



## RESEARCH REVIEW

# Sustainability over Speed: The Role of Major Funding on the Field of Summer Learning

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In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2021 Congress directed \$122 billion in funds to state and local education agencies through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) as part of the American Rescue Plan (ARP). States were directed to use at least 5 percent of their funding to address lost learning time by implementing evidence-based interventions such as summer learning, and 1 percent of their funding was earmarked directly for evidence-based summer learning programs (Griffith, 2021).

Additionally, states were required to subgrant at least 90 percent of the total ARP ESSER allocation to local educational agencies (LEA) in the state. In turn, those LEAs were required to reserve at least 20 percent of funds to address learning loss through the implementation of programs like summer learning and enrichment (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2021).

Those allocations, though small percentages, account for billions of dollars of potential funding directed at summer learning programs. It is a historic investment that's packaged with a ticking clock—the U.S. Department of Education has set a deadline for states to obligate their funding by September 30, 2024 (Afterschool Alliance, 2021). In January 2024, the U.S.

Department of Education sent a letter to state education agencies allowing them to request up to 14 months of funding extension that will be approved on a case-by-case basis, which would extend the liquidation deadline to March 2026, for those who were successfully able to apply for an extension (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). In that guidance, access to summer learning was highlighted as “one of the three of the evidence-based strategies that can significantly contribute to improved student performance” – a key criteria for approving extended funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

To understand the impact of such a large investment in summer programming and help the field chart a path forward when the funding ends, Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR), with support from the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA), reviewed publications and research conducted between 2020 and 2024 and interviewed key leaders on the impact of this funding on summer learning.

This review will identify common themes and lessons learned and make recommendations that will benefit the field of summer education as we plan to capitalize on this investment and continue to grow and enhance summer programming into the future.

## Research Review

As part of this project, we have reviewed more than 70 publications focused on the use of ARP funding on summer learning including reports from professional associations, advocacy groups, school districts, and universities (31%) and blogs focused on funding usage (26%) in each state (Figure 1). Thirty-five percent of the publications we reviewed we classified as “Other,” which includes infographics, policy snapshots, funding trackers, FAQs, news articles, conference papers, and book chapters. Only 3% of the publications were from peer reviewed journal articles, most likely owing to the newness of this topic and the lengthy process of conducting rigorous research.

We also looked at the focus of each report, publication, and blog to see how trends varied by year as the pandemic progressed. The most common topic written about from 2021-2024 was funding use, an unsurprising finding given the aim of our review. We also looked at articles and reports that focused on pandemic impact on summer programs and how they are being used to aid in the recovery efforts. Six publications covered the impact of summer programs or the impact of summer programming in general, with a few publications exploring policy considerations and other topics. Importantly, the publications we reviewed included the perspectives of several key stakeholders in summer learning including parents, providers, states, local education agencies (LEAs), and district superintendents.

Additionally, we interviewed seven NSLA-nominated leaders in the field of summer learning from across the country who represented different sectors in summer learning from government programs to out-of-school time networks to superintendents so that we could gain a more nuanced picture of how this funding impacted summer programming in their state, if they believe the

progress made can be sustained once the funding goes away, and what recommendations they have for policy-makers as they consider future funding initiatives.

## Key Themes & Findings

In our review, several key themes emerged that shed light on how the funding impacted summer learning, both in terms of the growth opportunities it afforded programs and the challenges presented by the rapid disbursement of funds, that will inform the strategy of summer advocates as they work to build from this unprecedented funding surge.

### ***Summer learning spending was a top priority for states and districts during the pandemic.***

Organizations tracking federal funding spending found that all 50 states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico allocated federal funding to summer learning programs (Afterschool Alliance & National League of Cities, 2023; Kidd, 2023). Many states gave control of funds directly to local districts (Munyan-Penney, N., & Barone, C., 2022). In 2021 when funding was first available, 75% of surveyed superintendents planned to use ARP funding for summer (AASA, 2021). While empowering local districts with control over funds allows for flexibility and autonomy in addressing the unique needs of communities, it can also lead to a disjointed approach across districts.

To better understand how states were allocating funding to summer learning, we reviewed the dataset Federal Pandemic Relief Funds: City, State, and School District Investments in Afterschool and Summer Learning (Afterschool Alliance & National League of Cities, 2023). We filtered the dataset by state plans that were focused on summer learning and then analyzed the descriptions of how the funding was allocated, tallying where funding amounts were mentioned. While not a comprehensive

Fig. 1 Publications by Type

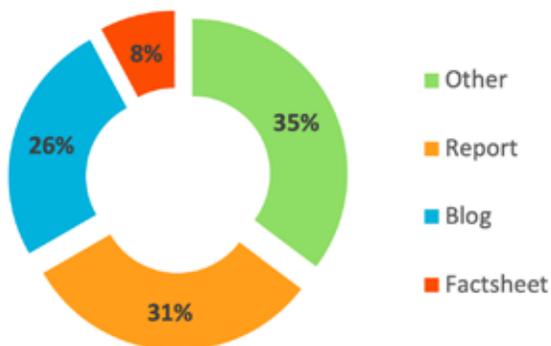
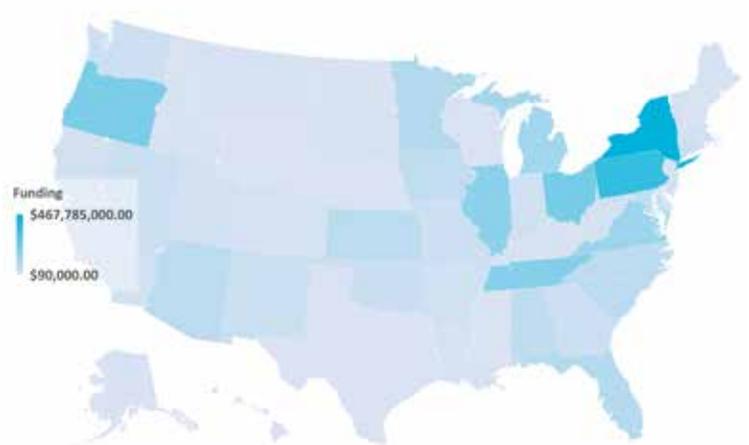


Fig. 2 Summer Programming Spending by State



number of the dollars spend on summer learning over the past three years, Figure 2 illustrates how states self-reported their summer spending. More research is needed in this area to connect the spend on summer by state with student outcomes.

In the report, *A Review of School Districts' Use of American Rescue Plan Funding to Support Afterschool and Summer Opportunities*, researchers reviewed 6,315 school district plans and found that of the funding allocated for afterschool and summer programming, the largest portion was going exclusively to summer programming with 2.4 billion allocated for summer and 1.6 billion allocated for afterschool programming (Afterschool Alliance, 2023).

### ***Summer learning was the most popular strategy used by districts to address learning loss.***

While it was a federal requirement that 1% of funding was allocated to summer learning, it's important to note that it was also one of the top priorities for addressing learning loss. Analysis of 5,000 district spending plans found that spending on summer learning was the most common strategy used by districts to address pandemic learning loss (DiMarco & Jordan, 2022).

***“The Santa Fe Public Schools (SFPS) has creatively utilized summer programming to provide year-round schooling that’s particularly beneficial for struggling students. ...Feedback from teachers is that students participating in summer programming return to school better prepared and with fewer attendance issues.”***

***— Hilario (Larry Jr.) Chavez, Superintendent, Santa Fe Public Schools***

A national survey of local education agencies (LEAs) launched in 2021 found that 75% of the summer pro-

grams that were implemented focused on learning recovery to address lost instructional time (Davis et al., 2022). The focus on learning recovery in the majority of summer programs highlights a deliberate effort to target areas of academic need and bridge learning gaps resulting from disruptions to traditional instruction. This data suggests a concerted commitment among educational stakeholders to maximize the impact of summer learning initiatives in facilitating student academic recovery.

A study of summer school's impact on academic outcomes estimated that summer learning closed the loss gap by 2-3% (Callen, et al., 2023). The estimated impact of summer learning in closing the learning loss gap by 2-3% underscores its potential as an effective intervention in mitigating academic setbacks. While modest, this improvement signifies the tangible benefits of summer programs in bolstering student achievement and reducing disparities resulting from interrupted learning. It's also more impressive when you consider the traditional “summer slide” where students without access to enriching and educational opportunities during the summer lose ground on academics.

With these additional funds focused on addressing learning loss, summer programs were able to bring creativity, fun, and a holistic approach to the challenge of helping students recover from the pandemic as they prepared for the next academic year. In an interview, Aaron Dworkin, CEO of the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA), shared that he saw across the country that “state and school district leaders used the funds to re-imagine how summer learning could be different than traditional, punitive, and disengaging notions of summer school.” The funding helped summer programs engage with more certified teachers and partner with community organization to bring the necessary resources and expertise needed to help students catch up and be better prepared for the upcoming school year.



## ***The funding helped programs expand their offerings and reach underserved youth.***

In interviews, summer leaders shared examples of what the funding helped them achieve, including expanding a Job & Career Readiness Training (JCRT) program in North Carolina, serving 1100+ youth across 5 sites in New York City and launching a new curriculum aligned the science of reading, and providing year-round schooling in Santa Fe Public Schools. In Boston, Chris Smith, Executive Director of Boston Afterschool and Beyond shared that “state and local leaders allocated funds wisely, prioritizing enrichment delivered by nonprofits to engage young people in learning. These funds enabled Boston Beyond to support a broad, diverse network of grassroots enrichment programs, many of which operate in neighborhoods where kids live, run by trusted adults they know.”

Additionally, a focus on expanding not just programming but access for underserved youth was paramount for these summer leaders. In Santa Fe Public Schools, Superintendent Hilario Chavez reported the funding helped provide free summer programming for parents who would otherwise pay upward of \$350 per student and this initiative was able to reach nearly 6,000 students between 2022 and 2023.

The additional funding enabled innovation and the launch of new programs as well as addressing the needs of the most vulnerable student groups, such as English Language Learners, students with special needs, and students who fell more deeply behind academically as a result of the pandemic. The funding was additionally an important tool to support equity and provide more access for students who would not otherwise experience to a high quality summer program by expanding discounted and free programming options.

***“We doubled down on supporting our neediest subgroups, English Language Learners, students with special needs, and those who did not meet academic benchmarks as measured by district and state assessments.”***

***— Matt Brewster, Special Assistant, New Jersey Public Schools***

## ***The rapid funding timeline was difficult for states to implement.***

To better understand the allocation of ARP funds, a June 2023 survey conducted by The School Superintendents Association revealed superintendents were focused on

sustainability, with 44% listing it as a top priority and 42% strongly considering it (AASA, 2023). However, some states reported only having eight weeks to create a statewide plan and only seven states were able to expend ARP funding during the summer of 2021 (Davis et al., 2023). While the urgency of addressing pandemic-related learning loss necessitated rapid action, the swift timeline of funding disbursement made comprehensive planning and coordination efforts difficult, potentially impacting the effectiveness and sustainability of summer programs.

Analysis of state ARP plans and direct communication with staff found that state departments of education felt rushed and did not have the opportunity to engage thoughtfully with stakeholders, plan for program evaluation, or to consider how the funding could be used for sustainable investments in summer learning (Munyan-Penney, N., & Barone, C., 2022). The states that did have an advantage in effectively managing their funds were, perhaps unsurprisingly, those who had an out-of-school time infrastructure in place and the ability to leverage existing relationships quickly to activate partners and expand quality services (Oravec & McLaughlin, 2022).

## ***Funding supported an increase in partnerships with community-based organizations, new tools, and technical assistance.***

A 2022 review of state plans found that 14 state departments required collaboration between districts and local community-based organizations (CBOs) (Munyan-Penney, N., & Barone, C., 2022). Promisingly, research on ARP funding trends found that 22 states used their funding to increase their work with community-based organizations such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers, leveraging existing expertise and lessening the burden on districts (Munyan-Penney, N., & Barone, C., 2022).

Collaborations between states and community-based organizations signals a strategic approach that can help maximize the impact of ARP funding on summer learning by tapping into the resources and networks of CBOs to expand program offerings and reach underserved populations, ultimately enhancing the accessibility and quality of summer programs.

A 2022 survey of program providers who received ARP funds confirmed the funding helped them hire more staff, serve more students, and expand program offerings (Afterschool Alliance, 2022b). The survey findings underscore the tangible benefits of ARP funding

programs. By enabling program providers to hire more staff, serve more students, and expand program offerings, the funding contributes to the scalability and effectiveness of summer initiatives in addressing learning loss and supporting student success.

***“Policymakers need to hold government systems accountable for the funds that they receive. Just sending more money to schools is not an answer, nor is expecting summer programs to ‘save’ the failing system. It will take people learning to work together and create thriving communities. We have an issue of TRUST.”***

***— Beth Unverzagt, Director, OregonASK***

As a follow-up from the 2022 From Recovery to Thriving: How American Rescue Plan is Supporting America’s Students Summit! the Department of Education and the National Public Education Support Fund shared a long list of summer programmatic commitments including grant funding to support school-community partnerships, new tools to access summer learning, and increased technical assistance offerings for states, community based organizations, and program providers (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2022). This is important because it shows that the funds were not only used to expand available programs and “slots,” but also to increase the quality of offerings, resources, and professional development for staff.

### ***Many predict cuts to summer programs when the funding ends.***

When asked about the 2024 obligation deadline, superintendents in the previously referenced 2023 survey, ranked summer learning second on their list of top cuts (behind specialist staff) with 51% identifying summer learning as an area that would need reduction (AASA, 2023). This is a worrisome statistic as the superintendents are key decision-makers in allocation of funds.

The significant percentage of superintendents identifying summer learning as a potential area for reduction highlights the vulnerability of summer programs to budget cuts.

***“Ending federal funding for youth programs can have significant consequences, both immediate and long-term. Cutting federal funding for youth programs can leave young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, more vulnerable to negative influences such as crime, substance abuse, and dropping out of school.”***

***— Dawn Hill, Manager, Youth Programs & Business Partnerships Housing & Neighborhood Services, North Carolina City Hall***

The potential negative impact of summer funding cuts is clear when we look to states that have already experienced funding cuts like Oregon. In the 2023 report Summer without Fun(ding) OregonASK provides a detailed account of the impact of the failed passage of Senate Bill 531 to continue summer funding over the next biennium, effectively ending funding support for community based summer learning programs in Oregon (OregonASK, 2023). In a survey of summer learning providers across the state, researchers found that demand for summer learning opportunities increased in 2023 according to 72 percent of providers who responded. However, without additional funding 51 percent reported a decrease in youth served compared with the previous year (OregonASK, 2023). Scholarships and the numbers of programs offered also went down because of the cuts.

In future research, we will need to continue to investigate the impact funding cuts have on summer programming. It is possible that the speed of funding increases for summer learning did not allow for needed sustainability planning. Investigating the effects of reduced funding on program accessibility, quality, and outcomes is crucial for informing policy decisions and resource allocation strategies aimed at preserving and strengthening summer learning opportunities.



## Outlook

The unprecedented investment in summer programming led to the much-needed expansion of summer learning opportunities, particularly critical for youth from lower-income families with less access to enriching summer experiences.

Furthermore, President Biden's commitment, as expressed in his 2024 State of the Union address, to expand high-quality tutoring and summer learning time underscores the national recognition of the importance of investing in education. This commitment is bipartisan as can be seen in support of 21st Century Learning Centers (CLC) across federal administrations. This commitment reinforces the urgency and significance of sustaining and enhancing summer learning initiatives as integral components of a robust educational system aimed at empowering every child to succeed.

***Since the start of the pandemic, summer learning has been identified as a key national education recovery strategy by our nations' leaders. It moved from being considered "a nice to have" experience for some to "a need to have" experience for all youth."***

**— Aaron Dworkin, CEO, NSLA**

There is a growing movement to shift the approach from "summer school" to "summer programming," supported by NSLA and its work with districts across the country to focus on best practices. This movement reflects a shift in mindset that summer can be a space both for addressing academic learning loss and engaging in a fun and create experience that helps youth develop social-emotional skills like empathy, active engagement, belonging, and reflection.

As a next step, we need to further examine ARP funding's impact on summer program quality. Through further research and evaluation, we will be able to understand how the funding influenced program quality, effectiveness, and program's ability to address learning loss. By prioritizing research and evaluation efforts, policymakers, summer leaders, and other summer advocates can make the case for summer, ensuring that future funding investments are strategic, sustainable, and effectively address the needs of youth.



By discovering and highlighting best practices and innovative approaches to summer learning, as highlighted in the interviews we conducted with organizations across the country for this research review, we will be poised to build a bright future for summer learners that can sustain beyond any funding cycle.

***"There's no turning back now. As federal stimulus expires, summer learning must be a priority in the budgets of school districts, cities, and state departments of education. ARP allowed us to expand and strengthen the community infrastructure to ensure that every summer is a productive one for young people. One thing we cannot afford with budget cuts is putting kids at risk with a return to the status quo. Let's not take a vacation from summer learning."***

**— Chris Smith, Executive Director,  
Boston Afterschool and Beyond**

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