

THE STORY OF SUMMER

Celebrating & Sustaining Community Learning in Allegheny County



#SUMMEROFPPLAY



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Story of Summer	1
Why is Summer so Important?	2
Summer Snapshots	5

Feature Stories

25 Carrick Ave Project.....	6
H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow, Inc.....	10
Imani Christian Academy	14
Legacy Arts Project	18
Rankin Christian Center	22
Small Seeds Development, Inc.....	26

Photo Essays

Arts & Culture: Summer of Expression.....	30
Attack Theatre	32
Casa San Jose	34

Outdoor Learning: Summer of Sunshine	36
AJAPO	38
Mooncrest Neighborhood Programs	40
P.O.O.R.L.A.W.....	42

Academic Enrichment: Summer of Success	44
Third Child, Inc.	46
Mooncrest Neighborhood Programs	48

Support Summer Learning

Advocacy and Actions	50
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#SUMMEROFPLAY

STORY OF SUMMER



Looking back and leaning in to save summer learning in Allegheny County

In Allegheny County, Summer 2021 was the **#SummerOfPlay**.

After more than a year of pandemic-fueled isolation, growing disparities, and constant unknowns, it was clear every young person in Allegheny County needed summer learning more than ever—playful, joyful, and affirming summer learning.

So a team of community organizations led by the **Pittsburgh Learning Collaborative**, **A+ Schools**, the **United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania**, and **Trying Together** came together to realize a simple vision: Help Allegheny County communities, including kids, families, organizations, and schools, re-engage with each other and embrace in-person, community-based learning.

#SummerOfPlay was a time for healing, self-expression, outdoor adventures, and much more. It was a time for families and learners to re-connect to their communities, have fun, and celebrate a return to in-person learning. At camps and programs across the region, kids of all ages had a chance to learn, let go, and just be, while still preparing for the school year ahead.

To spread the word, #SummerOfPlay made a splash with social media campaigns, yard signs, billboards and radio ads, advertisements and direct mailers, while street teams visited city events and neighborhoods to distribute summer learning information.



268,442

**#SummerOfPlay
social media impressions**

\$2,000,000

**granted to in-person summer
learning programs**

17,000+

**summer learning direct mailers
and flyers distributed**



But why is summer learning so important? And why is it worthy of our time, attention, and funds?

Perhaps most importantly, #SummerOfPlay worked to strengthen the region's emerging summer learning infrastructure, helping organizations tackle bumps along the road during an already challenging year. Understaffed programs? The summer learning job fair attracted prospective employees. Outdated information online? Helpful hands updated the [Bridge to Learn](#) and [Allegheny Child Care](#) websites. Overwhelmed staff? Regular meetups helped bring personnel together to swap stories and ideas.

#SummerOfPlay also supported the most pressing summer learning need: funding. [The United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania awarded grants as part of their Welcome Back! initiative](#) to 66 programs in Allegheny and neighboring counties, thanks to support from The McElhattan Foundation, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services, and several other community partners. [The funding supported programs for about 8,000 children across the region.](#)

Educators have long considered summer a time for “catching up.” Summer schools of old were built around remediation, while modern summer learning still focuses on combating summer learning loss and related [opportunity gaps](#).

[Research continues to show](#) that learners' skills in reading and math dip during the summer months. These declines disproportionately occur in learners from low-income families, who have less access to high-quality summer programs and are often people of color, non-native English speakers, or living in rural areas.

This learning loss increases over time, so that by ninth grade [summer learning accounts for](#)

[two-thirds](#) of the difference in reading achievement between low-income students and their middle-income peers. Plus, the same students most affected by summer learning loss are also more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to attend college.

Summer learning loss means that all across our region and country, teachers often spend the first few months of school on review. This not only wastes funding but squanders precious opportunities for innovative instruction and curriculum development.

Until every young person can access high-quality summer learning experiences, these disparities and poor outcomes are likely to persist.



But summer learning is about so much more than closing gaps. With access to high-quality experiences, summer can be a time for racing ahead.

Summer programs give kids and families, especially those from underserved schools and communities, a **whole child education**. They help learners embrace budding passions, maintain social-emotional wellness, access resources for basic needs like food and healthcare, and explore possible careers.

But summer learning, like its in-school and out-of-school-time (OST) counterparts, is also an issue of equity. Program access falls along familiar divides in race and income, and providers often don't acknowledge the traumas or uplift the cultures, experiences, and joys of non-White learners.

We need to preserve summer learning for seasons to come. It's time we gave summer learning programs and providers the funding, policies, and support they need and deserve.

It's time to save summer.

27%

of Allegheny County children participate in a structured summer experience

35,000

Allegheny County children are not in a summer program, but would be if one was available to them

87%

of Allegheny County parents support public funding for summer learning opportunities

And this summer, these issues only intensified as students of color emerged from a pandemic-era school year that **impacted their lives and learning** more than their White peers.

In Allegheny County, **unmet needs** around summer learning remain high. #SummerOfPlay helped fill gaps in 2021, but programs still faced resource and timing issues exacerbated by the pandemic. Typically, planning for the summer learning season begins in winter. In 2021, it didn't begin until May. Many programs operated behind schedule from the start; many were still trying

to hire staff when programs were usually already underway.

To keep community-based summer learning alive and thriving, we need systemic support that allows for ample and effective funding, planning, and coordination.

Summer learning is an essential part of every child's education and is vital to the fabric of our communities. It opens learners' minds and hearts to life-shaping experiences they may never have inside school walls or elsewhere.

SUMMER SNAPSHOTS

#SUMMEROFPPLAY

Feature Stories

25 Carrick Ave Project.....	6
H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow, Inc.....	10
Imani Christian Academy	14
Legacy Arts Project	18
Rankin Christian Center	22
Small Seeds Development, Inc.....	26

Photo Essays

Arts & Culture: Summer of Expression.....	30
Attack Theatre	32
Casa San Jose	34
Outdoor Learning: Summer of Sunshine.....	36
AJAPO	38
Mooncrest Neighborhood Programs.....	40
P.O.O.R.L.A.W.....	42
Academic Enrichment: Summer of Success	44
Third Child, Inc.	46
Mooncrest Neighborhood Programs.....	48





SUMMER SNAPSHOTS

Explore the stories of a dozen Allegheny County summer learning programs. Relive their successes, learn from their struggles, and see how their experiences can save summer learning seasons to come.

These stories showcase five areas of high-powered learning. Already proven to help prepare learners to succeed in a rapidly changing world, they are even more critical in the time of Covid-19:

- **Arts programs** allow learners to immerse themselves in self-expression. Beyond learning a new set of steps or singing scales, the arts help young people process and heal from large-scale trauma, like systemic racism or the Covid-19 pandemic, while boosting confidence.
- Similarly, **social-emotional learning (SEL) and personal development** programs help students re-emerge from quarantine, remember how to interact with peers, and share their feelings. Kids learn the basics of self-care and experience a needed break from the isolation and intensity of pandemic life.
- Mental health and emotional support, in turn, lay the foundation for **academic success and enrichment**. Free from testing and seat time requirements, summer programs can teach traditional, school-based subjects in uniquely engaging ways—think of learning times tables through song or taking an art class based on

literacy skills. They can also leverage any number of community partners, field trips, and hands-on experiences to reinforce other areas of high-powered learning.

- Leaning into the season, **outdoor learning** programs can increase learners' access to green spaces and physical activity, helping them break the sedentary habits of quarantine, develop motor skills, and reinforce SEL and wellness practices.
- Building on the benefits of other learning areas, summer programs focused on **work readiness** help learners build and apply real-world skills. Learners interact with professionals and build mentorships, which benefit their self-esteem and help them connect to different workforce pipelines, colleges, and employers.

These areas of high-powered learning help young people gain 21st-century skills, prepare for successful, fulfilling careers, and become healthy, happy adults. By offering them as part of summer or OST learning, our communities ensure the greatest number of children can experience them.

25 Carrick Ave Project



The Live Sound Apprentice Program brought student techs together with professionals to learn the science and the behind-the-scenes work of putting on a show.

- Teen apprenticeship program for aspiring live event technicians
- 16 students completed the program in 2021, with the opportunity to earn industry-level certification
- Offers unique job training and helps students grow their personal strengths

When the 25 Carrick Ave Project ran a summer camp in 2019, says Executive Director Pete Spynda, the goal was to train young people to work as technicians for professional events. Located in a former church in Carrick's South Hilltop community, the organization provides training and job placement in the event technology industry.

At the end of camp that year, some participants were hired by Hearcorp, a production company also located in the church that serves as the Project's corporate partner. Spynda remembers what happened after he sent a student out to work a full day: "It was a little more than they anticipated," he says.

Though students were trained to use the equipment, they lacked experience at events.

Taking that to heart, Spynda and his staff created a new kind of camp called the "Live Sound Apprentice Program," which debuted this summer. The camp paired education with experience in the Music on the Mon concert series at Southside



Works. Participants could earn “Live Sound 1” certificates, a recognized industry credential, as well as \$500 stipends that were covered by a Welcome Back! grant. The apprenticeship format, Spynda believes, will help “usher the next generation of techs into place without overwhelming them by throwing them to the wolves.”

The program served a total of 16 apprentices, aged 16 and up, in two four-week sessions. According to Director of Education Jordan Gilliam, they started with coursework that included learning terms and dipping into the science of sound: “What are the voltage stages? What is the mic line?... What’s going to happen when it goes to a speaker, what are all the things that you can do in between?”

At the concert site, they set up PA systems and saw “the load-in of the show, what happens when the truck comes in, when

the tents are going up, when the speakers are getting moved, when the instruments are getting placed, when the microphones are getting placed,” jumping in to help when they could. For the final performance, they worked the whole concert and saw the load-out of the show.

Back at 25 Carrick Avenue, where apprentices had a classroom on the third floor, they were exposed to the day-to-day operations of an event production company. When they came into the building, someone might be mixing the surround sound for a movie, an artist might be recording in the studio, or a nonprofit might be using the stained-glass-lit performance space for a streaming backdrop.

One day, Gilliam went looking for a drumstick for students’ first full band set-up. He ran into Dave Bjornson, founder of both Hearcorp and the 25 Carrick



Apprenticeship “will help usher the next generation of techs into place without overwhelming them by throwing them to the wolves.”

– PETE SPYNDA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Ave Project. “Dave’s like, ‘Oh, you need a drummer?’” Gilliam recalls. “He came upstairs and next thing you know he’s playing, and now the students are yelling at the big boss, ‘Hey, calm down. Just give me a kick.’” Moments like that, he says, are unique to the collaboration and the space.

Spynda, Gilliam, and the part-time instructors who worked with the apprentices have years of industry experience students can tap. Spynda runs several concert series and festivals in the city, and Gilliam has toured with artists such as Wiz Khalifa, Mac Miller, and the Dixie Chicks. They hope apprentices

learned that “there are people making a decent living,” Spynda says, in a range of jobs at an array of events. One of 25 Carrick Ave’s missions is to diversify the field of tech, which requires thinking through what kinds of support candidates need and how to sequence training; for example, to provide certification opportunities that will help them market themselves. Spynda is currently seeking to hire a career counselor for students and hoping to develop after-school programming for all ages. He also plans to continue the apprenticeship program, which drew more than 50 applicants for the 16 spots.

Their goals go beyond job training and placement to students’ personal growth. Though the industry is known for its wolves, Gilliam stresses that working in tech can help young people develop key strengths. For example, techs need to know how to speak clearly in high pressure situations, do their jobs under an audience’s gaze, and talk to performers when they might also be fans.

Gilliam was moved to tears at the story of two brothers who attended the program together, one of whom struggled to relate to others. At the conclusion of the program, his brother said, “I feel like this got him out of his shell and got him used to talking to people.”

But it was a young woman, new to tech, who validated the apprenticeship model for him.



PROGRAM EXPANSION

They hope to expand their summer apprenticeship model into after-school programming for students of all ages.



ADDITIONAL STAFF

25 Carrick Ave Project wants to hire a career counselor for students, to offer more connections to industry insiders and jobs.

Over the four weeks, Gilliam watched her belief in herself grow along with her communication skills. Her parents matched her excitement when they came to a concert and saw her “down in a professional setting...crushing

a show.” She was an example of what working in the tech side of production “can do for a person and their spirit, their personality, and their confidence,” he says. For Gilliam and Spynda, that’s what the program is all about.



What if we invested more public and private funds in high-powered summer learning, like work readiness programs? They help prepare students to succeed in a rapidly changing world and recover from the social, emotional, and academic impacts of Covid-19.

H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow, Inc.



After a lonely year, high-energy Camp H.O.P.E. in the West End helped children reconnect.

- Six-week summer camp for first through eighth graders, plus high schoolers
- 75 students attended camp this summer, taking part in activities ranging from reading, math, and mindfulness, to cooking, dancing, sports, and more
- Offered learners a much-needed reintroduction to socializing after a year of isolation

It started with six kids on a living room couch. Keysha Gomez and her husband, John Paul Gomez, had noticed there wasn't a lot of out-of-school-time programming for youth in their community. "So we started doing what our cultures teach us to do," she says, referring to her Jamaican background and her husband's Gambian background.

They invited children into their home to cook, play chess, and dance. When more and more children came, "we realized that there truly is a need and that we were filling it unintentionally."

That was in 2010. In 2014, H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow (standing for "Helping Ourselves Produce Excellence") was

officially born with nonprofit status and Keysha Gomez as executive director, in Pittsburgh's West End.

H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow filled another need this past year, when schools shut down due to the pandemic. With help from A+ Schools and funding from the United Way and other partners, the organization



SECOND LOCATION

With many children left on the waiting list this summer, they hope to open a second camp location to accommodate interest.



sponsored a learning hub from February through June, providing a safe space for about 40 students overall to attend virtual school while their parents worked. The organization re-opened the hub in August when Pittsburgh Public Schools delayed its starting date.

The learning hubs bookended Camp H.O.P.E., which served 55 first through eighth graders and 20 high school students this summer for six full weeks. The day started with a bang: music blasting as children arrived, matching their high energy, followed by the camp's

traditional chants. After breakfast, younger students read silently for 20 minutes and practiced math skills, which could involve relay races or games of catch to help them memorize facts. Three days a week they learned life skills—including character development offered by the Macedonia Family and Community Enrichment Center, Inc., and entrepreneurship using curriculum from Junior Achievement of Western PA—followed by their choice of two hours of classes at Kulture Dance Academy in McKees Rocks or sports instruction with 5A Elite Youth

Empowerment at a nearby park. And that was just before lunch.

Afternoons were devoted to mindfulness activities and social engagement, with visits to a wave pool once a week. High school students had their own programming, a mix of field trips and a community service project, as well as classes on financial literacy, leadership development, Black cinema, and healthy relationships.

During the school year, H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow partners with community engagement



“I had to take a step back and realize they’ve only seen each other online for the past however many months... We had to remind them, there’s a person in front of you. Make eye contact.”

– KEYSHA GOMEZ, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

officers from the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, who have held cooking classes for children, tutored, played games with them, and taught sports. The officers also showed up for Camp H.O.P.E., including accompanying the younger campers on day trips to Camp Guyasuta, operated by the Boy Scouts of America, Laurel Highlands Council. Older boys who had signed up for Scouts spent five days at the camp, for activities such as swimming, hiking, and archery.

At the beginning, Gomez says the effects of the past year’s social isolation were stark. While many children were returning campers, “It was an eerie feeling when they walked in and just kind of looked at each other” as if they didn’t remember their friends. “I had to take a step back and realize they’ve only seen each

other online for the past however many months,” she says. “We had to remind them, there’s a person in front of you. Make eye contact.” After a few days, she saw their brains, emotions, and bodies “warm up.” By week two, parents who’d been arriving early for pick-up didn’t come until five o’clock. “The kids were telling them, ‘Sit outside and wait for us until the very last minute. We don’t want to go,’” she says.

Among its funders, the organization won a grant from the Pittsburgh Steelers to operate the camp, but Gomez didn’t have the resources to open a second location for the many children on the waiting list. She also would have made different hiring choices if she’d had more funds. “We were able to get staff who had great backgrounds working with youth,” she

A T T I T U D E

determines how well you do it



CERTIFIED TEACHERS

With more funding, H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow wants to hire certified teachers to more deeply address campers' academic needs.



says, but she would have liked to hire some certified teachers to address academic gaps.

Still, Gomez takes the long view. The goal of the partnership with the police is to form lasting relationships, rather than a photo op. Camp traditions are passed on deliberately from older to younger campers to foster a sense of belonging and stability. In that spirit, one former camper turned

counselor wrote, "I enjoyed my time as a student, however, I appreciate the opportunity that I have had to help the next generation of H.O.P.E. children that will come after me."

For Gomez, H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow is part of the ongoing effort of a community to strengthen itself. Especially when it comes to their children, "they want more and we're working together to make more happen," she says.



How can we continue to use Covid-19 relief funds and resources to support summer learning?

Imani Christian Academy



The Community Summer Camp bridged the gap between a private school and the community of East Hills.

- Two-week camp for elementary learners, designed to address pandemic-related academic and social needs
- 25 children attended this summer, receiving meals, transportation, and activities
- Exemplifies programming that connects in-school and out-of-school learning

The staff at Imani Christian Academy had considered sponsoring a camp for children in the surrounding community of East Hills in the past. A camp could both serve residents and bridge the perceived gap between “an underserved community and a private Christian school that is sometimes viewed as being

beyond their reach,” says CEO and Head of School Paulo Nzambi.

The school charges a “modest” tuition, based on a sliding scale, and lacked the resources to offer a camp. This year, the Covid-19 pandemic pushed them to apply for a Welcome Back! grant, which paid for staff, meals, and transportation

for 25 campers for two full weeks. Though the camp was open to Imani students, Nzambi says he and his staff “quite deliberately” called it the Community Summer Camp “to telegraph to the community that this was a camp for you.”

For the campers, who ranged from kindergarteners to fifth graders,



ADDITIONAL FUNDING

Imani Christian Academy would use additional funds to conduct camp again, extending it with themed weeks focused on the arts and STEM.

Instructors designed activities to address pandemic-related gaps, such as fitness routines and penmanship for children who had been sitting in front of keyboards all year. To boost students' engagement, math and reading were interwoven with the arts. Math incorporated music—for example, teaching the times

tables through songs—and visual arts classes mirrored literacy concepts, with activities such as identifying the parts of speech represented in pictures. Twice daily group singing also gave instructors a way to monitor how students were feeling. Children's willingness to "robustly participate in music," Nzambi says, can indicate

their level of confidence and feeling of unity with the group.

That sense of belonging was especially important because the students were "very, very reserved" after more than a year of isolation, he says. While "parents and caregivers did the best that they could," his staff needed to help children relearn social and communication cues.

Nzambi recalls one camper who, at first, didn't want to be there. "He wouldn't make eye contact," Nzambi says. "He had a couple of outbursts in the first two days." The staff learned that he had recently lost a close relative and had no male family members in his home. At camp, in addition to Nzambi, three of the four instructors were men.

"Having that many men interact with him in a supportive, encouraging, and loving way made a huge impact on him," Nzambi says, along with their trauma-informed care.

In the East Hills community, where women outnumber men, many children know men only as authority figures. For his campers, Nzambi hopes that "having been in an environment with so many positive, caring, and loving adult African-American male figures allows them to interact differently with authority than they have in the past."

Before coming to Imani, Nzambi worked at Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, which runs an after-school

Compared to a school, an out-of-school-time provider has “much more freedom to speak to a child, to ask questions, to process, to take [our] time with the child,” which sends the message that “they are truly important and valuable, and that you really care.”

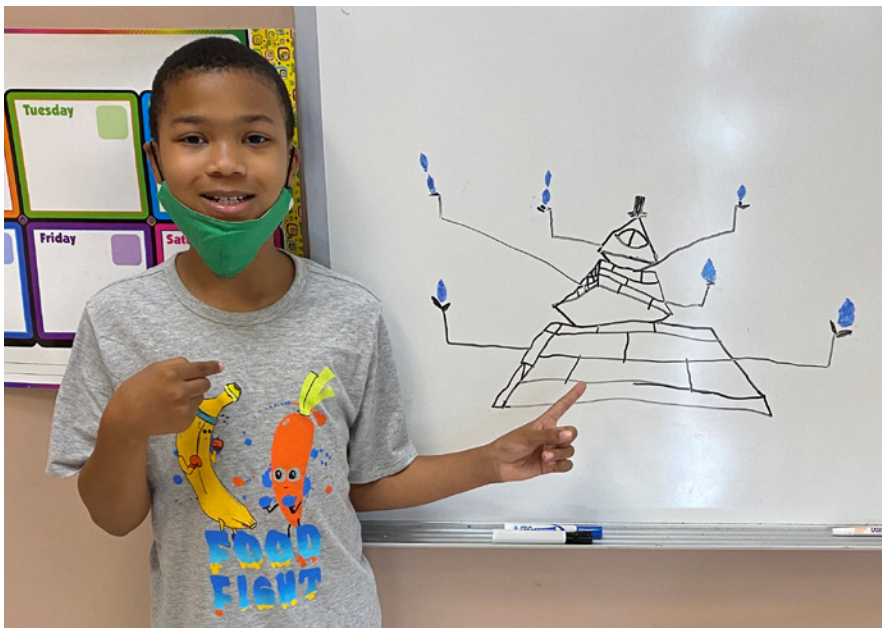
– PAULO NZAMBI, HEAD OF SCHOOL

arts program for teens. Now as head of a school, he has a perspective on what schools and out-of-school-time (OST) providers each have to offer.

An OST provider has “much more freedom to speak to a child, to ask questions, to process, to take [our] time with the child,” which sends the message that “they are truly important and valuable, and that you really care.” OST providers can share examples of programming with schools—such as game-based or arts-infused activities, or ways to use the city’s resources—that are designed to be highly engaging for participants who don’t have to be there.

For their part, schools “do a good job of bringing structure and consistency into the life of children who perhaps don’t have that structure or consistency at home,” he says. They can also “clearly identify those learning standards that you can push towards and reinforce during out-of-school time.”





Community Summer Camp was so successful that the staff is considering seeking funding not only to conduct it again, but also to extend it with additional themed weeks featuring the arts and STEM. Nzambi is already imagining the field trips: “We can take them to the art museum. We can perhaps take them to hear a concert,” or, for a STEM week, the CREATE Lab at CMU or ALCOSAN.

One exchange with a student has stayed with him. On the last day, the boy who had come in angry asked to speak to Nzambi. “Why is camp only two weeks long?” he said.



How can we support summer learning through more integrated and scalable systems, like the Community Schools model or a county-wide summer learning system?

Legacy Arts Project



Through the arts of the African diaspora and African cultural traditions, the Youth Summer Arts Program and Learn and Earn supported joyful learning in Homewood.

- Summer camp and Learn and Earn site for children of all ages
- 40 campers and teenagers studied dance, drumming, martial arts, gardening, and more
- Seamlessly blends learning with cultural tradition, self-affirmation, and community for children of color

For Erin Perry, executive director of the Legacy Arts Project, the concept of “legacy” has more to do with the future than the past. Since 2004, the Homewood-based organization has focused on deliberately passing on the cultural traditions of the African diaspora to children and adults in majority Black neighborhoods in and around Pittsburgh. Rather

than maintaining traditions for the sake of preservation, Perry says the work is to “create the things that we want to see in the world” for a better future.

Since 2015, Legacy Arts has run a summer camp for children, adding a “Learn and Earn” component for teens the following year. This summer, 20 children aged five

through 13 participated in activities ranging from West African dance, drumming, and the Brazilian dance/martial arts form Capoeira, to arts and crafts, smoothie making, and swimming, a rare opportunity for many of her campers.

The same number of teens worked on the camp’s kitchen/maintenance crew, built and tended a garden,



OUT-OF-STATE FIELD TRIPS

With additional funding, Legacy Arts Project would organize long distance field trips for campers, traveling to cultural landmarks like the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture or to the Gullah Islands.



served as apprentices to teaching artists, and helped prepare for “Dance Africa,” the organization’s signature summer event. Citiparks provided meals, and partners including Assemble, CMU, and Women for a Healthy Environment provided programming.

But Perry wants more for both the campers and the teens than the ability to perform a particular dance move or to plant a garden. Children in underserved communities carry “all that has run downhill

onto them,” she says—another kind of legacy that can show up in a lack of confidence, envy, and low self-esteem. Along with modeling positive interactions and resolving conflict in healthy ways, she and her staff held twice-daily gatherings, based on African social traditions, to affirm children as individuals and build community.

“How do we create spaces for people to be able to be seen and heard? How can we facilitate healthy dynamics where people

can...grow in their capacity to communicate with one another? This is the work that we do,” she says. Those goals are reflected in the outcomes she measures. Success looks like “a student who has overcome a difficult moment,” children helping one another, or a child who is motivated to create something without adult intervention. When children are given opportunities to immerse themselves in what they’re doing, she says, “not only are they learning, but joy brings healing.”



“Not only are they learning, but joy brings healing.”

– ERIN PERRY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

One of Perry’s dreams is to be able to take campers out of state, for example, to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, or to the Gullah Islands in South Carolina. In her view, the benefits would surpass exposure to their history. Experiencing “the vibrations from being in a different geography,”

or just breathing different air, can start a process of self-discovery.

With six other local organizations, Legacy Arts has participated in two successful virtual fundraisers. Collaborating to capitalize on their joint capacity, Perry says, is one way that “we’re thinking intentionally around what we can do to continue to support our





organizations and the work that we do." When it comes to where dollars are spent, she notes that the surge of the Black Lives Matter movement has produced "a bit of a rainfall of support" for groups that serve Black communities. She hopes that will be more than a temporary

trend. While it's in "the nature of being Black in America" to make do, "there's no reason that we should consistently think of ourselves in this position of scarcity."

The earth is abundant, she says. And that should be a shared legacy.



What if we made more public and private investments in culturally relevant, affirming, and sustaining summer programs for Black and Brown learners and other learners of color?

Rankin Christian Center



Super Summer Community Comeback Camp coupled with family dinners strengthened bonds and built community in Rankin.

- Eight-week summer camp for children aged six to 12
- 30 campers attended this summer, experiencing a variety of learning activities: arts projects, STEM, cooking, and lessons from guest educators
- Deeply connects academic enrichment with families and the community

The Rankin Christian Center has sponsored a summer camp for many years. The agency serves Mon Valley communities with an after-school program, scholarships for Woodland Hills High School students, a food pantry, and more. This year, due to a labor shortage, Executive Director Darlene McGregor couldn't find enough

staff to put on the camp for more than one afternoon a week. But like the community of Rankin, which she describes as "a lot of people in a small area," she packed those half days with learning and fun.

For the eight-week Super Summer Community Comeback Camp, McGregor and her staff drew on

a variety of resources from the region. On the first day, the 30 six-through 12-year-olds silkscreened T-shirts with a staffer from the Braddock Carnegie Library's print shop. Another day, a librarian from the Carnegie Free Library of Swissvale read books about the Olympics to campers, who were surprised at how young Olympic



ADDITIONAL STAFF

With more staff, Rankin Christian Center could expand camp to additional days, deepening their impact on local learners.

athletes begin to train. Staff from the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium brought animals for campers to observe, and an educator from the Carnegie Science Center showed dinosaur-related artifacts and brought cups and strings to make simulated dinosaur sounds.

Former NFL player and Woodland Hills High School graduate Chris Edmonds taught fitness routines, and the children “swarmed” him, McGregor says. They completed art projects with resident artist Sandy Kessler Kaminski, who collaborated with the Center on work for the Rivers of Steel’s Alloy Pittsburgh 2021. Programming was rounded out with STEM, crafts, and cooking, including modeling the phases of the



Campers wanted to be “out in the world and do different things and not be held back...They just wanted to be free.”

– DARLENE MCGREGOR, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

moon and making pretzels. “Every activity brought out something new for them,” one parent said.

The Center also opened its doors to campers’ families and the broader community for family dinners one evening a week. Edmonds, whose fitness program “Athletic Trauma Unit” includes a nutrition component, served dinner from his

food truck one night. Meals were followed by games and other forms of entertainment. McGregor “saw a lot of bright eyes” when “Weird Eric” demonstrated his magic tricks and balloon art, and a performer from Mad Science of Pittsburgh awed the group with fire and ice experiments. For McGregor, who was named executive director shortly before the pandemic, the

dinners allowed her to introduce herself in that role. “I was able to talk to a lot of the community members and see what they want for their children,” she says.

While the camp was action-packed, in calmer moments staff intentionally prepared children to go back to school, by encouraging them to pay attention, be “present in the activity,” listen, and follow directions. Staff also made space for children to share their feelings about the upcoming school year and their fears about the pandemic. A boy from the South, who was spending the summer with his grandmother in the area, asked, “Y’all got Covid here, too?” His question became a teaching opportunity.

Overall, McGregor calls the campers a “happy bunch.” They wanted to be “out in the world and



do different things and not be held back” after so much time at home. “They just wanted to be free,” she says.

McGregor plans to continue the family dinners, a unique feature of the camp that she feels strengthened the sense of community for all groups. Along with the fun activities, she hopes the children remember that adults reached out their hands to help them through a time of uncertainty and stress. She wants them to know they are still a part of that community, even after going their separate ways.



What if we implemented proactive summer learning staffing strategies at the system, district, and provider levels?

Small Seeds Development, Inc.



The non-site-based Mother to Son Success Camp used the resources of the city to help students' personal growth blossom.

- Five-week summer camp for boys aged eight to 14
- 15 boys attended camp this summer, following interest-built programming
- Focused on personal development and delivering organic learning that teaches responsibility

The high rate of single mothers raising children in Pittsburgh prompted the late Dr. James McLemore, pastor of Bethel A.M.E. Church, to found Small Seeds Development, Inc., in 1999. More than 20 years later, the numbers are still high: close to 40% of all families in the city were headed

by a single mother in 2019, the US Census shows, compared to less than 25% for the nation overall. For single moms across Allegheny County, East Liberty-based Small Seeds offers a range of support and activities under the umbrella of the “Mother to Son” program. One project is the

Mother to Son Success Camp, which served 15 boys aged eight to 14 for five weeks this summer.

For CEO Keino Fitzpatrick, flexibility is paramount. Because the camp lacks its own site, Fitzpatrick builds the program around what is available, using



INDOOR SPACE

In the future, Small Seeds Development hopes to secure funding to rent an indoor shelter for a portion of the camp's daily schedule.

resources such as Tickets for Kids. This year, to meet CDC guidelines for social distancing, he had to reduce the number of campers and find funding to rent an additional van.

The weather also stirred the pot. In the past, he says, "We didn't have a lot of rain-outs. We were able to conduct camp in a way that was very fulfilling to be outdoors." This summer, an especially rainy July stranded campers under park pavilions before they could go to another venue, many of which opened later



than in the past. In the future, he hopes to secure funding to rent "some sort of indoor shelter area for at least half a day," he says.

Despite the constraints, Fitzpatrick was committed to providing a camp that the boys would want to attend. In line with family-centered practice, Small Seeds surveys campers and their mothers to identify

their interests before deciding what form the program will take. For the 2021 camp, participants asked for music, photography, and time to just "chill out" after the stress of the pandemic.

Along with sports, games, and trips to various sites, Fitzpatrick added videography and music production, which involved writing, editing, and saving music on drives the campers



“I didn’t know this existed...
I didn’t even know this was there.”

– Campers, on experiencing new spaces and communities





Counselors worked to develop a sense of responsibility in the boys, from remembering to bring their camp-issued book bags each day to looking out for one another. One boy, whose creativity blossomed during the music production component, became “a little bit of a junior instructor,” helping others who didn’t master the equipment as quickly, Fitzpatrick says.

To document such personal growth for the boys themselves and for the organization, the staff administers a survey at the beginning and end of camp. They also send home progress notes, and gather information about how camp is going through “these conversations we’re having daily with the moms.”

could keep. Though it hadn’t been requested, he also included an exercise component for both boys and mothers who’d been forced to be more sedentary during the year.

One advantage of not having a dedicated site is that campers can be “in different areas, spaces, communities they’ve never been in, places that they never

experienced,” Fitzpatrick says. Campers who had never ventured beyond their own neighborhoods would say, “I didn’t know this existed... I didn’t even know this was there.” These experiences can produce “a lot of learning that can happen without physically sitting down with them and doing instruction,” learning that is more organic, in his view.

On their return to school this fall, Fitzpatrick hopes the boys “would have something to talk about other than, ‘What did you do during the pandemic?’” Instead, his campers could say, “I went to summer camp, I learned this, I was over in this neighborhood, I did these things.” They were still able to “get a life experience,” he says, despite the times.



What if we made more public and private investments in culturally relevant, affirming, and sustaining summer programs for Black and Brown learners, and other learners of color?

ARTS & CULTURE

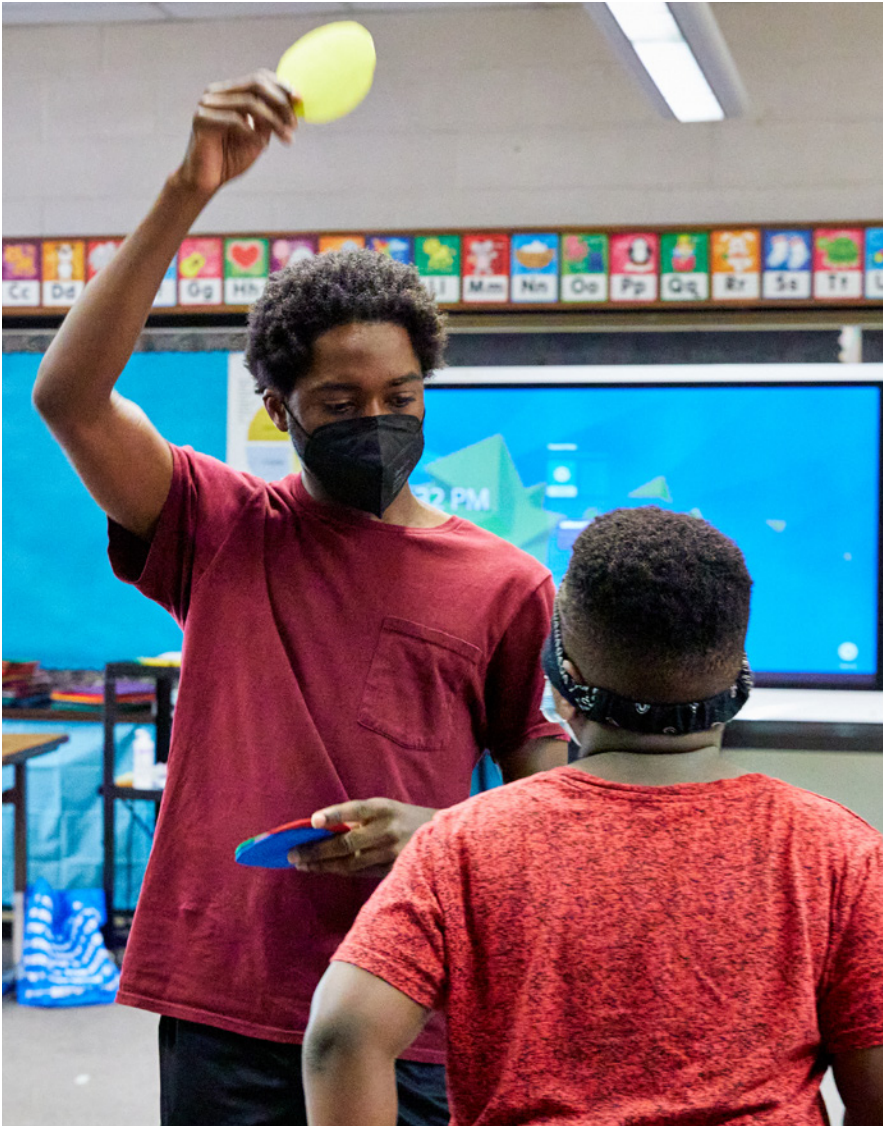
Summer of Expression

PHOTO ESSAYS

Attack Theatre 32

Casa San Jose 34





#SUMMEROFPPLAY

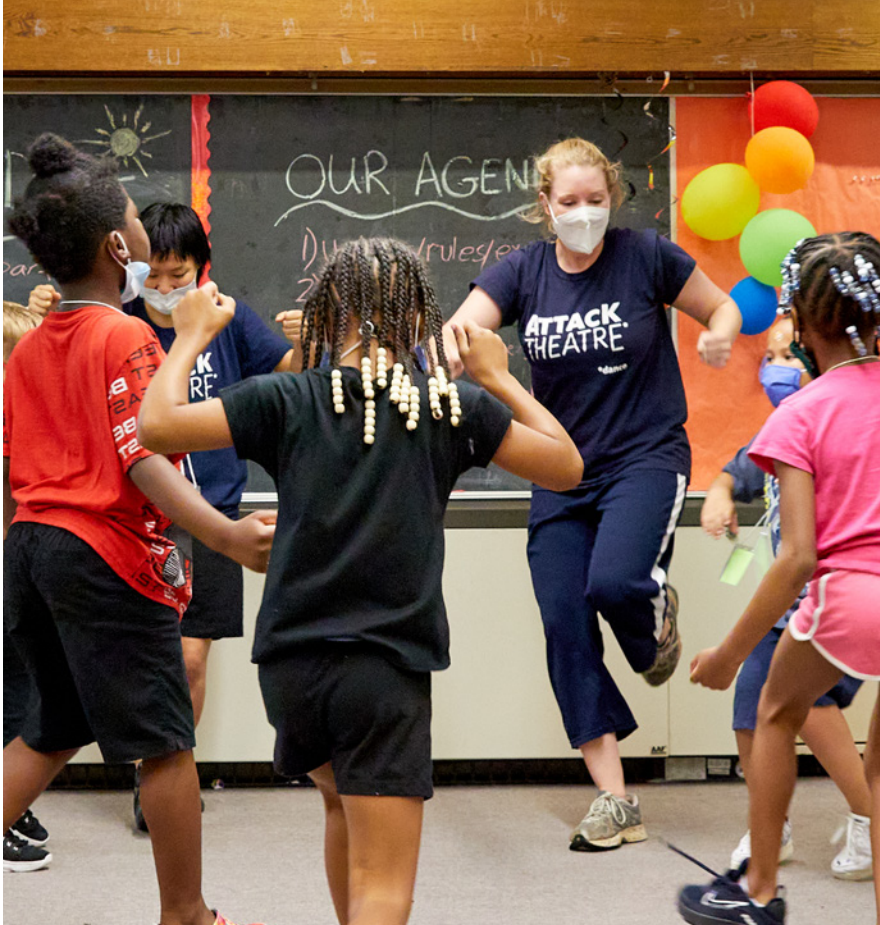


Attack Theatre

Learners jumped, jived, danced, and drummed to their own beat this summer. Attack Theatre partnered with Pittsburgh King PreK-8 to host Summer B.O.O.S.T workshops with second and third graders. The arts-based programming focused on active, expressive, and culturally affirming learning.

Learn more about Attack Theatre at attacktheatre.com.

#SUMMEROFPLAY





Casa San Jose

Latinx students took part in Casa San Jose's summer camp, which offered recreation and other activities traditionally not available to youth of color.

Learn more about Casa San Jose at casasanjose.org.

#SUMMEROFPLAY



OUTDOOR LEARNING

Summer of Sunshine

PHOTO ESSAYS

AJAPO 38

Mooncrest Neighborhood
Programs 40

P.O.O.R.L.A.W. 42





#SUMMEROFPLAY



AJAPO

**Acculturation for Justice,
Access and Peace Outreach**

Fresh air inspired academic wonder and emotional joy for students taking part in summer camps from AJAPO. Over eight weeks, AJAPO's diverse student body built social-emotional wellbeing through play, yoga, and STEAM-based crafts.

Learn more about AJAPO
at ajapopittsburgh.org.

#SUMMEROFPLAY







Mooncrest Neighborhood Programs

Learners at the Mooncrest Summer Mix dug into a curriculum-backed garden, fitness activities, and games, among other indoor learning.

Learn more about Mooncrest
Neighborhood Programs
at mooncrest.org.



#SUMMEROFPLAY





P.O.O.R.L.A.W.

**People of Origin Rightfully
Loved and Wanted**

Students attending P.O.O.R.L.A.W.'s summer camp, newly expanded from its after-school program, made learning physical on the gridiron and with the dance troupe.

Learn more about P.O.O.R.L.A.W. at poorlawhazelwood.wordpress.com.

#SUMMEROFPLAY



ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT

Summer of Success

PHOTO ESSAYS

Third Child, Inc.46

Mooncrest Neighborhood
Programs48





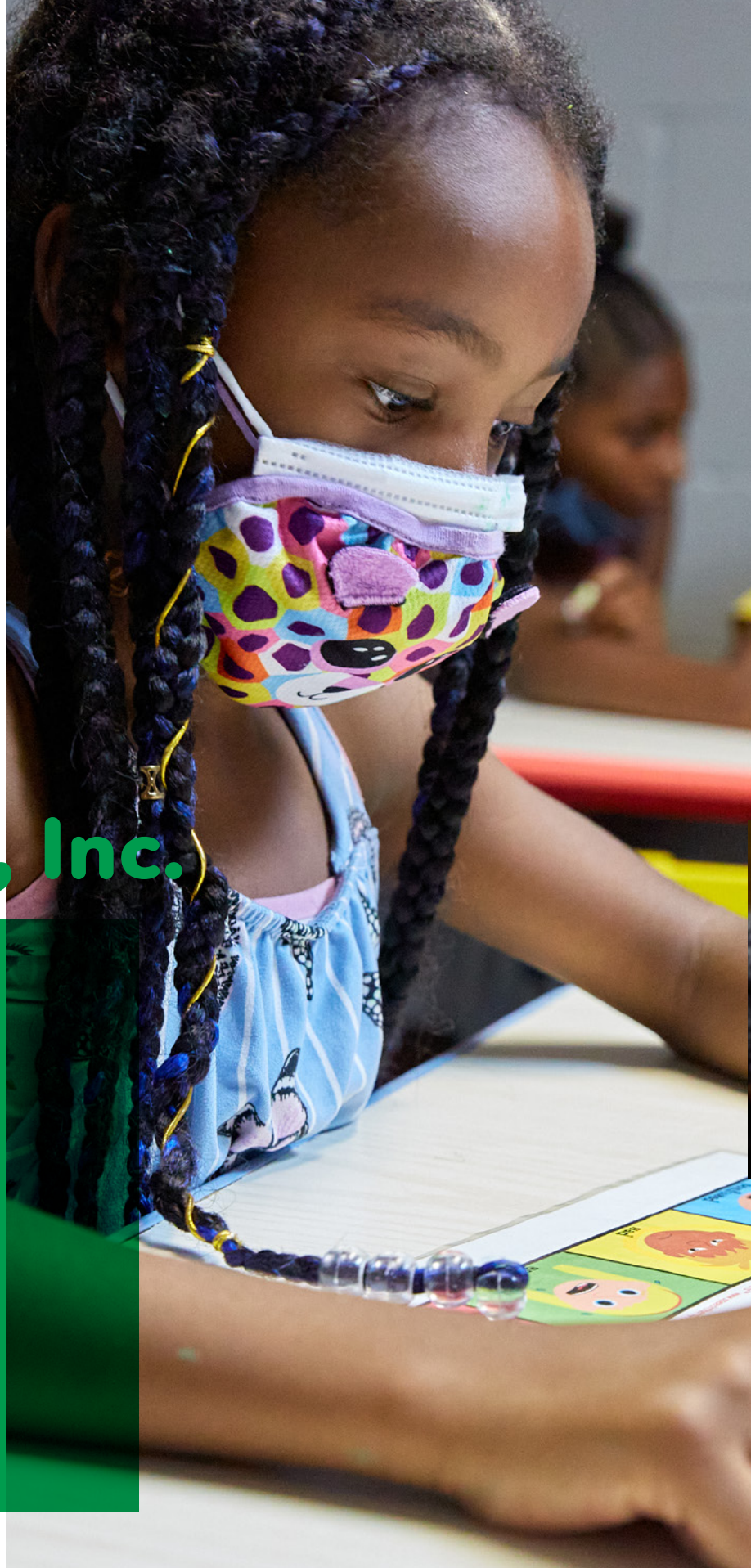
#SUMMEROFPLAY



Third Child, Inc.

Learners at Third Child, Inc.'s program had a "super" experience snacking, playing, and building their literacy and SEL skills as they worked to get ready for back-to-school.

Learn more about Third Child, Inc. at thirdchild.org.



#SUMMEROFPLAY





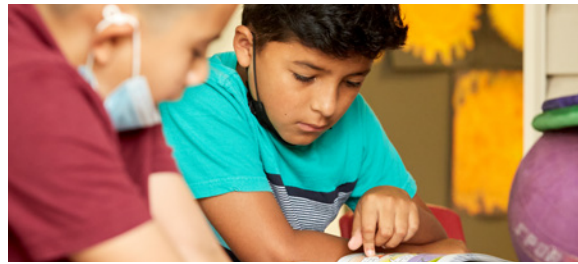
Mooncrest Neighborhood Programs

When not getting their hands dirty outdoors, students enrolled in the Mooncrest Summer Mix were busy coloring, crafting, and honing their STEAM and back-to-school skills.

Learn more about Mooncrest
Neighborhood Programs
at mooncrest.org.



#SUMMEROFPLAY



Support Summer Learning



ADVOCACY AND ACTIONS



It's time to save summer. We need to give summer learning programs and providers the funding, policies, and support they need and deserve.

Summer learning is an essential part of every child's education, and it's vital to the fabric of our communities. It opens learners' minds and hearts to life-shaping experiences they may never have inside school walls or during the school year.

We're putting forth six actions to ensure summer learning is accessible, equitable, and thriving across the region for seasons to come. They range from sweeping, systems-level strategies to specific funding priorities, and they require the shared support of our region's funders, policymakers, businesses, and individuals.



#SUMMEROFPPLAY

WE'RE CALLING FOR:

- An Official County-Wide Summer Learning System..... 52**
- More Policies that Support Community Schools 53**
- The use of ESSER Funds to Support Community Schools and Summer Learning54**
- Proactive Staffing Strategies at the System, District, and Provider Levels 55**
- Investments in Culturally Relevant Summer Programs for Learners of Color56**
- Investments in Areas of High-Powered Summer Learning.....56**

An Official County-Wide Summer Learning System

The most effective and impactful summer learning programs work within and across community systems, collaborating with schools, families, learners, local officials, and organizations to build a diverse and integrated whole-child learning experience. To scale this strategy across the region, Allegheny County needs a truly coordinated summer learning system.

With the help of a tool like the Community Indicators of Effective Summer Learning Systems, we can build on our existing learning ecosystem and county-level leadership to fortify a system that features:



Engaged Key Leadership

We need a **primary organizing body** (like the Pittsburgh Learning Collaborative or the Allegheny County Department of Childhood Initiatives) to centralize and coordinate efforts with county agencies, schools, superintendents, students, families, funders, program providers, legislators, and community members. A **Summer Learning Liaison** position could lead this work.

A Clear, Shared Vision For Summer Learning

The organizing body should engage the entire community in designing a multi-year **Summer Learning Action Plan**. They could host a **Summer Planning Symposium** or similar event to bring together families, learners, program providers, and schools to plan summer learning goals, priorities, outcomes, and measurement systems.

Shared Data Management

The system should have a **standard process and central platform for collecting summer learning data**, including participation numbers, academic outcomes, non-academic outcomes, and program quality. A majority of program providers should sign **data-sharing agreements** to allow for cross-organization data collection, analysis, and evaluation. The organizing body could consider drafting a return-on-investment equation or mapping metrics back to local schools in terms of short- (attendance), intermediate- and long-term (test scores) metrics.

Continuous Quality Improvement

The organizing body should conduct a county-wide **summer learning asset and needs assessment**. The results could inform codified standards for high-quality summer learning programs. To further these standards, the organizing body should provide professional learning to summer program providers, like a **Tutors Convention** or other events, and help providers conduct **after-action** reviews to identify lessons learned from their programming. Community leaders could also **create municipal policies that support OST learning**, such as removing unnecessary barriers to facilities-sharing between schools and community-based organizations.

Sustainable Resources

Multiple, coordinated funding sources should be in place to support both programming and system development, including local private foundations, business donations and sponsorships, local public funding, national foundations, state funding, and federal funding. Funding efforts should be guided by clearly defined funding targets.

Unified Marketing & Communications

The organizing body should spearhead a **coordinated summer learning** campaign that aligns messaging, establishes advocacy strategies, and builds awareness of the need, demand, and image of summer learning. **#SummerOfPlay!**



More Policies that Support Community Schools

Fresh from the #SummerOfPlay, now is the time to build on the energy, enthusiasm, and impact of this season's activities and reimagine in-school learning using the Community Schools Model.

Community Schools are public schools that partner with families and organizations to provide well-rounded educational opportunities and student supports. Community schools implement an equity-driven, whole-child, research-based strategy. They leverage the strengths and resources of the community to provide rigorous academics, SEL, collaborative leadership, and access to health, nutrition, and other student and family services.

They also support expanded and enriched learning time, including summer learning. In full-service community schools, educators collaborate with community partners to provide structured learning activities during OST and summer, using school facilities and other community spaces. The model makes clear that enriched learning time is the responsibility of both schools and communities. Supporting community schools is one of the best ways to provide high-quality learning and sustain the collaboration we saw this summer, transforming what started as semi-forced partnerships into a daily norm.

The Pittsburgh Board of Education already has shown strong support for the community school model, but we need more federal, state, and local policies that support community schools in our area. Possible policies include **federal and state community school grant programs, alignment of policies and resources across public agencies**—such as health and human services, workforce development, and parks and recreation—to advance community schools, **school board policies and resolutions, county/city resolutions or joint agreements with school districts, and local tax levies**, either directly for community schools or as part of a broader initiative to support children and youth.

The use of ESSER Funds to Support Community Schools and Summer Learning

With the passage of the American Rescue Plan's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, our districts and schools have significant federal resources available to assist students impacted by Covid-19. One allowable use of funds is to support evidence-based, full-service community schools.

Community schools are an evidence-based approach proven to improve student outcomes. According to a 2020 RAND study, community schools can positively impact student attendance across elementary, middle, and high school and have a significant, positive impact on elementary and middle school students' on-time grade progression and math achievement. The report also suggests a connection between community schools and decreased disciplinary incidents for elementary and middle school students. In addition, full-service community schools were particularly well-positioned to respond to Covid-19, given their close work with partner organizations to address community needs.

Schools in our county can use ESSER funds in several ways to either expand their existing community approach or begin implementing the model. Some ideas include:

- **Developing or expanding in-school student support centers**, which provide mentoring, counseling, and SEL to students in individual or group sessions.
- **Helping the district or school partner with community-based organizations to offer programs that provide innovative integrated services.** These services might include before- and after-school programs, summer learning programs, additional academic instruction or high-quality tutoring,



mentorship programs, workforce development activities like career counseling, internships, pre-apprenticeship programs, or service-learning opportunities, and restorative justice programs.

- **Hiring a site-level community school coordinator** to lead partnership and engagement efforts and oversee the integrated services provided by the school.
- **Funding a district or school community needs and asset assessment.** Conducting such an assessment is a critical first step in expanding or starting a full-service community school.

Proactive Staffing Strategies at the System, District, and Provider Levels

Like nearly every industry in the country, our summer learning programs were impacted by labor shortages this year. To combat these effects and ensure continued program availability and quality, we must utilize policies and practices that support the equitable recruitment, development, and retention of summer learning staff.

At the system level, we must **establish recommended professional development and minimum wage for summer program staff**. Establishing holistic staffing and credentialing programs with universities and workforce development organizations can help these efforts.

At the district level, **staffing structures should blend roles across the school day and after-school time so that some personnel work in both settings**. District leaders can facilitate collaborative staffing through human resources policies, investments in planning time, union contract provisions, and compensation structures.

At the program level, **providers can benefit from a staggered hiring approach**, starting with program or camp leadership. With the leadership team in place, programs can focus on hiring teachers, including academic and activity teachers. Providers can offer options for teachers to work either part-time (e.g., academic teachers in the morning and activity teachers in the afternoon) or full-time. They can also leverage connections and relationships with other community-based organizations to help identify potential staff, while outreach to pre-service teachers, art instructors, paraprofessionals, parents, and young adults through OST job fairs can also bolster recruitment.



With staff in place, providers should **focus on professional development by staff role**, including orientation and training activities, team-building exercises, mission setting, review of program policies and procedures, and examination of the academic curriculum. Programs should also devote some time to **mindfulness and wellness strategies**, so staff understand that self-care is vital to providing top-notch student support.

Investments in Culturally Relevant Summer Programs for Learners of Color

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) is a teaching approach that focuses on students' academic and personal success as individuals and as a collective. CRP allows students to participate in academically rigorous curriculum and learning, feel affirmed in their identities and experiences, and develop the knowledge and skills to engage critically with the world and others. Similarly, educators who work under a culturally responsive framework actively connect their students' home and school cultures. They inspect their own biases, design learning experiences that invite the curiosity of culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse students, and ultimately empower students to act as agents of social change.

A growing body of research shows that culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices can provide students with a range of social and cognitive benefits. They can help boost math and reading comprehension, spur motivation, critical thinking, and problem-solving, and strengthen students' sense of safety along with their racial or ethnic identity.

Until all schools can offer their students CRP or other culturally responsive experiences, summer programs may provide the only opportunity for learners, especially those from communities of color, to experience learning that reflects and celebrates their identities, experiences, and collective histories.

We need foundations, corporations, and individuals to prioritize financial support for these programs and organizations.

Investments in Areas of High-Powered Summer Learning

Arts education, outdoor learning, academic enrichment, workforce development, and SEL are five areas of high-powered learning that can prepare students to succeed in a rapidly changing world. They can also help learners recover from the social, emotional, and academic impacts of Covid-19.

Learners living in poverty or otherwise underserved communities may not receive high-quality in-school learning in all or any of these areas. Thus, we need foundations, corporations, and individuals to prioritize financial support for programs and organizations that provide these learning opportunities in OST or summer learning programs.





HELP SAVE SUMMER

You can help save summer programming, whether you're a provider with summer programming or out-of-school-time care, a parent or community member with ideas, or a supporter with a donation.

To learn more about how you can get involved,
email us at info@aplusschools.org or call 412-697-1298 ext. 100.



Visit projectplusus.org/pittsburgh-learning-collaborative for more info.





#SUMMEROFPAY

