EdSource
Engaging Californians on Key Education Challenges

ISSUE BRIEF

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Down But Not Out: **School Districts Struggle to Provide Summer Programs**

California's grim economic environment has hit summer school programs hard, but all of the state's 30 largest school districts still managed to provide some summer classes for struggling students in 2011, according to an EdSource survey.

The survey's findings included the following:

1. In many cases, summer classes were offered only to students in the most academic trouble who needed to get credits to graduate or to advance to the next grade. As a result, as students return for the start of the regular school year, many will come back having lost considerable academic ground, without the benefit of summer programs to keep them on track.
2. Officials at 25 out of 30 districts said fewer students participated in summer programs in 2011 than in 2008—in many cases substantially fewer than previously.
3. The cutbacks in summer classes come at precisely the time that the majority of these districts have reduced the number of instructional days they offer during the regular school year, in some cases by as much as a week. The result is that a smaller amount of instructional time is available to students—even as a major thrust of national education policy is to encourage more time in the classroom.

4. Although not able to replace most program cutbacks, some promising developments have emerged as models for other districts trying to provide some summer instruction in the face of declining revenues.
5. At least three districts—Oakland, Fresno and Santa Ana—have been able to expand their summer offerings in recent years by creatively using state and federal funding or getting support from private foundations.
6. On a far more modest scale, even as they were forced to make drastic reductions, some districts were also able to offer new nontraditional programs, usually with support from foundations such as the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Walmart Foundation.

Going forward, prospects for student instructional time look as bad or worse. Under the budget agreed to by Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature for the 2011–12 school year, there is a real possibility that the instructional year in many districts could shrink even further, from 180 days two years ago to 168 days this year. This will occur if the state's economy does not grow as projected—and it would result in a loss of more than two weeks in learning time in some districts.

If the regular school year continues to shrink in many California districts, students lagging academically are likely to need summer programs more than ever. However, it is clear that state budget cuts have already prompted most districts to minimize their summer classes. Absent a reversal in schools' financial fortunes, private funding and innovative alternative programs will play a crucial role in providing at least some support for the state's struggling students.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Most school districts have downsized their summer programs—sometimes drastically

The EdSource survey found that most of the state's largest school districts enroll only a fraction of the number of students that participated as recently as the summer of 2008, just before the financial collapse that has had a profoundly negative impact on school budgets. Since then, there has been a steady downsizing of summer schools. The EdSource survey found that at least a dozen districts were forced to make further reductions this year.

Methodology

In July 2011, EdSource conducted a telephone survey of California's 30 largest school districts. EdSource staff contacted officials at each of the districts to find out what kinds of summer programs they were offering, how many students they were serving, and how enrollments compared with previous years. Because many summer programs are decentralized, and district and school site staff were on minimal summer schedules, reaching the responsible staff required multiple phone calls and emails. Not surprisingly, given California's size and diversity, responses ranged widely from district to district. In some cases, officials were themselves not entirely clear as to how many students were enrolled and which school sites were offering summer classes.

(See the table at the end of this report for a list of the districts and their responses.)

Specifically, the EdSource survey found the following:

- Few districts appear to be running comprehensive summer programs across all grade levels, with district-level supervision and funding.
- Most common were districts that offer some classes to help students get the credits they need to graduate, called "credit recovery" programs.
- Middle school and elementary programs were small, likely to be site-specific and often done in conjunction with outside groups and funding. Typically, at the middle school level they were designed to help students get the credit or instruction they needed to move into high school. At the elementary level they were aimed at English learners or students who scored below basic on state tests.
- Some programs offered were the result of efforts by school principals with little or no district support. The shrinkage of summer programs has been accelerated by a 2009 state law[1] giving school districts flexibility in how they spend funds that were previously earmarked just for summer programs.

One of the most dramatic examples of downsizing of traditional academic summer programs occurred in the Los Angeles Unified School District, by far the state's largest with 667,000 students. In 2008, LAUSD spent $51.4 million providing summer academic classes. This year, it is spending about $3 million and is limiting enrollment to one class per student. That has translated into dramatically fewer students participating: from 188,500 elementary, middle, and high school students three years ago to 22,000 high school students this summer.[2]

Several districts are running alternatives to traditional summer programs

The EdSource survey found that several districts have come up with innovative new models for summer programs and, in some cases, with alternative funding sources to make sure that their students have summer options. In many cases, community organizations and other institutions, including colleges and universities, are playing an increasingly important role in filling the gaps left by the decline in public school summer classes. National foundations are also emerging as major supporters of summer programs, especially those involving "enrichment" activities that are intended to promote learning outside of a traditional classroom setting.

But these options are able to make up for only a small portion of the cuts in state-funded programs.

Innovations identified by EdSource included the following:

- Elk Grove Unified near Sacramento has arranged for students to take online summer classes at their schools' computer labs if they fail a class.

- Also near Sacramento, Twin Rivers Unified is attempting to reduce summer reading loss by sponsoring programs each Wednesday morning for students and their families at nearly a dozen school libraries—and encouraging students to check out books to read.
- In San Francisco, community organizations are trying to fill in the gaps by targeting summer programs to low-income students. For the past two years, the nonprofit San Francisco Summer Learning Network has provided training to the staff of the community groups on how to integrate academic content into summer recreational programs such as cooking, kayaking, and habitat restoration.
- School districts such as Elk Grove, Santa Ana and Los Angeles Unified are collaborating with nonprofit groups such as the Santa Ana–based THINK Together and LA's BEST with the support of private philanthropic foundations to launch new summer programs.
- Some school districts are consciously trying to provide ways for students to make up the credits they need to graduate during the school year, as a way to minimize the need for summer classes. For example, Sweetwater Union High School District is offering extra classes before and after school during the school year, and Moreno Valley Unified added a seventh period.
- In some parts of the state, county offices of education are playing a key role in providing summer offerings. For example, a high school summer program is run in conjunction with the Orange County Office of Education, and some of the area's largest districts, including Capistrano and Anaheim, send their students to that program.

Flexibility in state funds enabled districts to reduce summer offerings

California's public schools have traditionally offered free summer classes for a range of reasons. A major focus has been to offer "credit recovery" classes for students who need to make up classes in order to graduate or to avoid being held back a year. In particular, many classes were offered to help students successfully make the transition from elementary to middle school, or from middle school to high school—so-called "bridge programs." These programs are still popular with many high school principals who find funds to support them.

Under Education Code Section 37252, school districts were required to spend the funds they received to provide programs for students who were in danger of being retained in the same grade, or not graduating. They were also required to provide programs for students who had not passed the California High School Exit Exam.

The EdSource survey found that the shrinkage of summer programs in California has accelerated since a state law gave school districts more spending flexibility beginning in 2008–09. Summer school funding was included in a group of "categorical" programs for which the state continued funding and discontinued its requirements for how the funds are spent, an arrangement that will be in place until the 2015–16 school year. The funding for these programs was also cut 20% that year. (Requirements for summer services for special education students based on their Individualized Education Program still apply.)

As a result, school districts are no longer required to provide summer programs of any kind to regular education students. At least three-quarters of the districts surveyed indicated that they had taken advantage of this flexibility. Most districts reported that they had used the flexibility to shore up their programs during the regular school year, which likely included programs to support struggling students. Several said they instituted programs during the regular year with the intent of minimizing students' need for summer programs.

IMPLICATIONS

Summer programs can help narrow the achievement gap

The shrinkage of summer programs comes against the backdrop of a growing body of research showing that a long summer without any academic involvement is a likely contributor to the achievement gap between higher-achieving students and low-income and disadvantaged minority students. Narrowing the achievement gap has been a major focus of state, national and local education policies during the past several decades. Educators fear that the absence of robust summer programs will make that goal even more elusive.

A June 2011 RAND Corporation report titled *Making Summer Count* summarized research showing that "by the end of the summer, students on average perform one month behind where they left off in the spring." The report noted that low-income students are likely to lose even more ground, that these learning losses are cumulative, and that students may never overcome them. Underscoring the importance of summer programs, the report concluded "it may be that efforts to close the achievement gap during the school year alone will be unsuccessful."

Conversely, the report also found that students who attend summer school have better outcomes than students from similar backgrounds who do not attend summer programs.

The report suggests that low-income students are the ones most likely to be hurt by the contraction of summer programs. These are the students who are likely to be the most at risk academically. They are also the students whose parents are least likely to be able to afford to send them to pricier, privately run summer programs or camps.

The RAND report also points out that simply providing a summer program is not sufficient. "Programming needs to be high quality, and students need to enroll and attend regularly," the report said. But without outside help, schools that serve high numbers of low-income students—and thus need to provide more robust summer programs to support student achievement goals—are unlikely to have enough funds to do so effectively.

Collaboration with nonschool groups is a key strategy for sustaining summer programs

The EdSource survey found that several school districts are doing what the RAND report recommends is necessary to sustain successful summer programs, including forming partnerships with a range of outside organizations and institutions.

These partnerships can include smaller community-based organizations, private summer learning providers, colleges and universities, city and county governments and local funders. In addition, the RAND report recommends being creative about the staff who can be recruited to run summer programs, including college students, AmeriCorps students and teachers who are trying to get their administrative credential to be summer coordinators.

CONCLUSION

Private summer programs paid for by parents who can afford them are widely available in communities across the state. Threatened are the free summer classes traditionally offered by the state's public schools for students who are struggling academically and who need to make up classes so they can graduate or avoid being held back a grade. Classes for students who may not be in academic

peril, but who could nonetheless benefit from summer classes, have been largely eliminated in most districts.

But despite the absence of a state mandate to provide summer classes, all of the state's 30 largest school districts are still providing some classes for the students in the greatest academic danger. A few districts actually increased their summer offerings this year. In addition, multiple innovations are springing up, though typically on a modest scale, both to provide alternatives to programs that have been eliminated and to offer some broader "enrichment" programs that don't focus exclusively on academics.

These innovations could provide the foundation on which to build a statewide system of summer learning that is not exclusively school-based, but involves a wider range of players and institutions.

Based on research and responses from educators, summer programs should not be regarded as a frill, but as an essential element of a student's educational experience.

Depriving students of summer learning opportunities, compounded by less instruction during the regular school year, could contribute to the state's dropout rate and not just slow progress on closing the academic achievement gap, but contribute to widening it.

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ENDNOTES

1 So-called Tier 3 reform (SBX3-4; Chapter 12, Statutes of 2009), see RAND/PACE report, Deregulating School Aid in California, May 2011. www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1426.html

2 In partnership with nonprofit programs like LA's BEST, the district is also offering so-called "enrichment" programs for about 14,000 elementary and middle school students, three times fewer than in 2008.

To Learn More

This EdSource InSight "Quick Report" is intended to respond to a current issue in a timely fashion. For more information about summer learning:

- The National Summer Learning Association, www.summerlearning.org/
- *Making Summer Count,* www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1120.html
- National Center on Time and Learning, www.timeandlearning.org/

For an explanation of the 2009 changes in summer school funding, see these resources from EdSource:

- *School Finance 2009–10: Budget Cataclysm and its Aftermath* at www.edsource.org/pub_SchFin09-10_report.html
- And see www.edsource.org/data_09-10_categoricals.html for more detailed information about the programs and funding amounts.

520 San Antonio Rd, Suite 200, Mountain View, CA 94040-1217 ■ 650/917-9481 ■ Fax: 650/917-9482 ■ edsource@edsource.org
www.edsource.org ■ www.ed-data.k12.ca.us

Summer Programs at California's Largest School Districts

The information in this table was collected by EdSource staff through phone interviews with available staff at the districts or, in some cases, at school sites. The interviews were conducted in July 2011, and the information reported is based on the responses given. Respondents were asked about the types of programs they were offering and to compare those programs with what the district had offered prior to the recession and prior to the state's elimination of its requirements for use of summer school funds. Official data or reporting on summer programs in these districts was typically not available.

District	Offered Some Summer Programs in 2011			2011 Overall Summer Enrollment Compared With 2008
	Elementary	Middle	High	
Anaheim Union High	n/a*	Yes	Yes	Smaller
Capistrano Unified	No	No	Yes	Smaller
Chino Valley Unified	Yes	No	Yes	Smaller
Clovis Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Similar
Corona-Norco Unified	No	No	Yes	Smaller
Elk Grove Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller
Fontana Unified	No	No	Yes	Smaller
Fremont Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller
Fresno Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Larger
Garden Grove Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller
Kern Union High	n/a*	n/a*	Yes	Similar
Long Beach Unified	No	No	Yes	Smaller
Los Angeles Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller
Montebello Unified	No	No	Yes	Smaller
Moreno Valley Unified	No	No	Yes	Smaller
Mt. Diablo Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller
Oakland Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Similar†
Poway Unified	No	Yes	Yes	Smaller
Riverside Unified	No	No**	Yes	Smaller
Sacramento City Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller
Saddleback Valley Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller
San Bernardino City Unified	No	No	Yes	Smaller
San Diego Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller
San Francisco Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller
San Jose Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller
San Juan Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller
Santa Ana Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Larger
Stockton Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller
Sweetwater Union High	n/a*	Yes	Yes	Can't compare***
Twin Rivers Unified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Smaller

* No figures available in case of high school districts.

†Although this year's enrollment is smaller than 2009 and 2010, it is similar to summer 2008, when Oakland substantially expanded its summer program.

** Except for about 20 students at risk of failing the 8th grade.

*** The district changed to a year-round program in 2009–10 so students don't have a typical summer schedule any longer.

Notes: Programs for special education students that are required by law are not included in this summary. Programs that require students to pay fees, such as those offered through local community colleges, are also not included.