programs that were expressly for students performing below grade level or students who needed to recover academic credits still enrolled less than half of eligible students. Plus, prior research shows that summer enrollment counts substantially exceed the number of students who attend. One way districts can potentially increase enrollment for academically struggling students in particular is to communicate to parents that their child needs additional academic support (Kane and Reardon, 2023). Doing so through personalized recruitment materials and via teachers as trusted messengers can encour-

age the students most in need of assistance to enroll (Schwartz et al., 2018). To support strong attendance, districts should set a clear summer attendance policy and a firm enrollment deadline and provide attendance incentives if possible (Schwartz et al., 2018).

2. At least at the elementary level, summer programs realistically need to be longer than four weeks to meet or exceed the number of academic instructional hours that prior research shows benefits elementary-grade students academically. That research recommends five- or six-week, full-day summer programs that offer at least three hours of academics per day (in addition to enrichment activities). We are not aware of research that pinpoints a threshold of academic hours for secondary-level summer programs,[9] but we suspect that secondary programs, too, need to exceed four weeks to reap academic benefits for students.
3. A third area for improvement is for districts to start planning summer programs earlier during the year. That extra time can allow districts to lay the groundwork for higher-quality summer programming. For example, the NSLP study recommends providing summer teachers with academic lesson plans rather than asking them to source their own, and to train teachers on modifications and engaging lessons. Furthermore, the NSLP study also recommends that districts hire teachers with grade-level and subject-area expertise. This kind of intentional matching of teachers to summer classrooms takes time.

Looking ahead to summer 2024, it seems like summer programming is poised to shrink rather than grow. A sizeable minority of districts (39 percent) foresee funding decreases for summer 2024. Lower funding levels presumably mean that districts will have to serve fewer students, charge for their services, and/or cut back the length or degree of programming offered. If that comes to pass, it means fewer recovery services particularly for struggling students well before they have recovered to pre-pandemic academic performance levels.

Now that so many districts have ramped up their summer programming, the United States could choose a different path by building on the momentum already achieved—instead of scaling back—by improving the offerings and the enrollment rate among those students who need these programs the most.

How This Analysis Was Conducted and Limitations

RAND researchers fielded the eighth survey of the ASDP from October 12, 2023, through December 14, 2023. We designed the 12-minute survey to allow multiple different respondents from the same district central office to complete portions of the survey—for example, a superintendent, human resources director, or research director to answer questions about district staffing levels; an academic director to complete questions about math instruction; and a summer learning coordinator to answer questions about summer programs. We do not know which person(s) in each district completed the survey on behalf of their district.

Our methodology for analyzing survey data remains relatively consistent across survey waves; therefore, the description of our methods here is text that we updated from a previous publication (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2023). Starting in fall 2020 and in several waves since, we randomly sampled districts to invite them to enroll in the ASDP. All enrolled districts were invited to complete this survey. Of the 1,167 public school districts that enrolled in the panel between fall 2020 and fall 2023, 231 districts completed surveys (19.8 percent survey completion rate). The districts that took the survey are distributed across 41 states.

We developed survey weights that, when applied, make the districts in our sample look similar to the national population of K–12 public school districts, at least on such observable characteristics as district locale, enrollment size, poverty level, and student racial and ethnic composition.[a] Application of these survey weights allows us to interpret our results as nationally representative. For more information about the sampling and weighting procedures for the fall 2023 ASDP survey and to view demographic characteristics for our sample relative to the national population of K–12 public school districts, see Grant et al., 2024.

Importantly, survey responses were weighted to be representative of the national population of public school *districts*, not the national population of public school *students*. Students are not evenly distributed across school districts. More specifically, among the population of 13,000 school districts in the United States, only 7 percent are in urban areas, whereas 25 percent are in suburban areas and 69 percent are in rural areas (Grant et al., 2024). Yet roughly 30 percent of the country's 50 million public school students are enrolled in urban districts (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-a). And the country's 120 largest school districts (which represent less than 1 percent of all public school districts)—many of which are urban—alone account for roughly 20 percent of all student enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-b). Thus, although rural districts represent a majority of school districts, they do not represent a majority of public school students.

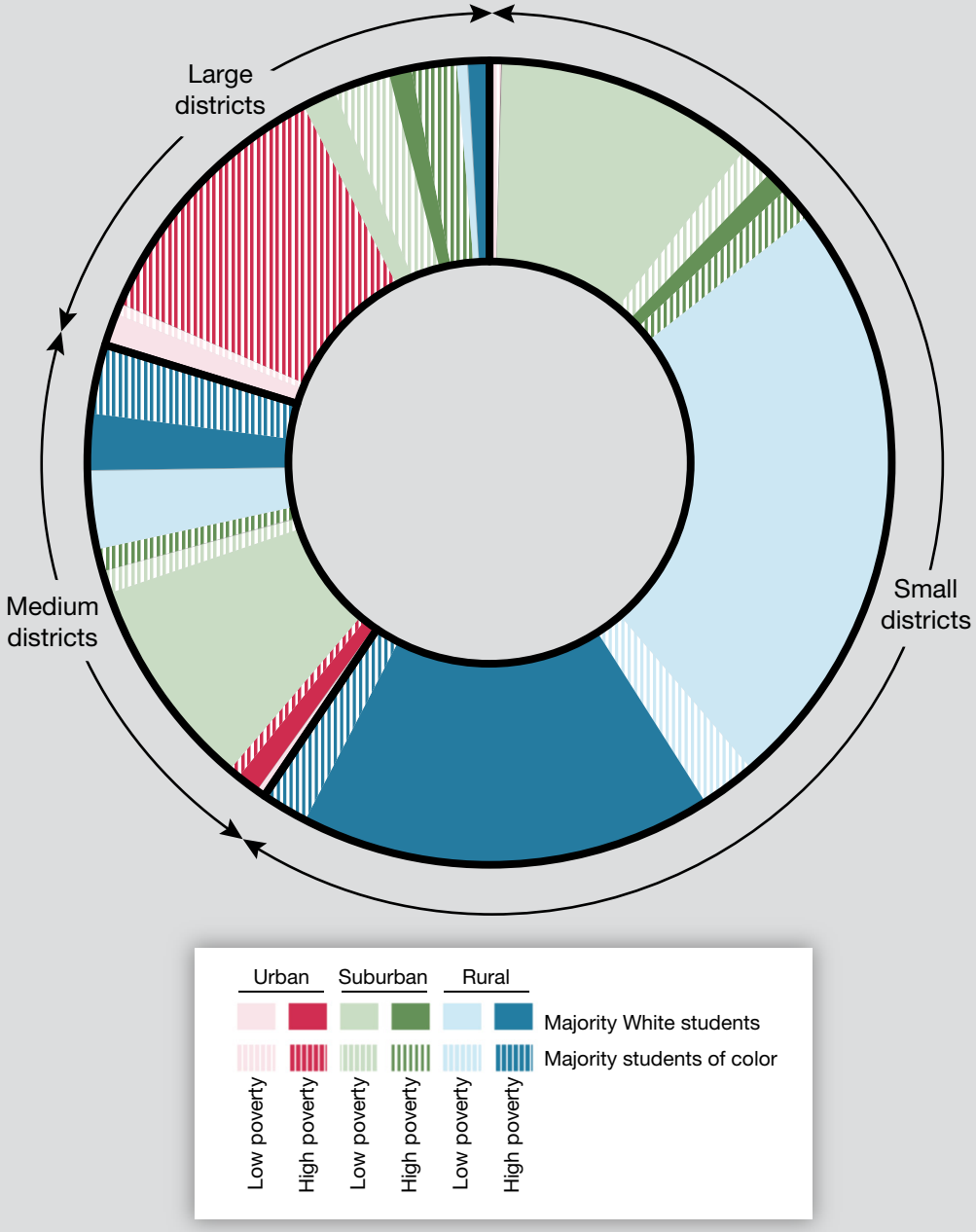
Because districts' experiences vary, we examined differences in districts' responses by district context. We obtained data on district demographics by linking survey data files to the 2020–2021 Common Core of Data (CCD) issued by the National Center for Education Statistics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). We analyzed the following four categories, which yielded ten subgroups:

- locale (*urban*, *suburban*, and *rural*)[b]
- student racial and ethnic composition (we categorize districts in which more than one-half of students are Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, or of two or more races as having *majority students of color*, with the remaining districts categorized as having *majority White students*)
- poverty level (districts in which one-half or more of students qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch are categorized as *high poverty*, whereas the remainder are categorized as *low poverty*)
- enrollment size (we categorize districts that enroll fewer than 3,000 students as *small* and districts with more than 10,000 as *large*; we categorize the remaining districts as *medium*).

It is important to keep in mind that each district that took our survey belongs to four of the ten subgroups—for example, a single school district that is large, suburban, and low poverty and enrolls mostly White students. Thus, patterns observed across district contexts might be driven by the same set of districts that share multiple characteristics. Figure 17 shows the overlapping nature of these demographic characteristics among the districts in our sample. For example, most districts in the sample—and districts nationally—are small and many of these districts are also rural. These small, rural districts tend to serve predominately White students. At the other end, fewer dis-

FIGURE 17

Overlap Between District Size, District Locale, District Poverty Status, and District's Student Racial and Ethnic Composition Among the Districts in Our Sample



NOTE: For the school districts in our sample (n = 226), this figure shows the distribution of districts across the four overlapping demographic categories: size (small, medium, and large), locale (urban, suburban, or rural), poverty status (high or low poverty), and student racial and ethnic composition (majority White or majority students of color). Five districts that responded to the survey are not included because of missing demographic information.

tricts in our sample are large districts. These districts tend to be located in urban areas. Many of these large, urban districts serve predominately students of color. Because of our small sample size, we are unable to disentangle these relationships.

In this report, we describe only those differences among district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5 percent level, unless otherwise noted. We conducted significance testing to assess whether subgroups were statistically different at the $p < 0.05$ level. Specifically, we tested whether the percentage of districts in one subgroup reporting a response was statistically different from the remaining districts that took the survey (e.g., urban districts versus other districts that are not urban). Because of the exploratory nature of this study, we did not apply multiple hypothesis test corrections.

Finally, survey responses reflect district leaders' perceptions, which might not align with their actual experiences. Survey items were not pilot tested before administration, limiting our ability to understand how respondents interpreted each item. Furthermore, respondents might not have consistently interpreted terms on the survey which could affect how they completed survey items.

[a] Two types of districts in our sample tend to have larger weights than other types of districts: (1) districts that are urban, high-poverty, serve mostly students of color, and have a medium enrollment size and (2) districts that are rural, low-poverty, serve mostly students of color, and have a small enrollment size.

[b] Our locale definition aligns with the four-category locale definition used by the National Center for Education Statistics, with the exception that we collapsed the districts located in towns into the rural category for sample size reasons.

Notes

[1] For the districts that reported summer programs that served only elementary or secondary grades, we randomly selected some records to spot-check against the grade levels served by these districts as reported by the Common Core of Data. Although we caution readers not to overinterpret this preliminary analysis, our findings suggest that these patterns might be driven in part, but not entirely, by the fact that not all districts serve all grades K–12. Some districts in our data serve only elementary grades and reported summer programs that only serve elementary grades, which would be full coverage for this district. In other cases, we found districts that did serve grades K–12 but only reported offering summer programs to elementary grades.

[2] We assume that in their responses, districts were thinking about students' entering grades in the 2023–2024 school year (e.g., 6th graders in summer 2023 are those students who entered grade 6 in 2023–2024). However, we acknowledge that districts might have responded thinking about sending grades instead of receiving grades.

[3] This is because, after we determined the total number of summer programs offered, we restricted subsequent survey questions to focus on districts' largest summer program at each grade level.

[4] Although we asked how many students enrolled, it is possible that some districts included only attendees in their answer. Furthermore, we asked what share of eligible students enrolled in their largest and primarily in-person summer program. A district that enrolled 100 percent of 20 eligible students might still have served fewer students in total than the district who enrolled 5 percent of 500 eligible students. Districts might also have served students in other summer programs that were not their largest summer program.

[5] As documented by our colleagues (Augustine and Thompson, 2017), students are best served when they attend summer school for at least 20 days. Schwartz et al. (2018) recommend different approaches to recruit students into programs, such as using timely and personalized recruitment materials and enacting firm enrollment deadlines. They also recommend defining a clear attendance policy to help with tracking and monitoring and, possibly, offering incentives to encourage students to attend.

[6] In a nationally representative survey of school principals that asked about summer school programs in summer 2023, 55 percent of principals said that these programs at their schools operated four days per week and 36 percent of principals said they operated five days per week (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Thus, the vast majority of schools nationally (91 percent) have summer programs that operate four or five days per week. We chose the upper bound of this range (five days) because it produces the most conservative estimates.

[7] If districts operated only virtual summer programs, we asked them to respond about their largest virtual summer program.

[8] We acknowledge that this is an imperfect estimate because districts could have achieved the same total number of hours of academic instruction by offering more instructional hours per day and operating for fewer days.

[9] There is no research testing the minimum required amount of summer programming necessary to produce academic growth for different grade levels and for different types of programs. It is quite possible, and even likely, that different types of programs of different lengths of time could differentially benefit students depending on their age and preferences. An evidence review finds only a small number of studies of middle or high school grade summer programs with a variety of focuses (e.g., career or employment) that were effective at improving one or more measured outcomes (McCombs et al., 2019).

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About This Report

In this report, the authors use a survey administered to a nationally representative sample of K–12 public school districts to investigate the prevalence and quality of districts' programming in summer 2023. This series is intended to provide brief analyses of educator survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, see *Technical Documentation for the Eighth American School District Panel Survey* (Grant et al., 2024) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting.

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