

# SUPPORTING SUMMER PROGRAMS

## Navigating Federal, State, and Local Program Support Opportunities

Summer is a time of enrichment, discovery, and fun for many students. But for others, especially those from low-income families, summer means time away from the support and resources that facilitate learning and social and emotional growth. Hundreds of school districts across the United States are committed to changing this opportunity gap. They strive to provide high-quality summer programs for students who might otherwise lack opportunities for learning and enriching activities, such as arts and exercise. RAND Corporation researchers have shown that high-quality summer learning programs can lead to positive academic, social, emotional, and career-related outcomes.

How are these programs supported? The quick answer is likely no surprise: It is complicated. There are numerous federal, state, and district funding opportunities to consider. Each opportunity offers pathways to sustain, scale, and improve the quality of summer learning programs. However, as program leaders know, each opportunity also presents roadblocks to navigate.

RAND researchers sought to better understand how summer learning program leaders can efficiently and effectively find their way through a complex policy landscape. This brief summarizes the results of the study and presents recommendations for summer program leaders to consider.

## Key Findings

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District-level decisionmakers have the greatest impact on summer learning programs. They are the ones who establish and design quality programs, seek funding, and meet student and community needs.

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The federal government offers the most summer program funding opportunities. Most of these are associated with the U.S. Department of Education's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

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There are funding challenges at all levels. There are restrictions on which students can be supported by federal grant funding and steep competition for some grant programs. Also, cities face the challenge of persuading citizens to support programs through taxes and other measures.

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District-level summer program leaders may be able to promote summer learning program sustainability, scale, and quality by setting a board policy on summer programming, authorizing a central body to carry out decisionmaking; measuring and communicating the impact of summer programming to justify spending and support; cultivating relationships with district, city, state, and federal decisionmakers; and advocating for clear funding messages from state agency staff.










## Three Ways That Local, State, and Federal Policies Can Affect Summer Learning Programs

Policies can affect summer learning programs in several important ways. The RAND study considered the following three factors:


-  **sustainability** (i.e., keeping programs up and running for more than one summer)
-  **scale** (i.e., increasing the number of program seats available to students)
-  **quality** (i.e., providing the features of high-quality programs, including five weeks or more of programming, consistent student attendance, small class sizes, and certified teachers with grade-level and subject-matter experience).

## Main Findings

District-level decisionmakers and policy have the greatest impact on summer learning programs. Ultimately, summer program sustainability, scale, and quality are affected most at the district level. Superintendents and other district leaders are charged with various responsibilities, including the following:

- **considering the demands** for various summer programs, including those from parents
- **setting policies** that determine whether and how to establish summer programs
- **deciding which students** will be served and what kinds of summer programs should be offered
- **balancing priorities** for limited available funding (i.e., will the program compete with the regular school year for state or federal funds?)
- **seeking new funding.**

Strong district capacity is needed. Because most decisions are made at the district level, summer program leaders need to convince district leaders that summer programming deserves funding. This might, in turn, require an investment in citing national studies, tracking attendance in summer



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programs, or conducting local program evaluation to help demonstrate value. Districts need to be set up to access, apply for, and administer grant money, and to combine money from various grants. Skilled grant writers are needed to apply for competitive grants.

The federal government offers the highest number of summer learning program funding opportunities. Formula grants distributed to states based on population data were the biggest funders of programs included in the study. Grants included those from the U.S. Department of Education that are associated with ESSA (Pub. L. 114-95). These include Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies (Title I, Part A), which supports students from low-income families; the Migrant Education Program (Title I, Part C); and Improving Teacher Quality State Grants (Title II, Part A). Study participants also sought grants from other agencies, including the Corporation for National and Community Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Some programs also accessed other federal funds through a competitive application process. The main competitive federal grant sought was the ESSA 21st Century Community

Learning Centers (21st CCLC) grant (Title IV, Part B), which supports out-of-school-time activities.

State agencies interpret federal policy and how it relates to summer programming, and some provide direct funding for it. A few states have significant funding streams for summer learning programs. However, the interpretation, regulation, and administration of federal funding streams are the main ways in which most states affect summer programs. These actions can influence whether summer learning programs are funded. States can also affect summer program scale and sustainability through mandates encouraging or requiring summer programs. Some states have created councils or caucuses to support or explore summer programming options and to signal their support for out-of-school-time programming in general.

Some cities have established their own summer learning program funding streams. A few cities, such as Oakland, California, and Seattle, Washington, have used ballot initiatives, budget set-asides, and property tax levies to create pools of dollars that have been used to fund summer programs.

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There are funding challenges at all levels. At the federal level, there are restrictions on which students can be supported by federal grant money and on district capacity to access and combine this money. There is also substantial competition for federal funds. State funding poses similar challenges for districts in terms of competition, along with the added challenge of providing short-term funding streams that may be used for summer programming but do not intentionally target them. With many federal and state funding opportunities, there is a lack of clear guidance on the extent to which summer programs are an eligible use for such funds. At the city level, residents need to be persuaded to support ballot initiatives that raise taxes or set aside general funds. At the district level, there are challenges in terms of persuading district and school board leaders to direct existing funding to summer programs or existing personnel to grant writing, and, if those resources are approved, winning the grant competitions.

Policies also affect summer program quality. Districts affect program quality by deciding which teachers can be hired for summer and how they are selected; quality is also affected by decisions about the types of summer programs to offer, program length, and curricular emphasis. States can influence quality by requiring specific practices in exchange for funding summer programs with state money and by incentivizing or requiring implementation of specific practices linked to quality in exchange for federal funding of summer programs. For example, Pennsylvania's 2016 request for proposals for 21st CCLC funding requested that applicants provide a minimum of six weeks of summer programming for at least 12 hours per week or provide justification for why this threshold could not be met. At the federal level, ESSA Title I requires that certified teachers deliver academic instruction, which supports program quality when districts use this funding for summer programming.



## How the Study Was Conducted

The Wallace Foundation launched the National Summer Learning Project (NSLP) in 2011. Through this project, five districts providing voluntary summer learning programs at no cost to low-income, urban elementary school students (in Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Duval County, Florida; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Rochester, New York) received financial support and technical assistance. NSLP funding drew to a close in 2017, and districts and their community partners turned their attention to sustaining, scaling, and supporting the quality of these programs.

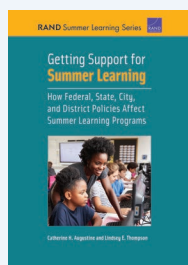
RAND researchers examined how the summer program leaders from these districts navigated and sometimes shaped policies at the district, state, and federal levels. The research team reviewed policies representing all project sites and conducted interviews with more than 60 district staff members and more than 20 policy experts, advocates, and practitioners from agencies and organizations at city, state, and federal levels.

## Recommendations for Summer Learning Program Leaders

The study suggests that there are several ways that summer program leaders can efficiently and effectively navigate the policy landscape to better support their summer programs.

TABLE 1

Recommendations	Considerations
<b>Implement an official school board policy on summer programming and a central decisionmaking body</b>	An official school board policy could promote program scale and sustainability, while a designated working group could catalog all district summer opportunities in one place. This catalog could help inform logistic and quality-related discussions and decisions across programs.
<b>Measure and communicate the impact of summer programs</b>	Evidence of program quality and effectiveness, along with narrative accounts of student experience, could help demonstrate the importance of summer programming and why dollars should be spent to support it. Informal and formal communications, including grant proposals, should demonstrate links between student participation and improved student outcomes. National data, such as the information that emerged from the NSLP, could be referenced, if applicable.
<b>Identify and address policies or practices at the district level that create barriers</b>	Identifying barriers should begin with an assessment of all the tasks involved in planning and running a summer program and then noting the barriers related to each. A complete list could help program leaders focus on changing the status quo or developing new practices to reduce conflict.
<b>Cultivate relationships with district, city, and state policymakers</b>	Relationships at these levels can help stimulate interest in and buy-in for summer programming. Relationships with superintendents, chief academic officers, funding coordinators, and other district leaders might have the greatest impact, given their roles in determining how revenue is allocated and in setting policies that affect summer programming.
<b>Seek clearer information on the eligibility of summer programming for federal and state funding</b>	District staff need to know about available funding opportunities and when to apply. Leaders might consider requesting guidance from state agency staff that includes a list of all federal and state grants for which summer programming is an eligible use of the funding and that provides more clarity concerning the application process.



This brief describes research documented in *Getting Support for Summer Learning: How Federal, State, City, and District Policies Affect Summer Learning Programs*, by Catherine H. Augustine and Lindsey E. Thompson, RR2347-WF, 2019 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR2347](http://www.rand.org/t/RR2347)).

To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RB10108](http://www.rand.org/t/RB10108).

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