

# **MOUNTAIN EMPIRE UNIFIED**

## **SCHOOL DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA**

“Investing in Us” to Deliver High-Quality  
Summer Learning in Rural Communities



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**BY DR. KIMBERLEY EDNIE, ED.L.D.**

# RESEARCH SAYS...

## **Community Partnerships in Rural Districts Require Contextual & Creative Approaches in order to complement and enhance the academic components:**

Rural districts often do not have access to the breadth and depth of CBOs found in urban and suburban environments. Rural school district leaders can develop individualized, contextualized connections that will provide students with access to the wealth of community assets:

- “Connecting with community members and businesses can give rural students access to more locally contextualized curricular resources, ease their school-to-work transition, and provide a sense of place and belonging” ([Bauch, 2001](#)).
- “The informal, close-knit nature of rural areas lend themselves to more flexible and creative configurations of partnerships, as districts tap a unique mix of local community assets, resources and networks to broaden horizons and opportunities in the summer” ([McAlister, et. al, 2024](#)).

**Targeted professional learning supports educators to improve learning outcomes for students:** Summer learning programs can positively impact student achievement, but “their success depends on careful design and implementation.” ([McCombs, J. & Augustine, C., 2021](#); [Schwartz, H., et al, 2018](#)).

Two elements of successful academic programs:

- Academic Curriculum & Resources: Impactful summer learning uses high quality curriculum aligned to school-year curriculum and standards, and looks different from school year work. Providing high quality lesson plans for teachers enhances instructional effectiveness, especially during shorter summer sessions.
- Academic Teachers: Hiring teachers with specific content knowledge and skills increases instructional effectiveness. Specialized teachers, including interventionists, special education, and multilingual learning certified staff, support students’ individual needs. Professional learning tailored to summer is a year round investment.



# RESEARCH IN ACTION...

[The Mountain Empire Unified School District](#) (MEUSD) is the most Southeastern school district in San Diego County, bordering Mexico. The District covers a large geographic area of 660 square miles in mountainous terrain, and requires extensive bussing of students. As a rural district, Mountain Empire recognized that creating high quality summer programs for academics and enrichment required an investment in their people. They intentionally focused on building their educators' knowledge and skills, while also elevating their existing expertise. Additionally, they centered partnerships that were contextually relevant to their community, while also fostering teacher leadership in enrichment. The result: sustainable, rich, joyful learning that continues year round.

[California's Expanded Learning Opportunities Program \(ELO-P\)](#) has provided a consistent funding stream that allowed Mountain Empire to invest in their educators. ELO-P funds afterschool and summer school enrichment programs for transitional kindergarten through sixth grade, specifically to create and/or support learning activities different from the regular school day.

As Dr. Amy Conforth, Director of Education and Instructional Services, shared: "In a rural community, summer programs are exceptionally important for students. Access and resource availability are limited here, which hinders students' ability to continue learning and participating in extracurricular activities during the summer months. ELO-P allows us to provide programs in the community that are vital to supporting students during non-school days." This funding has fueled Mountain Empire's innovative academic and enrichment summer programming design.



# ABOUT MOUNTAIN EMPIRE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

## DISTRICT OVERVIEW

- Rural community
- 1,713 students
- 4 elementary schools, one junior high school, and one high school
- Alternative Education Program serves grades 7-12

## SUMMER LEARNING

20 days / 4 weeks  
5 days / week

## ELEMENTARY SUMMER LEARNING STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

- ~**300** Students
- 26%** English Language Learners
- 24%** Socioeconomically disadvantaged
- 25%** Students with disabilities

## OVERALL STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

- 65%** Socioeconomically disadvantaged
- 27%** Students receiving MLL services
- 15.8%** Students with disabilities
- 4.8%** Native American
- 0.2%** Asian
- 0.5%** Filipino
- 1.4%** Black/African American
- 57.2%** Hispanic/Latino
- 4.3%** Multiracial
- 30.9%** White

# SITE LEAD COORDINATORS

## EXPANDING EDUCATOR CAPACITY TO LEAD SUMMER LEARNING

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For contractual and cultural reasons, building principals and assistant principals did not lead summer programs in MEUSD. However, leaders were present: the district heads recognized that their most successful summer sites were correlated with sites where a strong teacher served as an informal site coordinator. At those sites, staff reported clear working expectations and instructional design, smooth operations, high student engagement, and positive behavior.

MEUSD’s district leaders decided to expand their staff’s leadership capacity by placing a formal teacher leader at every summer learning school site. During the fall 2023, they created a site lead coordinator position, interviewed interested candidates, and hired five certificated teacher leaders. That winter and spring, MEUSD’s summer leadership team developed a monthly scope and sequence for the new coordinators, initially focused on administrative logistics such as transportation, meals, and scheduling. However, as the leads were positionally equal to their teacher peers, they requested training about informal authority, supporting strengths based development, and conflict management.

After two summers, there has been a positive impact on employee satisfaction and sustainability, both essential in a rural district, where the remote location makes replacing staff challenging. Summer teacher surveys reported higher levels of satisfaction related to program logistics and support. The site lead coordinators reported growth and independence, saw a path into leadership that they had not considered previously, and described increased satisfaction in their jobs. The MEUSD summer administrators — also full time senior leaders in district administration — reported being “less in the weeds” in running summer sites.



# READING INTERVENTION PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

## PROVIDING ROBUST, SCIENCE OF READING-INFORMED LITERACY TRAINING TO EDUCATORS WHO THEN SERVED AS SUMMER READING INTERVENTION TEACHERS

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MEUSD has a districtwide focus to improve literacy for all students. Sheri Miller, Literacy and Expanded Learning Coordinator, and a former principal and reading intervention specialist in the district, saw a need for more educators trained in science of reading-informed models. The district's reading teachers on special assignment (TOSAs) who had previously received the Orton-Gillingham Core Foundational Literacy Skills Curriculum found success using this program. With the additional funding provided by ELO-P, Sheri invited 12 teachers to participate in the intensive 40 hour training, led by the [Institute for MultiSensory Education](#). After receiving this training, teachers were asked to apply their new skills and knowledge in the summer setting as reading interventionists. Each day, two teachers at each site pulled students between 9:00-12:00 for 20-30 minute sessions in small groups with 2-6 students, while the other students engaged in full class academic programming with the core teacher.

During summer 2025, the twelve reading intervention-trained teachers returned, and an additional four teachers received training, including secondary teachers supporting struggling readers in middle school.

These sixteen teachers have reported that the investment and opportunity to apply the training in a smaller summer setting was transformative. (See "Teacher Feedback" box, below.) Importantly, these teachers have continued to use the knowledge and skills to enhance their instruction during the regular school year, having an impact on overall district literacy rates beyond summer. Some of those teachers have also become MEUSD's afterschool literacy tutors.

The impact on students is promising. Observational data described that students who received the additional intervention during summer were enthusiastic about having individualized time with a teacher and reported feeling that they were growing as readers. Teachers reported students were highly engaged and demonstrated fewer negative behaviors. Quantitative data shows promising results on reducing summer slide and accelerating growth: Of K-5 students who attended 2024 summer learning, 83% stayed constant or improved from EOY to BOY on their DIBELS assessment (K-3rd assesses Phonemic Awareness, Decoding; Oral Reading Fluency & Comprehension; 4-5th assess Oral Reading Fluency and Comprehension).

## TEACHER FEEDBACK

*“[The training] was a real boot camp on the science of teaching reading and how very deliberate phonics instruction can have a massive impact on our struggling readers, and those just learning to read for the first time...even now a couple years removed from it, I'm still using tools and techniques I got from them in my everyday teaching. There is a lot of buy-in from the students...they like learning their new words and letters and particularly like the multiple tactile strategies we use to make the phonics learning a whole-body exercise. They're excited to come to groups each day and improve their reading skills.”*

**– 1ST GRADE TEACHER**

*“Being given the opportunity to be part of the reading team and implement all the things I have learned has been an incredible experience. The kids are always engaged with the lessons and because of the engaging opportunities they are remembering the bases and meanings at a deeper level. Students are showing a deeper understanding of higher academic vocabulary. I am teaching it in my 3rd grade classroom as well and the more they are exposed to the lessons...the more they are proving to be more independent.”*

**– 3RD GRADE TEACHER**

# A FOCUS ON STUDENT ENRICHMENT

## TAPPING INTO EDUCATORS' TALENTS TO CREATE AND DESIGN TEACHER-LED, JOYFUL ENRICHMENT IN PARTNERSHIP WITH LOCAL BUSINESS AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS

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The Mountain Empire Leadership team knew that enrichment was a non-negotiable component of high quality summer learning. With a limited number of CBOs in their geographic area, the team had an opportunity to be creative: tapping into educators' talents and interests to create and design teacher-led, joyful enrichment, as well as centering contextual partnerships with the local business and cultural organizations that have deep ties to their school community.

MEUSD has an enrichment block each day from 12:30-3:00. During the first year of revamped summer learning, MEUSD purchased kits of STEM materials from an outside vendor. Faced with a reduced budget in subsequent years, the summer leaders needed more cost effective models. Furthermore, they received feedback that teachers wanted to contribute their expertise to summer learning. As a result, teachers now lead the majority of enrichment design and implementation. Teachers are required to complete a project proposal that includes goals, aligned standards, and a budget, which is reviewed and approved by district leadership.

Teachers describe feeling energized by the chance to share their expertise and interests outside of the classroom with their students. Some of this summer's enrichment opportunities included: building raised beds for a garden; cooking; musical instrument exploration; theater production; watercolors; and marble rollercoasters. Site Coordinators created choice charts, so students could select the programs they were interested in. At the end of summer, teachers led celebration walks, where students had the chance to share what they engaged in and created during the enrichment block, demonstrating joy and fun alongside their academic learning.



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MEUSD has also prioritized contextual partnerships with local business and cultural institutions with deep ties to the community. Two partnerships highlight this focus:

**Campo Band of Kumeyaay Indians:**

The Site Lead at one elementary school participating in summer learning reached out to the Campo Indian Education Center to ask if they would be interested in providing enrichment for elementary students during summer. The educators from the cultural center partnered with the school to provide a cultural immersion, including a performance from a bird singer from a local tribe, learning traditional games, constructing art such as dreamcatchers, and cooking Indigenous food. The school site where this programming occurred has a majority of students whose first language is Spanish, and the school educators and leaders from the Campo Center described this as an opportunity for intercultural learning.

**Pine Valley Dance and Play:** Student and family interests have continued to shape their MEUSD’s offerings, and many students requested dance. Pine Valley Dance and Play is a local dance company that was hired to bring dance, cheer, and tumbling programs to this Southeastern corner of California. The owner and founder shared that she is committed to introducing children to the arts, especially those from smaller towns.



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