





CONNECTING THE DOTS

MAKING THE MOST OF AFTER-SCHOOL AND SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAMS

By Robert Bittner

Staying after school used to be a punishment. Summer school used to be remedial. But over the last decade, these concepts have been dramatically updated in schools across the country. Changing demographics, shifting emphases in the school-day curriculum, new technologies—all chronicled by a wealth of recent research—are turning after-school hours and summer months into opportunities for enhanced learning. What's more, they're even fun.

Making the Most of Every Minute

A 2011 Rand Corporation study, "Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning," notes that "students' skills and knowledge often deteriorate during the summer months" and "low-achieving students need additional time on task to master academic content." Because of that, "instruction during the summer has the potential to stop losses that might occur and to propel students toward higher achievement." Rather than

being remedial and reactive, today's summer school helps students avoid the kind of "remember this?" instruction that typifies the first month after summer break.

After-school programs provide specific benefits of their own. A 2014 report from the Afterschool Alliance, "America After 3PM: Afterschool Programs in Demand," says, "More than a decade of research shows that after-school programs across the country are an integral support for children, families, and communities. Each

day after school, quality after-school programs are keeping kids safe; inspiring them to learn; serving as a source of support and comfort to working families; and even helping working parents be more productive at work and keep their jobs.”

Effective education during a typical school day tends to focus on three key learning essentials: aptitude, perseverance, and ability to comprehend. In the words of the “Making Summer Count” study, “aptitude is the amount of time a specific student needs to master a learning objective. Students with high aptitude will learn the objective more quickly than those with low aptitude. Perseverance is the amount of time a student is willing to invest in mastering the objective. Some students, through interest or through learned discipline, spend more time learning. The ability to comprehend the instruction is generally related to language comprehension and the ability to understand the learning task.” In addition, students need to understand what the specific learning goal is, and they must have sufficient materials for learning and the steps required for learning need to be well-organized.

However, research suggests that the best learning occurs when students also are actively engaged with a subject. This is where most after-school and summer programs focus their attention: providing a range of activities and experiences that

encourage engagement and spark imagination. A growing number of schools are also working with artists, experts, and education-focused, community-based organizations (CBOs) to regularly bring such activities into the school day.

Where to Begin

There is no one “best” approach. Some programs focus more on the arts. Some strive to balance mental exercises with athletic activities. Some highlight reading and math retention, whereas others emphasize hands-on projects. Some districts develop their own curriculum and provide their own instructors; others rely on CBOs that specialize in delivering after-school and summer learning. Some schools charge students a fee for participation; others are funded by grants and corporate sponsorships.

Each district and each school needs to develop the program that best fits its students, community, staff, and budget. If you are in an urban school district, for example, research shows that more urban parents (40 percent) prefer after-school programs that provide music, art, and culture than their suburban and rural peers. If you are in a rural district, after school may be your only option; providing summer classes of any kind may be prohibitively expensive.

Whatever the situation, an effective program begins with the principal.

Robin Berlinsky, executive director of Engaging Creative Minds, a Charleston, South Carolina-based CBO, notes that, before it accepts a school as a client, the organization talks directly with the principal. “Our approach has to be principal-driven,” she says. “We want to make sure they’ll support something they may not be comfortable with at first and that they’ll give teachers the freedom to explore it in the classroom.”

On the principal’s side, Courtney A. Howard, interim assistant dean of the College of Charleston’s School of Education, Health, and Human Performance, says, “Principals should be able to articulate a clear vision for how they want the program to serve students and the type of experiences they want their students to have while in the program.

“The principal also should consider to what extent the program will align with the school day, including how students are grouped or organized, what they will do, and who will staff the program. These components will influence the type of experience the students will have and, ultimately, their attendance and engagement.”

No program must deliver all things to all students. The key is to know your resources, as well as your limitations, so you can then make the most of what is available. For example, Ethan Dschaak, principal at Piedmont Valley Elementary

in Piedmont, South Dakota, oversees a K–6 school of over 560 students. Yet that number is deceptive: Piedmont’s total population is just over 200. So Dschaak’s students are drawn from rural communities within a seven- to eight-mile radius—in a district that covers 3,100 square miles.

Piedmont Valley Elementary offers a popular after-school program called Capable Kids, which runs from about 2:30 to 6:30 p.m. every school day. The good news is that 80 kids are signed up for the program. The less-than-good news is that the program can handle only 45.

“The South Dakota Department of Social Services oversees our program,” Dschaak explains, “and their rules dictate one adult per 15 kids. Since we have three people working that time frame, we can have a maximum of 45 kids. I’m always asked, ‘Why don’t you hire more people?’ It comes down to facility use. It would be a real challenge to find a place to house a lot more kids in the winter months.” So Dschaak and his team focus on making Capable Kids as effective and desirable as possible.

Representing the other end of the spectrum is 186th Street Elementary School in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Gardena. To some, it may appear to have even fewer resources than Piedmont Elementary. “We’re 100 percent Title I, 86 percent disadvantaged,” principal Marcia Sidney-Reed states. And because

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the neighborhood has very few children, about 75 percent of the students are bused in from other areas. Yet the fact is that Sidney-Reed and her staff are making the most of what they have, with 186th Street Elementary earning awards as a 2016 California Gold Ribbon School and a 2016 Title I Academic Achievement School.

With just over 775 K–5 students in the school, Sidney-Reed notes that 200 participate in the many after-school programs offered. She emphasizes that programs do not have to be grand or expensive. “We celebrated National Public Lands Day with a community service learning project that was sponsored by Toyota and the Audubon Society. We took 56 of our fifth-grade students to clean the Least Tern Colony at Venice Beach. It was the first time some of these children had ever been to the beach! They removed the invasive plants and debris from the colony and went on a birdwatching tour. We make every moment a teachable moment.”



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No matter how engaged students may be, though, the benefits of these additional teachable moments won't accrue without regular attendance. Particularly where summer learning is concerned, regular attendance and engagement are critical, according to the 2016 Rand Corporation study "Learning From Summer: Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Urban Youth."

"We recommend offering at least five weeks of programming—and preferably six or more—with at least three hours of academics per day," the study's authors write. In addition, "district leaders should encourage students to attend for consecutive summers."

Meeting the Challenges

Challenges are inevitable, but not insurmountable. Consider each a teachable moment of its own—but one intended for administrators and staff.

"School-based after-school and summer programs can find it challenging to establish a program 'culture' that differs from the school day while using the school building

and using school-based staff," Howard says. "If the principal does not intend for the after-school program to be an extension of the school day, then paying attention to the culture and curriculum of the program is vitally important."

"Also, if staff teachers are working in these programs, making the shift from the school-day culture can be difficult. This can be especially true for teachers who are expected to focus on academics with their own students or in their own classrooms during these programs. In all fairness to them, these programs are second jobs to teachers. In the case of after school, wouldn't any of us feel challenged if our second job began a mere 15 minutes after our first job ended?"

The Power of Partnerships

Gigi Antoni, CEO of Big Thought, a Dallas, Texas-based CBO specializing in arts-focused in-school experiences and arts- and STEM-based summer learning, points out that schools approach her organization—and others like it—because "they're looking at expanding beyond the expertise of a teacher for summer learning and after school. There are people working at professions with skills that teachers don't have." Providing avenues for connecting with such experts is a big part of the service provided by education-based CBOs. But these organizations, most of which are

headquartered in big cities, are not available for every district or every budget. That doesn't mean creating effective partnerships is out of the question.

Antoni recalls working with a school in one small community that seemed especially dry of resources. "So we started talking to the kids," she recalls. "We found that a lot of them were going to a certain gentleman's house on Saturday mornings. He played in a mariachi band, and on Saturday mornings he'd open his garage, all the kids would come, and he'd teach them about mariachi instruments and their place in his culture. So, we asked him if he'd be willing to come to the school after school, bring his compadres, and talk. Now that school has its own mariachi band program.

"The cost for doing that was so minuscule. It raised the profile of the school, got more kids coming to the school instead of choosing a charter or parochial school, and it connects the school to the community.

"In most cities and towns, there are organizations that have built programs and experiences—museums, cultural institutions, science/history—they're looking for ways to be more relevant and support kids in learning.

"In rural communities, it may not be a company or an organization. You may have a person who paints, who quilts, who cooks, who gardens. It doesn't have to be

terribly complicated. It's about connecting real-life activities to what's going on in school. And for kids at risk, this can be the thing that helps them have the perseverance and the grit to succeed."

Principal Sidney-Reed seems to be a natural when it comes to building bridges between the school and the community. Her school is across the street and a few blocks from the headquarters of Toyota Motor Engineering & Manufacturing North America. Toyota now donates computers to the school, and its engineers visit to teach the children how to program robots. She has current and former partnerships at the local high school, at the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles, and even the International Children's Choir of Long Beach.

"I always say that every child deserves a golden opportunity, and every golden opportunity deserves a child," she says. "It's waiting for a courageous leader to just ask. Go out into the community and find those resources. Go to local businesses. It doesn't always have to be about funds; it could be about the services they provide. Find something where children can dream big, where they can see opportunities from another angle. If someone says no, that's OK. Go to the next person.

"I also invite company leaders to come into the school and serve as 'principal

for an hour.' Just being there for an hour and seeing the kids' faces gives them a whole different perspective. When they finish the visit, they're asking, 'What can I do to help?'"

Everyone Can Do Something

A wealth of additional information and resources is available for schools that want to develop or improve their after-school and summer programs. And that pool will only continue to grow, because the need is so great and the possibilities so wide open. Perhaps best of all is the fact that every district, every school—urban, suburban, or rural, wealthy or low-income—can do *something* when it comes to after-school and summer learning.

"When you consider the amount of time students spend outside of school, it makes sense to pay attention to how best to use this time for students' benefit," Howard acknowledges. "I think it is important to stress, though, that this is a collective effort. No one school should go at it alone.

"I hope principals will feel empowered to connect with local colleges and universities, extracurricular providers, community groups, local government, and each other more, to create effective out-of-school systems that provide relevant, enriching, enjoyable experiences for students." •

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