

Introduction

During the academic year 2020-2021, the Tennessee General Assembly enacted legislation to support students whose learning was interrupted by COVID-19. As part of this initiative, Tennessee school districts were required to offer learning loss remediation programs for eligible students during the summer of 2021. Eligibility for this program was based on factors including individual student performance on state reading and math assessments, overall academic performance at specific schools, and economic challenges facing families.

For students who were entering Grades 1-5 in the fall, Knox County Schools offered a 6-week Summer Learning Camp that ran from June 1 through July 9. The camp was 7 hours of daily, in-person programming from 7:45 a.m. to 2:45 p.m. Monday-Friday and included:

- Four hours of reading, writing, and math instruction.
- 1 hour of intervention.
- 1 hour of play.
- One hour of STREAM instruction.

The Summer Learning camp was offered free to families and included bus transportation, free breakfast and lunch meals, and pre-and post-camp testing to measure student progress. The district identified 30 elementary schools to host summer programming. Students from schools that were not selected as summer learning sites attended programming at an assigned school. Enrollment was voluntary.

Purpose of the Analysis

This analysis provides insight into parent and teacher attitudes toward the Elementary Summer Learning Camp. This analysis also offers recommendations to KCS on how it can better serve these populations in developing the 2022 Summer Learning Camp. It was conducted at the request of the executive director of elementary education. The following research questions guided the analysis:

- What value did parents and teachers feel the Summer Learning Camp provided students?
- What attitudes did parents and teachers have toward the Summer Learning Camp?

Method

Two different surveys were administered: one to teachers who participated in the Summer Learning Camp and the other to parents whose children attended it. A total of 161 teachers and 508 parents participated in the survey, which comprised both Likert scale items and open-ended responses, the latter of which were used in this analysis. Values¹ coding was used to code and analyze the survey responses and proceeded as followed:

1. Segments of each survey's data were labeled with initial tags or codes that described what was written. The initial coding resulted in 20 codes of how participants discussed various aspects of the Summer Learning Camp.
2. Those tags were then grouped into categories. Examples included "providing socialization" and "avoiding summer slump."
3. Survey responses were reread to confirm coding decisions, which were then collated into broad, theoretically overarching themes.
4. Patton's² dual criteria for evaluating categories and themes—external heterogeneity and internal homogeneity—was used to confirm that data within themes joined together meaningfully, while the themes themselves held clear distinctions between each other.

Findings

¹ Saldana, J. (2021). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Fourth ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.

² Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. SAGE Publications, inc.

Overall, teachers and parents responded favorably to the Summer Learning Camp. The coding process resulted in three themes that encapsulate teachers' and parents' understandings of the Summer Learning Camp in and beyond the context of COVID-19's impacts on student learning. The findings are detailed below.

(Re)Introducing Socialization

In the context of COVID-19, teachers and parents reported that one of the most significant values the Summer Learning Camp provided students was the opportunity for socialization into the classroom culture. Socialization is the process by which individuals gain specific knowledge, social skills, and values to conform to the norms and roles of a given culture. One teacher summarizes how the Summer Learning Camp was the first opportunity for many kids to experience this process in school:

Many students that were in my class were virtual learning the previous year. Therefore, the first weeks were a refresher on being "at school" and remembering those simple routines and expectations while learning.

Many other teachers gave similar answers, which demonstrate how social interactions and interpersonal relationships are embedded in the educational process and vital to developing students' school-based competencies. Findings suggest the benefit of Summer Learning Camp was as much about giving students the opportunity to learn how to socialize with others in the school setting as it was providing them with the necessary curriculum support. As one parent described, "*Socialization and academic continuation will help us stay on grade level after a half virtual, one long-term sub, half in-person year.*"

Educational Benefits Exceed Coronavirus

While the aim of the Summer Learning Camp was to fill in learning gaps that occurred due to the coronavirus pandemic, many teachers and parents reported that the program was addressing educational issues that had existed before it. Parents and teachers referred to the smaller class sizes, one-on-one teaching, learning continuity, and maintained structure much more in the context of preventing the "summer slide" or "summer slump" than in addressing COVID issues. One parent summarizes the experience of many parents in describing their child's involvement with the Summer Learning Camp,

he had more one-on-one time with his teachers and felt more confident in what he was learning. He had extra time to practice skills that he learned the following semester. It avoided the "summer slump" and kept him actively learning.

Parents based the value of the Summer Learning Camp mainly on their ability to see an increase in reading comprehension, writing ability, and math understanding. In addition, that their child felt more confident in these skills gave the parents some assurance that their child was ready for the upcoming school year.

It is worth noting that both parents and teachers reported how the absence of pressure from formalized testing seemed to make a significant positive difference for the students who had struggled the previous year. Teachers reported that removing the pressure of "grades" allowed them to focus on student effort, performance, and growth. This opportunity to focus, coupled with the low student-to-teacher ratio, offered teachers the flexibility to meet students where they were academically and behaviorally. According to parents, that children got to experience the low-stress learning environment described by teachers had positive impacts at home. Their children felt excited to go to school and, as one parent wrote, "enjoyed the opportunity to learn without the pressure of quiz or test anxiety."

Communication, Consistency, and Time were Overarching Challenges

Many of the more salient challenges parents described seemed to stem largely from a lack of communication about expectations. For example, while many parents described how the low-stakes environment enabled their child to learn, they were concerned whether their child was learning enough given the lack of communication by teachers and the district. In addition, while the Summer Learning Camp did have a pre and post-test, results were not shared with parents. Seeming to recognize how the low-stress learning environment positively impacted their child's learning, parents suggested a daily or weekly "check-in" by teachers on how their child is progressing instead of tests, such as those given during the school year.

For teachers, the main issue was a lack of consistency in educational materials. Overwhelmingly, teachers spoke highly of the social studies curriculum while expressing frustration about the math and ELA course materials. One teacher summarizes how the inconsistencies proved challenging for many teachers:

The Social Studies department did an amazing job with resources. Laid out perfect for day-to-day teaching with little prep. Some of the math fluency was not even close to appropriate levels for my grade level. One question was asking students to look at a picture of items and estimate how long a string was. Many of my students didn't even know numbers or the concept of numbers. We were unable to use most of the resources that were put out."

The surveyed teachers and parents reported the summer learning camps lasted for too long a timeframe. The overarching trend among answers was that four weeks would have been preferable to six weeks. Others cited the decrease in student focus and attention as indicators that the days were too long; however, moving to shorter days could impact parents who work full days and limit the amount of reviewed material.

Conclusion

The analysis suggested there were several themes in the open-response portion of the elementary summer learning camp survey.

- 1) Summer learning camps were largely valued by respondents
- 2) Summer learning camps provided a low-stakes learning environment that most respondents perceived as a positive change from traditional schooling
- 3) Perceived benefits of the summer learning camps included increased socialization among students, some of whom only participated in virtual learning environments during the 2020-2021 school year.
- 4) Summer learning camps could have perceived benefit from better communication between school-based staff and parents about programming, expectations, and student progress and a shorter program duration, and math and ELA curriculum material format that more closely aligned with student needs.

These themes may want to be considered when designing any future summer learning initiative.

