Designing Summer Programs in Districts With Diverse Needs

How to effectively implement digital curriculum to improve outcomes for all students enrolled in summer programs.

Authored by Michelle Rutherford and Denise Kelly Stinson
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School leaders across the country are increasingly changing the structure of summer programs to meet a wider range of student needs. Over time, the focus of summer school has shifted from providing opportunities for struggling students to recover lost credits to include new and innovative ways of expanding educational opportunities for all students.

In addition to serving students who need to catch up, innovative summer programs are serving students at the other end of the scale who desire new options and pathways for advancing their education at their own pace — a pace faster or different than that of their peers.

At the same time, stakes are high for students falling behind and schools are challenged to ensure all students move forward. Districts face increasing pressure to show growth in student achievement, while states continue to establish ever higher standards and introduce new assessments of mastery through high-stakes standardized testing.

While meeting these standards, school districts today are expected to offer summer educational opportunities that meet needs across a broad spectrum. As the range of expectations grows, summer programs must be designed in a manner that can serve a myriad of student needs while ensuring positive outcomes for all.

Yet the challenge is greater than simply delivering learning opportunities that meet diverse needs. When designing summer programs, many districts are working with constrained budgets and condensed schedules, as well as limited facilities and personnel. In addition, learning must be engaging to keep students interested and on track during summer courses.
However, there is also growing demand for summer programs that provide additional opportunities and meet a wider range of needs. Many students desire to get ahead, advancing their educations beyond what they can accomplish within the limits and options available to them during the regular school year.

These students want summer programs that allow them to:

- Get ahead in meeting the requirements for early graduation.
- Complete courses at an accelerated rate to participate in advanced programs such as early college or dual enrollment.
- Expand options for additional coursework, certifications, and endorsements through additional electives or AP courses, or through internships or CTE programs.
- Build the knowledge and skills required to demonstrate college readiness through assessments such as the SAT, ACT, TSI, and the ACCUPLACER.

A one-size-fits-all approach to summer programs will meet the needs of a limited number of students only. In order to serve the entire student population, districts require flexible offerings and solutions. Yet that is not the only challenge to overcome.

Meeting diverse needs

Summer programs previously focused on providing credit-bearing remediation for failing students, and this need still exists. Today’s summer programs continue to provide opportunities for remediation and credit recovery, so students can:

- Build prerequisite and foundational skills needed for success in the next grade level.
- Earn course credit in order to get back on track to graduate with their cohort.
- Remediate prior to taking an assessment required for graduation, such as an end-of-course exam or a state-required assessment.
Limitations When Designing Summer Programs

Educators planning summer programs at the district level are likely well-acquainted with the expanding role of summer educational opportunities. They are also likely well-acquainted with several logistical issues that arise when attempting to design programs that meet these diverse needs, in addition to the budget concerns that are an inevitable part of the planning process. Regardless of individual program design, districts must be able to offer standards-based, flexible programs in a cost-effective manner in order to stay within their budgets.

Realizing the true potential of technology takes more than videotaping a lecture, creating PDF versions of textbooks or giving students access to productivity applications to create documents and presentations. It means producing digital content that actively engages students in learning and supports teachers in building meaningful connections among the digital coursework, the physical classroom and the outside world.

After budgeting requirements are met, staffing, facilities, transportation, and curriculum-planning must also be addressed. Common concerns include:

- Finding qualified teachers willing to work during the summer, particularly when the courses contain specialized subject matter.
- Limited facilities, as only some school buildings are available for summer program use.
- Transporting students from their home school to a centralized summer location.
- Ensuring proper standards-coverage within the condensed time frame of summer programs — ranging from 3 to 8 weeks.

Given these constraints, how do school leaders make those programs a reality in a cost-effective manner?
An increasing number of school districts are discovering the advantages of digital curriculum as a flexible and cost-effective solution for summer school programming. High quality digital curriculum allows districts to serve students with a wide range of needs despite limited resources. The right digital curriculum can enable personalized learning and enable districts to scale summer programs. When districts are able to offer scalable, personalized learning opportunities, they can improve outcomes for all students, from those who need to recover credit to those who wish to accelerate their learning through advanced programs.

In short, adopting digital curriculum enables greater flexibility for districts. Consider the following planning questions:

### Facilities: Which facilities are available during the summer?

### Scheduling: When will teachers and students work? How many days per week? During which times of the day? Will students be expected to complete any offsite work? Will any activities, such as summative assessments, require on-site proctoring?

### Credit and Course Type: Which types of courses will be offered? Recovery? Remediation? Advancement? Enrichment? Which subjects will be offered?

### Staffing: Who will teach each course? What kind of support staff will be needed? Administrative?

### Enrollment Fees: Will there be a cost to enroll? Will waivers be offered for students with free or reduced lunch status?

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Students at Cuyahoga Falls City School District who wish to earn credit toward early graduation, create a free period in the next year’s schedule for an elective, or choose early dismissal can participate in a five-week summer program. While most students are enrolled in original credit courses, a small group of students take courses for credit recovery in order to regain tracking for on-time graduation. Students pay a fee of $250 and are served by highly qualified teachers.

Students complete course work from home with the exception of unit, semester, and final assessments, which are proctored at school. Highly qualified teachers are available on-site on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 8 a.m. to 12 noon to proctor assessments and help students who need assistance or require face-to-face instruction.
Leveraging a digital curriculum to support summer programs provides flexible planning options. Leadership teams should also keep in mind three available models made possible through the use of a digital curriculum:

**Blended Learning**
Blended instruction is offered mostly onsite with a portion of the instructional time occurring offline. This model leverages teacher relationships and relies on the digital curriculum for assessment and instruction.

**Independent Study**
Instruction occurs mostly offsite. Students are expected to pursue learning on their own time and come to school for tutoring and proctored assessments. This model is best for students who are self-motivated, independent learners.

**Virtual Learning**
Instruction is provided by a centralized virtual program teacher. This model is best for students who are unable to physically attend school and is widely used to support course offerings with limited enrollment. Districts can have their own virtual school program or choose to offer it through a partner such as Apex Learning Virtual School.

Dorchester School District Two uses Apex Learning digital curriculum to provide credit recovery and original credit opportunities.

Certified teachers facilitate multiple courses within their content area. Students apply to participate and pay a $275 fee for each course to offset the cost of teacher and administrator stipends. Students from across the district attend classes Monday through Friday over a six-week period at a central location. Students enroll in four-hour sessions held in the morning and afternoon. Students are permitted to enroll in both morning and afternoon sessions to complete two full courses.

Students complete course work at their own pace and receive targeted instruction from the on-site certified teacher. Upon completion, students earn credit for the course and are dismissed from the program. Teachers comment that the resulting smaller

No matter which model is implemented, utilizing a digital curriculum enables districts to work within the constraints of summer programs while meeting diverse student needs and improving outcomes.

**Summer programs can be tailored so that:**
- Courses are offered regardless of demand.
- Learning occurs both onsite and offsite, maximizing facilities.
- Learning is focused, ensuring standards coverage within short timeframes.
- Teacher involvement is increased without increasing allocations.
- Curriculum is tailored to meet the range of student needs from credit or unit recovery, to exam preparation and accelerated learning.
- Data is easily accessible to students and teachers; reporting should identify whether students have mastered key concepts and skills.
- Summer programs operate within budget constraints.
Guidelines for Selecting a Digital Curriculum

Despite universal benefits offered by all digital curricula, solutions differ, and curriculum decisions should be made with careful consideration for meeting the needs of students and teachers. The most effective digital curriculum engages the learner in active experiences that allow them to learn by doing and provides teachers with actionable formative feedback.

When evaluating options, educators should choose digital curriculum solutions that:

**Contain a standards-based curriculum**
A digital curriculum should be standards-based, designed to meet the requirements of state and Common Core standards.

**Provide actionable data**
Understanding student progress and performance is critical to ensure the intended learning happens in the prescribed timeframe. Teachers must be able to leverage progress and performance data to understand which concepts, skills, and standards students have mastered, and identify those who require additional learning.

**Supports blended and virtual learning options**
A digital curriculum is most effective when it is flexible and scalable enough to adapt to a wide range of needs, including instruction that occurs in the classroom, virtually or in combination.

**Actively engages students**
Digital learning can be as flat as textbook learning if presented in a passive manner. Rather than having students passively watching a lecture or read digital text, active learning promotes “learning by doing”. This interactive approach engages students in a variety of ways, so they learn at their own pace, observing, inquiring, creating, connecting, and confirming each concept. The engagement that results from active learning is particularly important during summer programs when time is of the essence and struggling students.

**Contain scaffolds and supports**
A digital curriculum solution should be flexible and adapt to student needs, slowly moving each learner toward mastery. Referred to as scaffolding, this approach offers temporary support that strengthens understanding by offering a balance of direct instruction, constructive practice, and formative feedback. It enables students to learn at their own pace, interacting with the curriculum in ways most beneficial to them, offering support when and where students need it and checks for understanding as each student progresses.

**Is supported by professional learning**
Successful implementations provide ongoing support for teachers, staff, and administrators. This support goes beyond functionality training to include coaching and mentoring as well as program review and optimization support.
High quality digital curriculum enables personalized learning. Students often begin with a prescriptive, standards-based assessment to identify mastered skills and concepts and to receive individualized instructional plans that direct them specifically to the concepts requiring additional learning. In addition teachers and students are provided with data for mastered concepts. This approach is engaging and motivating for many students because it offers them the ability to self-pace, and provides choice in learning time and location.

Most importantly, personalized learning improves academic outcomes, whether implemented for remedial or advanced programs. With personalized learning, students benefit across the board — and across the district.

When evaluating digital curriculum solutions, leadership teams should give high priority to the personalized learning that a solution does — or does not — enable.
Best Practices for Designing Summer Programs

In addition to implementing a digital curriculum, educators should consider the following best practices when planning a summer program:

**Create Policies and Procedures**
Summer programs differ from opportunities provided during the school year. Districts can proactively avoid potential issues by creating policies and procedures that are applicable during summer programs.

**Define Staff Roles and Responsibilities**
Staffing for summer programs might include teachers as well as administrators or site coordinators, and support staff. In addition, counseling, maintenance or IT staff might be required. Make sure roles and responsibilities are clearly defined for each position.

**Provide Professional Learning Opportunities**
Summer programs are typically condensed into short timeframes. Make sure teachers are fully prepared for the differences. Professional development will also ensure a digital curriculum is used to its fullest extent for the benefit of student learning.

**Give Students Scheduling Options**
The best summer programs offer flexibility and scheduling options. With a digital curriculum, students can work from any device with Internet access, allowing them to complete work beyond scheduled school time. Many students take part in activities such as work and athletics during the summer. Flexible scheduling options can increase participation, motivation, and successful learning.

**Require Students to Complete One Course at a Time**
Optimize staffing resources and help students focus, by limiting the number of courses students can take to one course per session. If multiple sessions are offered, limit students to a maximum of two course enrollments at one time.

**Assess Fees for Each Course**
Many summer programs charge a fee to cover the cost of teacher stipends for instruction and proctoring. Assess fees per course, and collect the fees with the student’s summer school application. Consider offering a few waivers for students with free or reduced lunch status.

**Provide a Student Orientation on the First Day**
Establish clear expectations to set students up for success during their first day. Explain policies and procedures, set clear attendance requirements, discuss student work expectations, and explain communication and motivational support systems.

**Motivate Students for On-Time Course Completion**
Staying on track during summer programs can be a challenge when students are juggling jobs, sports, and the distractions of a break from the regular school year. Encourage teachers to have a plan for motivating students to stay on track, whether the learning offered is onsite or offsite.

**Monitor and Respond to Student Progress**
With a digital curriculum that offers robust reporting, educators can monitor student progress and drill down to identify students who are succeeding, and students who are struggling. Teachers should be prepared to monitor progress and have an intervention plan in place to assist students who are not progressing or who are struggling.

**Communicate and Facilitate Student Progress**
Teachers should communicate frequently with students and parents throughout the course using predetermined methods.
Conclusion

Summer programs have grown in complexity as student needs have expanded from those requiring remediation to advanced opportunities. Yet the challenges to designing cost-effective, feasible summer educational opportunities remain. Districts that adopt personalized learning models powered by a digital curriculum can design and implement summer programs that meet diverse needs and ensure positive outcomes for all students.

Resources

http://www.christenseninstitute.org/blended-learning-definitions-and-models/?gclid=Cj0KEQjw5Z63BRCLqqt6dk7gBEiQA0OuhsMl27ImEdxaOyuVu5HgPc89EKr78q_4mLuPW32iV9uEaAuX38P8HAQ

http://gettingsmart.com/publication/blended-learning-implementation-guide-2-0/

http://www.inacol.org/resource/inacol-national-standards-for-quality-online-teaching-v2/


http://www.amazon.com/Blended-Disruptive-Innovation-Improve-Schools/dp/1118955153
About the Authors

Michelle Rutherford  
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Michelle leads a team of implementation success managers who work with districts across the nation to maximize student outcomes. Michelle is focused on identifying and sharing ideal implementation models and best practices for virtual and blended learning programs. She also designs services to help district and school administrators plan and evaluate their programs, and to support the development of specific skills and strategies for teaching with a digital curriculum. Prior to joining Apex Learning, Michelle served as an Instructional Technology Interventionist and Blended Learning program coordinator for Dorchester School District Two in South Carolina. Michelle began her career in education as a biology teacher in 2001. She holds an undergraduate degree in secondary science education from the University of North Florida, and a master’s degree in educational technology from Lesley University. She has also attained National Board Certification (AYA Biology). Michelle has presented blended learning models and best practices at numerous district, state, and national conferences.

Denise Kelly Stinson  
*Director of Standards Alignment, Apex Learning*

Denise has extensive experience as a teacher, administrator, and curriculum developer. Denise began teaching in a Title I resource program for students with language delays and later moved into teaching social studies and English language arts at the middle school level. She then began developing content for a number of publishers as a contract writer, while continuing to teach for a private learning center specializing in working with students with learning disabilities. Denise later went to work full-time for a digital content developer that eventually was bought by Pearson. After a number of years, she decided to return to the field and became the Curriculum Director for a national company that managed charter schools in seven states. While working for the charter school organization, Denise was asked to find a new digital curricular resource that had a full course catalog with all courses required for high school graduation and that would prepare at-risk students for success on high-stakes and exit-level exams. After working with the Apex Learning digital curriculum and staff, Denise decided to return to the publishing world. She is now the Director of Standards Alignment at Apex Learning where her role ensures the development of standards-based courses and content.
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This white paper is sponsored by Apex Learning, the leading provider of blended and virtual learning solutions to the nation’s schools. Our digital curriculum provides an active learning experience that engages all students in rigorous coursework to prepare them for college and work. The standards-based digital curriculum — in math, science, English, social studies, world languages, electives, and Advanced Placement® — is widely used for original credit, credit recovery, remediation, intervention, acceleration, and exam preparation.

Contact info@apexlearning.com for more information.