

SEATTLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Balancing Enrichment and Academics as a Strategy
for Academic Growth and Student Confidence



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RESEARCH SAYS...

Research indicates that high quality summer learning is most successful when designed for a blend of academics and enrichment that attends to whole child development, equity, and acceleration. Summer learning that prioritizes engaging and enriching learning supports students with better learning outcomes, increased social-emotional capacities, new interests and relationships, and deeper connections to learning ([Schwartz et al., 2018](#), [McCombs et al., 2019](#), [Afterschool Alliance 2024](#)). Research suggests that this engagement can also improve absenteeism and disinterest, and to develop relationship skills, agency, and identity ([Naftzger & Newman, 2021](#), [Pyne et al., 2023](#)). Researchers have found evidence that students who participated in summer learning that included mathematics instruction and enrichment activities later performed higher on math assessments compared to a control group ([Lynch et al., 2022](#)).

Learning Policy Institute's Report ([Bang et al., 2021](#)) emphasizes that high quality summer cannot center solely on "academic recovery." They describe best practices grounded in learning theory, requiring: "experiences that are intellectually honest and authentic; that provide opportunities for joy, exploration, play, and self direction; and experiences that offer...a chance to study and understand the world." They urge leaders to create programs that: "center the range of experiences, needs, and dreams that young people will be bringing with them to learning environments."



RESEARCH IN ACTION...

SEATTLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- 109 schools
- 51,000+ students
- Urban community

SCHOOL DISTRICT STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

	All Students	K-4 Summer Learning Students
Native American	0.4%	0.5%
Asian	12.5%	20.4%
Black/African American	14.3%	20.4%
Hispanic	15.3%	26.8%
Pacific Islander	0.6%	0.6%
Multiracial	0.6%	0.7%
White	44.6%	21.3%
Special Education Served	18.2%	24.1%
Multilingual Served	14.7%	42.4%

High-quality summer programming can support broader district goals to improve learning overall. Since 2022, Seattle Public Schools has focused on how afterschool and summer learning contribute to a coherent strategy for year-round education through rigorous, engaging learning that includes academics and enrichment. The district describes this as “200 Days of Excellence: a commitment to continuous learning and student success beyond the traditional school year.”

To achieve this commitment, the summer learning leadership team made strategic choices:

- Focused attention to summer’s role in year round learning: They established a vision of the importance of extended learning to student success, and aligned summer goals with overall district goals. Leaders drew from research to design programming to prevent summer slide, and develop opportunities for educators to engage in creative instruction.
- Cross-departmental planning: They brought together key leaders across academics, partnerships, operations, and transportation to ensure clarity and commitment.
- Collaborative, year long practices: Full year planning for curriculum and instruction, partnerships, specialized learning, including CTE, MLL, and Special Education.

SNAPSHOT OF THE SPS ELEMENTARY SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAM:

- Full day, 4 weeks, 5 days a week.
- Programming: balance of targeted academic support and enrichment.
- Morning: instruction in SEL, ELA, and Math with licensed SPS teachers.
- Afternoon: CBO instructors provide STEAM enrichment, complementary to academics.
- Serves ~1300 elementary students at 7 school sites.
- Selection: students scoring below the 60th percentile in both Math and Reading, based on Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) Assessment, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), and teacher recommendations.
- Classroom design: 20:2 student-adult ratio to ensure individual attention.

INTENTIONAL, ENGAGING ACADEMICS

The Seattle team knew they had to disrupt students' mindset that summer school meant failure and remediation. So, they committed to students' growth and joy by offering hands-on learning within academics and enrichment, and by providing project based learning that might have been inaccessible without the program.

As Lisa Clayton, Program Coordinator, describes: "You are not going to make someone a reader in 19 days. However, you can build their confidence, so they see themselves as someone who can succeed in school and who can enjoy learning." Sara Mirabueno, Director of Continuous Improvement, emphasized how critical this shift is: "our summer learning is breaking the idea of 'catching up' as the goal. Instead, we are focused on centering students' passion for learning, expanding their sense of hope, and seeing themselves as successful learners."

The summer learning curriculum is academically rich and culturally-specific. The ELA curriculum team created summer instruction that centers Scholastic's Rising Voices libraries, a collection of STEAM-focused books centering and reflecting diverse student populations. The team built out summer specific ELA lessons tied to the routines of Seattle's regular school year ELA instruction.

This allowed summer staff to teach in creative ways, using books in which students saw themselves reflected, and emphasizing core literacy routines and concepts that enhanced students' literacy skills.

Math programming blends [Envision](#) with [Math for Love](#), and schools also include social emotional learning. Additionally, the summer learning team collaborated with the multilingual learning and math department to develop "Marketplace," a four week, hands-on project where students conceive, design, market, build, and sell a product or service, culminating in a community market. This project requires students to use skills in math, literacy, and communications to create a reflection of their identity. The team designed Marketplace using principles of high quality project based learning that were aligned to reading and math standards, and centered student discourse, critical thinking, and reflective writing. Additionally, this project supports teachers to develop instructional skills in project based learning, which many do not engage in during the regular school year.

Across these academic innovations, students engage in learning that requires deep thinking and application, which in turn boosts their confidence that they are successful learners who belong in school. Educators report that this confidence carries over into the school year.

FUN, JOYFUL, ENRICHMENT FOR LEARNING

SPS believes that enrichment programming is essential to their success in summer, as it signals to students that this is not “school as usual,” invests them in learning in ways that regular school does not, and complements their academics with joyful experiences. As Lisa Clayton described: “you want students to experience productive struggle, but they need to find joy within that, otherwise, they stop. The enrichment that our CBO partners provide is also part of academics! They are providing rich programming centered on science and math, building students’ confidence and critical thinking skills in a space where they are supported to grow.”

Seattle’s summer programming team chose CBO partners to lead enrichment. The team recognized that they did not have enough internal expertise in STEAM and that CBO educators were best suited to provide the tailored project based learning experiences.

To fund this initiative, Seattle’s summer learning leaders leaned into cross-district collaboration, partnering with the Director of CTE to share the cost. This provided a mutual benefit: STEAM enrichment in summer supports elementary school students’ exploration of careers and technical education and encourages their

participation in secondary CTE programs. The success of this innovation has led to sustainability: the Director of CTE has included CBO summer funding into his annual budget.

SPS has developed a thoughtful application process for CBOs to provide enrichment services, including demonstration of mission and vision alignment, programming that complements academics, and commitment to equity and inclusion. Summer 2025 CBO partners were: Seattle Parks and Recreation, Seattle Universal Math Museum (SUMM), STEM Paths Innovation Network (SPIN), Mathnasium, Communities of Rooted Brilliance, and East African Community Services. SPS provides CBO instructors, partners, and school staff with integrated and aligned professional learning and support.

The CBO-led enrichment and academics are aligned for purposeful student discourse. As Lisa Clayton shared: “it is all part of the package: there is a hum in the buildings in both the morning and the afternoons; our teachers and CBO partners are supporting students to find success in applied learning that boosts their sense of themselves as successful students.”

IMPACT...

Seattle’s Summer Learning Program is a high-impact, student-centered initiative that delivers measurable success—building skills, confidence, and joy in learning for the majority of participants, as affirmed by both students and families.

Sara Mirabueno described the long term impact: “Prior to SPS providing enrichment, summer programming was not providing the academic results it is now seeing over consecutive years. Providing enrichment to students in the summer not only increases academic

outcomes for students, it creates equitable opportunities and inspires our students to continue to want to learn. We are providing an inspiring educational experience for students that allows them to explore their potential and return to school in the fall more confident and empowered.”

Student surveys indicate that they had fun, learned how to solve problems, and felt more confidence. Families also indicate that they saw increased confidence.

STUDENT SURVEY	FAMILY SURVEY
<p>91% “I got the help I needed in Summer Learning.”</p>	<p>91% “There was support to help my child succeed academically during Summer Learning.”</p>
<p>90% “In Summer Learning, I learned new things or got better at my skills.”</p>	<p>90% “My child is more confident about themselves as a student after Summer Learning.”</p>
<p>86% “During Summer Learning, I learned new strategies to solve problems.”</p>	<p>86% “My child experienced joy during summer learning.”</p>

Furthermore, these qualitative indicators are supported by promising quantitative assessment data. Seattle recognized the importance of reducing “summer slide,” or learning loss associated with summer, which can compound for students who have fewer opportunities for rich summer learning over years. To understand how their program was having an impact on performance on standardized tests, SPS worked with an independent evaluator who considered MAP data for focal groups in summer learning, compared to students who did not attend summer learning.

The analysis indicated statistically significant growth for focal student groups in summer learning on fall MAP data after participating in summer learning in reading and math. This has been true for two consecutive years. The data is showing that summer programming is not only helping to prevent the summer slide but also improving academic outcomes for students.

MATH: K-4 STUDENTS MEETING FALL-FALL TARGETS

	All Students	Special Education	Multilingual Learners	African American Males
Non-summer learning students	52.2%	50.7%	48.0%	47.3%
Summer learning students	53.4%	51.7%	56.0%	55.1%

READING: K-4 STUDENTS MEETING FALL-FALL TARGETS

	All Students	Special Education	Multilingual Learners	African American Males
Non-summer learning students	54.3%	55.2%	55.4%	48.8%
Summer learning students	60.1%	61.1%	57.3%	51.1%

The suggested citation for this case study is:

Dr. Kimberley Ednie, Ed.L.D. (2025, September). *Seattle Public Schools, Washington: Balancing Enrichment and Academics as a Strategy for Academic Growth and Student Confidence.*

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