

COVID-19 Impact Memo

Promising Practices In Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to all levels of education that could impact student outcomes for months and possibly years ahead. The SCORE series of COVID-19 Impact Memos analyzes challenges, examines emerging innovations and research-supported practices, and highlights student-centered approaches for educators to consider.

Maximizing Summer Learning

Spring 2022

Research suggests that academic summer learning programs can be an effective strategy for addressing learning loss and accelerating student learning. Last year, in response to the disruption caused by the pandemic, the Tennessee General Assembly established and funded two new kinds of summer learning programs for students: summer learning camps for rising first through fifth graders and learning loss bridge camps for rising sixth through eighth graders. Starting in 2023, third-grade students who are not proficient in English Language Arts (ELA) on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) will have the option to attend a learning loss bridge camp as one of several pathways to avoid retention.

The timing of the legislative process meant Tennessee district leaders did not have much time to prepare for last summer's camps. Beginning in March 2021, they did the hard work of learning new program requirements, preparing the budget, recruiting teachers and students, and making important programmatic decisions about scheduling and curriculum in time for camps to begin at the end of their 2020-21 school year. One leader commented on the challenge of implementing new summer programming on such a compressed timeline by saying, "For a little while we were building the plane while we were flying." As a result of this process, some aspects of planning and implementation of programming were more effective than others.

The effectiveness of summer programs depends on how they are designed and implemented. Research suggests the most effective programs address key design principles to maximize student learning. This spring offers leaders the opportunity to incorporate these design principles – as well as their learnings from last summer's camps – to maximize learning for the students who need the most support.

Summer 2021: Learnings From The Field

As mentioned above, the Tennessee General Assembly required districts to provide summer learning opportunities to mitigate impacts from COVID-19 interruptions. SCORE conducted a series of interviews to get a first-hand account from district leaders and teachers about their experiences with summer learning and learning loss bridge camps. Six districts participated, totaling 23 teachers and 15 leaders.

The interviews uncovered practices and strategies that generally served students well and that will be implemented in 2022; they also revealed challenges in critical areas, like attendance and staffing, that will need attention moving forward.

Planning Challenges

After the legislative action, district leaders had to prepare for new summer learning and bridge camps for the first time on a compressed timeline even as they also continued to navigate the challenges presented by the pandemic. Given this context, it was not surprising that leaders reported several challenges that arose as they prepared for summer programming. Most leaders reported a delay in communication regarding budget, curriculum, and assessment that made it difficult to make decisions and communicate information to their teachers and staff in a timely manner. Two leaders also noted how supply chain issues prevented essential resources from being available by the start of their summer camps. Most leaders also acknowledged the difficulty of doing something new for the first time and were optimistic that planning for next summer's camps would be easier.

Program Purpose And Structure

Across all interviews, teachers and leaders shared how they planned for their summer programming to be different from the typical summer school experience. They emphasized the importance of using their summer programming to address learning loss but doing so in a fun, engaging, and personalized manner. Many teachers and leaders noted their intentional use of the term "summer camp" instead of "summer school" when communicating to students and families.

The impact of the pandemic on the continuity of student learning experiences during the regular school year shaped how districts planned to address learning loss and accelerate learning for students during the summer. Some districts reported viewing summer programming as a much-needed extension of the school year. Because some students had been on a virtual or hybrid instruction schedule at different times during the school year, they had missed valuable instruction time, and teachers had not been able to finish all their planned content from the curriculum. As a result, teachers focused on teaching any unfinished content during the summer. As districts plan for this summer's camps, it will be important to consider how this approach might need to be adjusted, especially if teachers have been able to cover all their regularly planned content during the school year.

Other districts reported using their summer camps as an opportunity to [accelerate learning](#) for students by previewing the English and math content that students would see during the first nine weeks of the upcoming school year. By utilizing ancillary materials and assessments from their high-quality instructional materials, these districts hoped to build students' confidence to tackle grade-level content during the upcoming school year.

Budget And Staffing

Interviews with district leaders suggested that budget and staff capacity are two areas of concern as they begin planning for this summer's programming. Some leaders noted that their district may not be able to provide teachers with the same level of compensation for this upcoming summer, making retention of returning teachers and recruitment of new teachers difficult. Overall districts felt that they had sufficient funds last summer, thanks to state dollars, but nearly all districts reported they will not be able to support learning and bridge camps in the same way this summer without additional funding. One district leader shared their belief that teachers were not



compensated enough in 2021, stating that teachers should be paid on the same scale used during the academic year.

The following trends emerged across the six districts interviewed:

- ◆ Compensation rates (\$40-50 per hour) served as an incentive for teachers, but several districts likely will not be able to sustain such high rates.
- ◆ Due to either scheduling concerns or fears of insufficient staff numbers, some districts offered teachers the opportunity to select weeks of the program they would work rather than the full length of the program. This choice led to scheduling challenges and inconsistencies for students.
- ◆ In some cases, districts were not clear about how many teachers would be needed – potentially due to uncertainty surrounding initial student enrollment numbers and/or not accounting for declines in enrollment and attendance.

Recruitment, Enrollment, And Attendance

Initially, districts sent out letters to parents and used other communication channels, such as text messages and flyers, to recruit priority students. After the initial 30-day enrollment period, many districts focused on filling seats without consideration for whether students were considered priority for enrollment. Districts that continued prioritizing the recruitment of high-risk groups, focused on students who struggled during the year based on TCAP scores and course grades.

Most districts did not require students to commit to attending for the entirety of the summer programming. Because programming was often competing with other summer activities, such as family vacations and other camps, leaders noted that ensuring consistent student attendance was sometimes challenging. All districts reported using student incentives to promote consistent attendance. These incentives included end-of-the-summer field trips, ice cream parties, and raffles for different prizes.

One district clearly communicated the expectation to families that enrollment in their summer programs was contingent upon students attending for the entire session. This district reported approximately 90 percent of their students attending 90 percent of the time. Leaders from this district made the decision to limit the number of available seats to keep classes small and recruit their top teachers to provide instruction. Teachers in this district were provided with an attendance bonus if they missed fewer than three days.

Curriculum And Assessment

All districts reported using their existing high-quality English and math instructional materials during the summer for at least some grade levels. Leaders noted that using these curriculum materials created continuity for students and teachers. Teachers' familiarity with the materials eliminated the need for additional professional development and made their daily planning time more efficient. Some teachers reported that their district's choice to use these materials was an effective incentive to teach during the summer.

Some districts also used the state-provided English Language Arts (ELA) and math curriculum materials for some grade levels. Teachers from one district noted that these materials were very accessible, reducing their planning time and increasing their ability to focus on how to deliver content to students each day. Leaders also noted that the state-provided materials were also helpful to teachers who were teaching outside their content area during the summer.



Teachers and leaders reported challenges related to assessments. These challenges included what the majority of teachers called a "misalignment" between the pre- and post-assessments for math and ELA. It was also reported by many of those interviewed that they had not received the results from the state-provided assessments. For these reasons, most teachers used formative assessments in addition to the state-provided assessments throughout the summer to measure student progress.

Summer Learning Design Principles

The most effective summer learning programs address key design principles, including duration, attendance, use of time, and quality of instruction. District leaders should keep the following principles in mind as they plan for this summer's learning and bridge camps.

Program structure

- ◆ **Duration:** Programs demonstrating the most positive impact on student achievement last at least five weeks and include at least three hours of academic instruction per day. Students receiving at least 20 days of instruction have seen the largest benefits from summer learning programs.
- ◆ **Class size:** Capping class sizes at 15 students fosters the development of strong relationships and helps teachers offer individualized supports to students.
- ◆ **Attendance:** Communicating the importance of consistent attendance to families, setting an enrollment deadline, and providing transportation are ways to ensure strong attendance.
- ◆ **Enrichment activities:** Providing enrichment courses and activities to supplement the core academic program is an important way to build engagement and motivate students to attend each day.
- ◆ **Academic curriculum:** High-quality, standards-aligned curriculum materials and lesson plans can minimize teacher planning time while still maximizing the quality of instruction that students receive.

Personnel

- ◆ **Academic teachers:** Certified teachers with strong content knowledge and support staff help provide a rigorous academic experience for all students.
- ◆ **Enrichment instructors:** Enrichment courses led by teachers with content expertise are the most likely to be engaging for students.
- ◆ **Administration:** Planning for summer learning programs should start early and be led by a summer learning director or coordinator.

Learnings For Summer 2022 And Beyond

Although planning for new summer programming for the first time presented leaders with numerous challenges, it also provided them with valuable learnings to apply to future planning. Based on SCORE's conversations with leaders and teachers across the state about their experiences with summer learning and bridge camps, the following learnings should be considered as a part of future planning:

- ◆ **Accelerate learning:** Use data from existing assessments to focus summer programming on [accelerating learning](#) for the students who are the most behind academically. At the elementary level, students should include those who are the most at risk for being retained in third grade. Recruit your best teachers to work with these students. Prioritize content and skills in the curriculum that students will see during the first nine weeks of the upcoming school year.



- ◆ **Strategically supplement the budget:** Consider how ESSER funds and other available funding sources can supplement the budget to support critical program components for elementary and middle grades. Consider using ESSER funds to provide summer programming for high school students of greatest need.
- ◆ **Communicate early:** Share expectations, logistics, and other critical information about summer learning programs with students, families, and staff as early as possible.
- ◆ **Right-size staffing:** Expect about 20 percent of students who enrolled for the program not to attend. Consider this drop-off when determining how many teachers and support staff to hire for the program.
- ◆ **Provide supports for teachers:** Provide teachers with curriculum materials, lesson plans, and supplementary resources to minimize time spent on planning. Incorporate planning periods into the daily schedule.

Additional Resources

[SCORE Summer Planning Guide](#)

