Reimagining Summer Programs

Best Practices for Expanding Summer
Learning Opportunities for All Students

Authored by Michelle Rutherford

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Best Practices for Expanding Summer Learning Opportunities for All Students

As we move forward through the pandemic and its impact on learning during the 2020-2021 school year, districts are reimagining their summer programs. How can they balance the need to help more students, provide more classes than usual, bridge learning gaps across skills, concepts, and sometimes courses, and address the social and emotional needs of exhausted and frustrated students and teachers? It is a lot to tackle, but it is doable. We are all walking a new path forward, and there are no right answers. There are, however, lessons to be learned from years past. Combine them with all that we've learned since March 2020, and some creative ideas for summer programs in 2021 emerge.

The evolution of "summer school"

Historically, summer school primarily served students needing to recover lost course credit to get back on track for on-time graduation. Students attended school for four to eight weeks to repeat up to two courses and receive credit toward graduation. These traditional "repeater courses" offered students a standard, condensed scope and sequence, focusing instruction on the essential skills and concepts in the course.

In recent years, forward-thinking districts have introduced digital curriculum to support credit recovery efforts and to personalize learning through prescriptive assessment. This innovation enabled a competency-based progression and allowed for extended work outside of time physically in the classroom. Students can now work at their own pace, potentially faster than the pace of the class. The shift to digital curriculum also allows teachers to facilitate more than one course within a single classroom section, potentially saving districts thousands of dollars in staffing costs.

This year, as districts embrace the flexibility and benefits digital curriculum offers on a larger scale than ever, many are turning to digital learning tools to expand summer learning opportunities to a wider range of students while continuing to support students who need to recover credits.

Summer program best practices

Here are four best practices that are dominating conversations about summer programs this year:

1. Meet the social and emotional learning needs of students so that they are receptive to learning

2. Provide flexible opportunities to earn initial course credit

3. Remediate gaps in prerequisite knowledge prior to advancing grade levels

4. Increase college and career readiness

Best Practice 1: Meet the social and emotional learning needs of students

There is no question that the pandemic is impacting students' mental health. From the grief of losing loved ones to the anxiety of isolation and everything in between, more students than ever are suffering. And until their social and emotional learning needs are addressed, mastering new material will continue to be a challenge.

Summer programs can provide students the opportunity to focus on character development, behavioral intervention and restorative practices, and mental health and well-being. They can return to the classroom in the fall with skills and strategies needed to engage fully in their learning.

Best Practice 2: Provide flexible opportunities to earn initial course credit

Summer programs can give all students a head start in the coming school year. Students who did not struggle with academic content in the previous school year may choose to participate in summer programs for a variety of reasons, including:

- A desire to graduate early

- Qualifying to participate in early college or dual enrollment courses

- Making time in the upcoming school year schedule for specific courses or work-study experiences

When summer programs are expanded to include opportunities to complete courses for initial credit toward graduation, the use of digital curriculum allows more students to be included. In addition, schools can realize significant cost savings compared to traditional summer offerings—and address possible staffing shortages—because each teacher is able to support more students. Teachers meet with students periodically for instruction, progress check-ins, lab activities, and assessment proctoring. Robust digital curriculum offers several benefits for students as well. Because digital curriculum enables online, self-paced learning, students can work on lessons and activities from any device with Internet access, in a location and at a time of their choosing. Online or blended summer programs can meet the needs of students who are unable to physically attend classes due to health safety concerns, transportation issues, life circumstances, or summer jobs.

Summer program profile

Fullerton Joint Unified School District, California

Getting a jump start

Incoming freshmen get a jump-start on health education requirements and learn valuable skills before their first day of high school

When updated content standards for health education took effect in California, Fullerton Joint Union High School District saw summer as the perfect time to help incoming freshmen transition and start completing high school graduation requirements before school even began. For flexibility, the district decided to offer the course virtually. This option empowered students to complete the course at their own pace, when and where it was convenient for them. To ensure equitable access for all students, the district offered the option to use a school computer lab in addition to a fully virtual option.

While the two-week, standards-based health course fulfills the new California Healthy Youth Act standards, the course also provides students with a unique online learning experience. "Students are used to being passive and waiting to be told what the answer is," shared Lisa Valdes, Online Learning Department Chair for iSierra Online Academy. "The online health program pushes these soon-to-be high schoolers out of their comfort zones and starts to teach them how to problem solve and take ownership of their learning." Because the health content isn't quite as rigorous as other online courses, it's a good opportunity for students to practice online learning skills such as taking exams, interacting with teachers and other students, submitting assignments, and other tasks needed to excel in high school, college, and the workplace.

Fullerton Joint Union High School District offers online learning to students through the iSierra Online Academy, so they already had the infrastructure in place to offer the new health course online. Since 2010, the district has partnered with Apex Learning to develop courses that challenge students, enrich learning, and meet standards. According to Valdes, "The California Healthy Youth Act standards are very specific. We wanted to make sure the course we offered really addressed them, so we worked with Apex Learning to build a course directly based on the standards."

After just its first year in 2016, the virtual health course option was deemed a success. In fact, the district continues to offer it each summer. Administrators were pleasantly surprised by completion and passing rates. Nearly 75% of the incoming ninth graders enrolled in and completed the health course requirement. Students reported that they appreciated the flexibility the course gave them to learn anywhere, even while on vacation. They also liked that they had ownership of their learning and that the digital curriculum enabled them to work at their own pace. "We're very happy with how well the program worked for everyone," said Valdes.

Best Practice 3: Remediate gaps in prerequisite knowledge prior to advancing grade levels

Research indicates that even in a normal year, many students are underprepared for high school and need support to succeed due to weak foundations in prerequisite concepts. This is especially true this year. Many students experience early patterns of failure that can lead to the belief that they will not be able to earn a high school diploma. Without effective forms of intervention and support, these reinforcing patterns of failure can cause students to fall further behind and eventually drop out of school.

When educators fail to intervene with struggling students at the middle-school level, those students are likely to struggle even more in high school. In fact, poor performance in middle school is a key indicator of a student's likelihood of dropping out of high school.[1] Ninth grade is a particularly pivotal year for students. Ninth graders have the lowest grade point averages, the most missed classes, the most failing grades, and more behavior based disciplinary referrals than other high school grade levels.[2]

Rising freshman are not the only students who need remediation of fundamental skills and concepts. Learning loss has been a common topic of conversation this year, and the number of impacted students is staggering. Yet digital curriculum offers educators an ideal tool to identify where students are in their learning and provide them with the lessons, practice, and assessment needed to remediate those gaps.

In many districts, students identified as performing below grade level will be invited to participate in summer remediation programs where they're given an opportunity to learn and strengthen the prerequisite skills and foundational concepts needed for success at the next grade level. These proactive intervention programs increase the number of students who are ready for the next grade level.

Best Practice 4: Increase college and career readiness

Under ESSA, states are required to implement strategies to increase the number of students who are ready to take on college-level coursework before they enroll in college. While colleges and universities offer remedial classes to students who don't meet the standards, these institutions are looking to high schools to provide students with the necessary academic foundation and skills before they receive a high school diploma. Similarly, trade schools and businesses expect students with high school diplomas to possess skills that will enable them to quickly pick up the tools of their trade.

The lack of college readiness has long-term negative consequences. One in three freshmen will not complete their first year of college.[3] When students take remedial classes before taking credit-bearing college classes, the likelihood that they will drop out of college during their freshmen year increases by 74%.[4] Districts are offering programs during the summer to prepare high school students for college entrance exams. In these programs, digital curriculum is leveraged to provide prescriptive assessment that delivers a personalized learning plan with adaptive remediation for each student. Students work at their own pace to achieve mastery of the concepts they most need.

Students participating in these programs report an increase in their ACT®, SAT®, and ACCUPLACER® scores, which may improve their chances of entering the college or university of their choice and increase their scholarship opportunities.

Conclusion

Summer learning time has great potential. In the past, summer school was typically reserved for students who had fallen behind. Recently, innovative districts have leveraged summertime to help students get ahead, address knowledge skill gaps prior to grade promotion, and improve college and career readiness. This year, districts are tackling the need to prepare greater numbers of students than ever for the next grade.

Districts can get the most out of summer learning time when programs are expanded to reach more students. Digital curriculum offers flexible options to meet the disparate needs of students. Combining digital curriculum with a summer program allows students to work in a variety of locations and is a powerful way to support student success, free of the constraints of a traditional school day and classroom.

In addition, districts are realizing increased graduation rates while ensuring students are ready for college, life, and work.

Summer Programs Resources

5 Best Practices for Summer Programs

Summer Learning Opportunities Beyond Credit Recovery

Summer Learning Digital Curriculum Checklist

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About the author

Michelle Rutherford

Director of Implementation Design, Apex Learning

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 personalized 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 personalized learning models and best practices at numerous district, state, and national conferences.

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Contact

Apex Learning

1215 Fourth Ave., Suite 1500
Seattle, WA 98161
Phone: 1 (206) 381-5600
Fax: 1 (206) 381-5601
ApexLearning.com