
Key Elements of High Quality Summer Programs

Below are key strategies and best practices drawn from the latest research on designing and implementing high-quality summer programs that can serve as a north star for summer programming in 2022 and beyond.



Elevate Relationships & Enrichment

Positive, supportive relationships and rich, stimulating environments ignite the brain to form connections that promote learning. Developing the conditions for connection and development—including opportunities to play, explore new skills and experiences, and connect with peers and caring adults—can help cultivate relationships and support higher levels of growth. Effective summer programs go well beyond classroom skills remediation and invest in enriching experiences that can be life changing. Supportive learning environments are also key to helping young people shape their voices and sense of purpose.



Deepen Community Partnerships

Creating a community system for summer learning and growth opens the door to collaboration, reduces duplication of efforts, and results in stronger shared investment and support for student learning and well-being. It's often very helpful to collaborate with local governments, community-based organizations, business and industry leaders, and summer program providers. These partnerships will help your program broaden student participation and achieve stronger learning outcomes.



Put Youth and Families First

An effective community approach starts with thinking of families and communities as co-designers of summer programs. What do youth and families want and expect from their summer learning opportunities? Doing your market research first and developing your program in response to local need will help ensure not only a higher level of demand for the services you offer, but also ensure a strong sense of investment and ownership on the part of the youth you serve.



Integrate Well-Rounded Learning & Work that Matters

A well-rounded education moves beyond the courses students take and into essential life skills. It provides the knowledge and skills to live, learn, work, create, and contribute to society. It also ensures that every student is known, heard, and supported. The goal is to establish and actualize a definition of a well-rounded education that focuses on the whole student and their community and the knowledge and skills they learn.



Ensure Mental Health and Well-Being

Building relational trust, care, and connection among families, staff, and students is fundamental to summer programming. Summer programs must attend to students' needs for individuals to reflect, connect, and learn. Students' mental health and well-being must be a primary driver in planning summer learning.



Communicate Consistently with Your Communities

Effective outreach activities are necessary to boost enrollment and maintain regular attendance. Summer programs are voluntary, and without intentional effort, it can be difficult to interrupt old, outdated images of summer school that may deter attendance and reinforce outdated stereotypes. But even better, community exposure—whether through the media or through creative partnerships—can help build awareness of the need for (and effectiveness) of your program and all it offers.



Purposeful Planning and Quality Programs

To realize summer's full potential, it is essential to start planning early. Launching a summer program is akin to starting a new school year and ending it within weeks. Quality summer programming requires advanced planning that typically starts the prior school year in September. An early and robust planning process might be one of the most important characteristics of a strong program. Families may make plans for summer by February or March, meaning schools, districts and partners must move quickly to determine summer plans.



COMPREHENSIVE SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAMS

Strength-based and enriching

Well-rounded, integrated, project-based, and hands-on

Relationship and student-centered

Accessible to all families

Exciting and fun; young people want engaging and attractive programs to attend

Co-created with students, families, and community partners

Can take place in a variety of settings and locations