

Summer 2021: How California educators met the moment with re-engagement, reconnection, and reimagined learning



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There has been an unprecedented level of attention and infusion of public funding this year to increase access and expand the role of summer programs, to combat the negative effects of distance learning, disengagement, and trauma experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Across California our schools—together with community partners—reconnected students with learning, caring adults, and play, creating a bright spot for an education system plagued with negative headlines.

This report highlights key trends and promising practices across California’s summer learning programs, and offers recommendations for summer 2022 and beyond to: 1) support local school district and community priorities and planning, and 2) inform sustainable statewide investments and policies. [These findings](#) are based on interviews with a diverse cross-section of school and district leaders, an analysis of statewide data, and media tracking.

Summer 2021 represented a turning point in how education and policy leaders think about summer and the critical role it plays in student learning and well-being.

The difference alignment makes: funding, policy, and practice came together.

According to a national survey of school administrators, summer programs were the top investment of the American Rescue Plan funding, with three-quarters of respondents saying they were spending funds on summer learning and other enrichment activities.¹

Despite COVID protocols and staffing shortages, schools stretched to serve as many students as they could. Interviewed districts used summer as an opportunity to re-engage students’ learning and connections, and to prepare both students and adults to return to in-person learning in the fall. According to a June statewide survey:²

- **88%** of reporting districts provided summer programs.
- **Over 70%** of reporting districts offered some in-person options and **nearly 40%** operated fully in person.
- **Over 70%** of reporting districts provided wellness, enrichment, and/or mental health supports.

Both state and federal COVID-19 relief packages specifically allocated funding to be used in the summer including, but not limited to, the American Rescue Plan Act and [Expanded Learning Opportunity Grants](#) (AB 86). Almost all interviewed districts utilized COVID relief funding, including the AB 86 funds, to provide summer programs. In a first for several districts, they reported planning ahead for multiple years of summer programs.

Unlike many education issues over the last year, there was agreement across parents, policymakers, and school leaders that summer 2021 should prioritize enrichment and wellness. Summer programs were not framed as “summer school.” Instead, state policy leaders—including the Governor—framed 2021 as “the summer of joy.”³ This research illustrates that when schools are given targeted, multi-year resources and the flexibility to pursue broader learning goals—as opposed to just academics—they create meaningful summer programs that engage students and lead to year-long success.

SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAMS

Summer learning programs combine academics with whole-child development to create learning opportunities that look and feel more like summer camp than traditional summer school.

California schools have more funding—over \$9 billion—for summer learning than ever (though most is one-time funding).

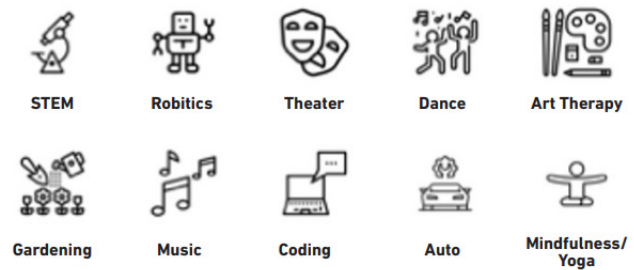
Findings and promising practices

- 1. Summer programs during COVID-19 elevated what research on high-quality summer programming shows: schools need to prioritize student engagement, social-emotional learning, and mental health.**⁴ The most common attribute of 2021 summer programs—across very diverse districts and communities—was the focus on providing students an environment that was both safe (emotionally, socially, and physically) and enriching, where they could reconnect with staff, peers, and learning.

Best practices:

- Included choice for students and teachers
 - teachers taught lessons based on their own interests and talents, and students selected courses from a menu of enrichment programs.
- Offered a wide range of engaging and unique summer enrichment activities.
- Integrated mental health supports by partnering with health providers, hiring more on-site counselors, increasing training, and meeting staff wellness needs.
- Focused on physical activity, outdoor learning, and play.
- Provided experiential learning through both virtual and offsite field trips.
- Fostered a summer camp culture through rallies and games.

Figure 1: Districts offered engaging and unique summer enrichment activities.



Source: District interviews conducted by Public Profit and Partnership for Children and Youth, 2021

- 2. Schools prioritized students who needed programs most.** While two-thirds of the districts that responded to the statewide survey reported that summer offerings were open to all students, the majority of districts interviewed for this report targeted students who needed programming most, particularly in-person experiences, and ensured that those students had access to the summer program.⁵

Best practices:

- Recruited students as a team: teachers, counselors, principals, and other support staff who had relationships with students worked together.
- Opened enrollment to prioritized families first.
- Invested in labor-intensive individual outreach and conducted outreach in students' home language.
- Waived fees to remove participation barriers for families.
- Provided full-day programs to support the families who most need child care during the summer and to increase staff hours, benefiting recruitment and retention.

STUDENT GROUPS PRIORITIZED FOR SUMMER PROGRAMS

- Unhoused students and students in the child welfare system.
- Chronically absent students, those who hadn't been heard from throughout the school year, and students who were struggling to show up or engage online or in-person.
- Students who are English Language Learners.
- Students from low-income households.

*According to a 2021 national survey of parents, 44% of low-income parents who did not have a child in a summer program reported that cost was a major reason for this decision, with more than one in five reporting that transportation and lack of awareness were notable barriers as well.*⁶

3. Schools utilized smaller class sizes, project-based learning, and intentional curriculum to build students' academic skills. All of the districts interviewed included an academic component. A benefit to the required COVID ratios was that all class sizes were 15 (or fewer) students to one or two staff, resulting in more individualized academic attention.

Best practices:

- Individualized learning and targeted interventions through small groups or one-on-one attention.
- Integrated enrichment with academic lessons like literacy and science to ensure academic lessons were reinforced through hands-on activities. A common model was to offer academics in the morning and enrichment in the afternoon.
- Utilized a specific curriculum to build academic skills, often supported by an external partner.
- Linked lessons to school-year approaches, which can improve coordination between school-day and community-based staff in the fall.

According to the National Summer Learning Project, between 81 and 97% of surveyed teachers reported that they enjoyed their summer experience due to small group size, access to new curricula materials, and half-day schedules.⁷

4. Partnerships expanded districts' capacity. Every district interviewed relied on at least one partner and some had over a dozen. Over 75% of the districts partnered with a community-based organization to provide specialized enrichment and/or increased staffing so they could serve more kids for more time.⁸ Urban districts had more access to community partners than rural districts.

Best practices:

- Invested in a coordination lead because managing partnerships proved to be a full-time job for some districts.
- Coordinated across internal departments, including the English Language Learner division, special education, foster and homeless youth coordinators, and food services.
- Engaged with and were supported by county offices of education. Key roles and responsibilities included: service provider, convener and resource broker, and professional development provider.

Summer partnerships cut across a range of stakeholders and areas—city and county agencies and service providers, community-based groups, curriculum vendors, enrichment specialists (including STEM), professional development and coaching, health and wellness, nutrition, and more.

5. Districts provided time and space for professional development that benefit learning year-round.

Several districts said that the extra time and more flexible schedule provided a unique opportunity to build and broaden educator skill sets (teachers, paraprofessionals, and staff from community-based organizations).

Best practices:

- Tested new curricula intended to be used in the fall, in some cases accompanied by coaching and training.
- Gave staff new and different leadership roles and exposed them to learning environments outside of the traditional classroom structure.
- Provided behavior and classroom management training.

ACCORDING TO INTERVIEWS, DISTRICTS SPENT THE INCREASED FUNDING FOR SUMMER ON THE FOLLOWING:

- **STAFFING:** Districts increased the number of educators and support staff, offered pay increases and stipends. A few districts added staff to provide professional development and oversight, community partners coordination, and an interpreter/cultural liaison.
- **SITES:** Districts increased the number of summer sites and/or youth served.
- **COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND VENDORS:** Districts engaged partners to provide enrichment and other services (such as professional development and mental health services).
- **SUPPLIES:** Districts purchased new materials and supplies, including curricula.
- **SUBSIDIZED COST:** Districts subsidized the cost of attendance for youth and families, making programming either free or substantially reduced in price.
- **TECHNOLOGY:** Districts invested in tech support and purchased new devices and programs.
- **TRANSPORTATION:** Districts provided transportation to make programs accessible for families.

6. Despite additional funds, districts struggled to staff programs. Districts employed a range of creative solutions and incentives to try to mitigate the challenges posed by staffing shortages, but some districts were not able to serve as many youth as they had hoped.

Best practices:

- Increased pay. Districts provided stipends or increased base pay using COVID relief funding.
- Worked with unions to modify job descriptions and increase the number of full-time roles.
- Hired high school youth to staff summer programs for younger students. This strategy is a win-win to increase staff numbers and increase leadership and work experience for youth.
- Gave staff the flexibility to choose what and how they taught.

RANGE OF STAFFING MODELS OBSERVED

- Staffing was blended between district employees and community-based organization staff. This staffing model helped for the smaller ratios and targeted interventions.
- A single community-based organization was heavily involved in planning and staffing.
- The district staffed at least one program site, while community-based organizations staffed others.
- District employees led all summer programming.

Looking forward to summer 2022 and beyond

Due to the ongoing increased funding, more time to plan and secure staff, and increased access to vaccines, summer 2022 should offer comprehensive and targeted learning opportunities to even more students.

ACTIONS FOR DISTRICT AND ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERS

- Begin planning during winter 2021-22 to align decision-making deadlines with school budgeting calendars and requirements, reflect on lessons learned and student data from last summer to increase impact, and get buy-in from families and internal and external partners early in the process.
- Prioritize investing in human capital and partnerships by allocating resources to support full-time positions and competitive wages, recruiting staff early, building robust professional development, and identifying a partnership liaison.
- Take advantage of the increased and unrestricted funding and public/political will for new schooling approaches to design programs that promote year-round learning, leverage technology advancements, and think outside the box.

ACTIONS FOR STATE LEADERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

- Maintain dedicated and flexible multi-year funding and policy for summer learning that prioritizes the needs of the whole child.
- State investment alone doesn't solve educational inequities—increase and improve statewide guidance on data collection, identification of models/best practices, and technical assistance.
- Adapt and fill gaps in summer programming and access: direct resources and policy to equally meet the needs of rural communities, early learners, high school students, and community partners.

Read the full report, [Summer 2021: How California educators met the moment with re-engagement, reconnection, and reimagined learning](#).

Endnotes

1. School district spending of American Rescue Plan funding: A snapshot, School Superintendents Association, 9/2021 (national survey).
2. [Biweekly Instructional Status Survey](#) data, provided by the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, June 2021.
3. [California Releases New Summer Programming and School Reopening Data, Launches Parental Engagement Campaign](#), Office of Governor Newsom press release, 6/7/2021.
4. [Summer Learning Program Quality Intervention](#), Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, 5/21/21, and [Summer Learning Toolkit](#), Wallace Foundation, 2021.
5. [Biweekly Instructional Status Survey](#), CA Safe Schools for All, 6/2021. n=906. Note: missing responses were removed from analysis.
6. [Study Finds Cost a Key Barrier to Summer Programs for Youth](#), Wallace Foundation Blog, 6/2021.
7. [Getting to Work on Summer Learning](#), Rand Corporation, 2018.
8. See Methodology & Limitations section of this full report, [Summer 2021: How California educators met the moment with re-engagement, reconnection, and reimagined learning](#). The identified districts were provided by expanded learning TA providers, which could impact the predisposition of the data.

About Us

The [Partnership for Children and Youth](#) (PCY) is a statewide intermediary that has been working for over 20 years to expand access to high-quality expanded learning and wellness opportunities for children in under-resourced communities across the state of California. PCY oversaw a seven-year statewide [Summer Matters Campaign](#) dedicated to creating and expanding access to high-quality summer learning programs for underserved students. This campaign engaged hundreds of diverse schools, districts, community-based organizations, municipal agencies, and county offices of education, and this braintrust remains a resource for California educators. PCY continues to provide a range of technical assistance to local education agencies and their partners on quality summer and expanded learning programs. To learn more, go to [partnerforchildren.org](#).