Sustainability for Summer Learning Programs

What is program sustainability?

Program sustainability refers to the ability to keep providing services even when facing major challenges. Today, summer learning programs are facing multiple challenges. Staffing, funding, time, and attention are all stretched thin as ESSER and ARP dollars are spent down while impact from the Covid-19 pandemic continues to be felt.

Why does summer learning program sustainability matter?

Research into high-quality summer learning programs shows that meaningful improvements in students' academic growth (IES REL, 2018) results from their engagement in high quality summer learning programs over multiple years. By sustaining high quality summer learning programs and making them available on a consistent basis to the students whose needs are the greatest, districts are continuously working to close the year-over-year opportunity gaps that exist among peers who have similar interests and academic readiness, but whose families' access to enrichment opportunities can vary widely.

How do program quality and continuous improvement affect sustainability?

Sustainability depends on a program's ability to secure needed resources to offer a high quality experience to participants that addresses their needs and yields clear benefits. Through a continuous improvement model, program leaders can use the growing evidence base for what works in summer learning to ensure their program design and implementation are grounded in practices that are more likely to serve students' specific needs well. And through a local evaluation, they can gather evidence to demonstrate the impact of the program on intended outcomes. These strategies allow leaders to make a strong case for investment of scarce resources in their programs. This guide strongly encourages districts to embrace high quality summer learning as a core strategy for student growth and to embed it in their overall policy and practice, providing enough time, expertise and leadership to ensure a process of continuous improvement and sustainability for the programs offered to students.

Using this resource: Sustainability is a process.

This resource is designed as a quarterly action guide that district and program leaders can use to plan for and continuously communicate, collaborate and reflect on questions of sustainability throughout the year. The four strategy guides and meeting agendas offer a customizable approach to supporting ongoing program design and planning efforts through the lens of sustainability, ensuring that it is not overlooked.

To support districts in planning strategically for program sustainability, this resource contains:

1 Four quarterly strategy guides that offer choices for districts to tailor for their context.

2 Four quarterly meeting agendas that offer a structure for convening key stakeholders to address the districts' sustainability opportunities and challenges.

3 A page of six fiscal sustainability strategies that teams can use for discussion and decision making.

4 Recommendations for further reading.

The resources are formatted for easy copying and pasting into a word processor for your customization. Districts should freely adapt and use the strategies and agendas based on the timing during the year that works best for them, including scheduling actions to align them with local budgeting or planning cycles., Although this resource focuses on one year's worth of meetings, we expect that as districts meet and plan, they will want to discuss issues of sustainability that extend several years into the future as part of their continuous process of planning and implementation.

Who should be at the table when planning for sustainability?

Planning a well-designed summer program that meets students' learning and developmental needs requires leadership and resources at the district level. In addition, schools, communities and districts should collaborate to support the sustainability of valued programs; students, families, community partners, local higher education institutions and elected officials can all help to support sustainability through advocacy, collaboration, and resourcing. However, the Core Team of sustainability planners – those who should keep selected strategies on track and attend the quarterly meetings – consists of those district (and partner) staff who are responsible for the three critical strategy areas –1) budget, 2) communication and stakeholder engagement, and 3) designing, implementing and evaluating an evidence-based summer program.

Quarterly Strategy Guides and Agendas

The strategy guides and agendas are organized around three critical areas that district and program leaders can leverage to sustain an evidence-based program that continuously improves. The first is *communication and stakeholder engagement* to obtain broad community support and to uncover needs, wants and opportunities. The second is *embedding evidence-based programs in district policy and practice* to create district-wide expectations around program implementation, and ensure the needed capacity and alignment so they succeed. The third is *working towards fiscal sustainability*—ensuring that there is ongoing financial support from reliable sources to plan, implement and continuously improve a high quality summer program.

Achieving Fiscal Sustainability

Across the United States, financial support for voluntary summer learning programs greatly increased with the infusion of funds from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) package. As those funds sunset in 2025, many districts are also also facing inflation and rising labor costs as well as local demographic shifts that reduce enrollment and funding. This creates a "fiscal cliff" or a steep, sudden loss of spending power. Communities and districts are facing cliffs of various sizes, but few will be untouched. (ERS, 2023) District budgets for summer learning will generally be set at least 18 months ahead of actual implementation. The Core Team should have the budget data they need as soon as it is available in order for them to make the most of planning time. Promptly confronting budget realities as they exist in your community will allow your district to engage stakeholders to make informed choices about how to sustain quality programming for the greatest number of students. In this economic environment, programs may need to use more than one fiscal strategy. Review the Six Fiscal Sustainability Strategies one-pager on the last page of this resource for ideas and examples you can use.

1. Quarterly Strategies For Implementation

Goals for this quarter

During actual implementation, stay engaged with summer partners and stakeholders. Capture highlights and feedback from the summer programs that help to secure support. Share and build on the success of your summer programming to gain support for embedding it in district policy.

Strategy	Action	Activities
Communicate with and engage stakeholders	Communicate/Share Information	• Capture highlights of the summer program - through video, interviews, pictures, etc. • Share summer stories with parents • Obtain feedback (written, survey, video) from students, parents and staff
	Engage with Stakeholders	• Regular meetings with partners (during summer programming); thank them, engage them in after-summer review/debrief • Invite superintendent and board members to visit summer program • Thank parents, teachers, site leaders and staff after summer program
Embed your program in district policy and practice	Embed Program in Policy	• Invite school board members to visit summer school • Suggest inviting students and parents to present at school board meeting • Suggest school board resolution in support of enriching summer program
	Embed Program in Practice	• Collect data, video, stories, results from summer program • Plan and hold after-summer debriefing
Work towards fiscal sustainability	Funding Analysis	• Reconcile expenses against budget • Prepare and deliver financial report to district and partners

Agenda 1: Sustainability Check-In for Implementation

About this agenda

The *Quarterly Sustainability Check-In for Implementation* is held as the summer program is concluding and ideally as part of the program review. This check-in helps the program team to answer several questions:

1. Do we have a program that we want to sustain;
2. How well did this cycle of program implementation set us up for sustainability; and
3. What lessons have we learned from this cycle of implementation that we can take going forward to build a stronger plan for sustainability?

Who
Core team plus community education; families, students, partners/CBO's

When
Concurrent with the end of summer programming; 60–90 minutes

Key Resources
Share important information, findings, etc. with the group. For example: survey and feedback results; attendance reports; other quantitative or qualitative data that illustrate program quality and achievement of goals.

Introductions: Purpose of Summer Programming and How Did We Do? (20 minutes)
- Summer lead shares purpose for meeting; shares vision/purpose of summer learning program and how it connects to student needs and district priorities
- Each team members share how their work connects summer programming and district priorities/student needs, and how it went this summer

Do We Have a Program We Want to Sustain? (30 minutes)
- Consider results of after-program review against program goals, student needs and district priorities.
- Give everyone a chance to weigh-in on results—what did we do well? What could we have done better? What does that mean for our program's ongoing sustainability?

Sustainability Strengths and Risks: Where Have We Succeeded and What Next Steps Do We Need to Further the Strengths/Mitigate Against the Risks? (30 minutes)
- **Community Support and Stakeholder Engagement**
  - Who knows about our program outside this room?
  - Who should know about our program?
  - Who already supports our program?
  - Who can we meet with to share our successes?

- **Embedding Evidence-Based Program in Policy and Practice**
  - Who in district leadership is a supporter of this program and needs an update?
  - Have we done a good job of engaging the school board?
  - Are we implementing a continuous improvement plan? Can we share improvements compared to last summer?

- **Affordability**
  - How much did our summer programming cost?
  - Are we facing cuts for next year or the year after?
  - What program elements and expenses do we think are essential to keep?
  - What program elements could we let go of without giving up core program quality and strengths?

2. Quarterly Strategies For Engagement And Goal-Setting

Goals for this quarter

Once implementation ends, reflect on summer programming to understand strengths, needs and funding resources. Alongside program development improvements, set sustainability goals and outline sustainability efforts for next summer and beyond. Plan and implement a broad communications strategy to inform community members, district leadership, and stakeholders of actual benefits and keep them invested in summer.

Strategy	Action	Activities
Communicate with and engage stakeholders	Communicate/Share Information	• Prepare and deliver report for district leadership • Prepare and deliver report for school board • Create and implement a communications plan to broadly share your story and your results
	Engage with Stakeholders	• Based on after summer debriefing and feedback, identify additional community members you should engage • Regularly include summer planning in agenda for district leadership team
Embed your program in district policy and practice	Embed Program in Policy	• Ensure your planning team includes district, board, and community members with authority to institutionalize aspects of your programming • Connect current data about student needs to your summer learning design • Focus attention on staffing policies to ensure you will have the right staff to support enrolled students

	Embed Program in Practice	• Begin clarifying priorities for next summer:
		   o Be clear about your vision, purposes, and goals
		   o Ensure summer program aligns with district priorities
		   o Clarify which community needs your summer programming should be responsive to
		   o Plan for program evaluation

Work towards fiscal sustainability	Funding Analysis	• Match up budget/financing you used last summer with what you expect to be available next year • Clarify what shortfalls may exist for next year, based on grants or program sunsets • Strategize early with district executives and budget and funded program leads regarding anticipated budget cuts. Work to protect those areas most likely to support vulnerable or underserved students and to preserve programs with demonstrated benefits.

Agenda 2: Sustainability Check-In for Engagement and Goal-setting

About this agenda

The *Quarterly Sustainability Check-In for Engagement and Goal-setting* is held in the late fall/early winter. This meeting helps the program team to reflect on the extent to which the previous summer program was aligned with research and with district priorities and how planning for next summer can heighten this alignment. It helps the team answer several questions:

1. What are our ideas for how next summer's program can be aligned with research and district priorities;
2. How can we keep stakeholders engaged; and
3. How are we thinking creatively about funding for next summer?

Who
Core team plus program staff

When
Late fall; 60–90 minutes

Key Resources
Survey/feedback reports; key research on summer learning; district strategic plan

Introductions: Aligning District Priorities, Summer Research, and our Summer Program (15 minutes)
- Summer Lead shares purpose for meeting; shares alignment of program with best practice research. Each team member introduces themselves, shares how their work connects their role in summer to the research

What Are Our Ideas for Next Summer? (20 minutes)
- Activity that supports team members to generate ideas for next summer - and tie them to research, student needs, and district priorities

Sustainability Efforts: How Are We Doing And What Are Our Next Steps To Building A Sustainable Program? (30 minutes)
- **Community Support and Stakeholder Engagement**
  - What are our communications goals to keep stakeholders engaged?
  - How have we started/can we start to engage internal and external stakeholders?

- **Embedding Evidence-Based Program in Policy and Practice**
  - How have we made sure our program is aligned with and supportive of district priorities?
  - Are we reflecting on our continuous improvement plan?
  - How have we/can we engage district leaders in appreciating the alignment and supporting our summer program?

- **Affordability**
  - How is our budget for next summer looking?
  - What new funding have we gone/can we go after?
  - What [potential] partners can help us secure funding for summer program priorities?
  - What are our next steps in program budgeting?

3. Quarterly Strategies For Sustainable Program Design

Goals for this quarter

Work with the planning team to design summer programming around best practices with an eye towards the sustainability issues you identified in the previous quarter. Work with existing and potential partners. Design a continuous improvement plan to implement in summer. Develop a budget for summer programming and solicit funding.

Strategy	Action	Activities
Communicate with and engage stakeholders	Communicate/Share Information	- Consider and plan for strategic communications needs based on goals and risks identified in program reflection - Share information regarding next summer planning with community members
	Engage with Stakeholders	- Plan with partners - Solicit additional partners - Examine plans for professional development to ensure alignment between PD plans and program improvements needed for sustainability
Embed your program in district policy and practice	Embed Program in Policy	- Include summer program and policies in district website - Create school board resolution that speaks to purposes of summer program and memorializes student recruitment and registration process
	Embed Program in Practice	- Create continuous improvement plan to collect relevant data and feedback during summer programming - Plan professional development for summer staff
Work towards fiscal sustainability	Funding Analysis	- Clarify program costs, including per pupil expenditures, cost drivers, and proportion of your summer learning budget to entire annual budget - Develop budget for program - Determine what potential new funding sources may be available - think about program priorities and look for funding aligned with their purposes - Reach out to potential new funders - explore whether their resources can support summer activities - Collaborate with partners to solicit funding jointly

Agenda 3: Sustainability Check-In for Program Design

About this agenda

This Quarterly Sustainability Check-In for Program Design is held in the late winter when summer program planning is in full swing. It helps the team to ensure that their program planning is inclusive of strategies to build sustainability and identify further steps that can support their sustainability efforts.

Who
Core team plus representatives/input from all operations-related and stakeholder groups

When
Late winter; 60–90 minutes

Key Resources
Program and implementation documentation; planning calendar

Introductions (15 minutes)
- Summer lead shares purpose for meeting. Each team member introduces themself, shares their hope for how their work will show up in next summer's program.

What Is Our Current Program Design And How Does It Support Students, Families, And Other Stakeholders? (20 minutes)
- Activity that supports team members to tie current ideas about summer program design to needs and feedback from students and other stakeholders.

Sustainability Efforts: How Are We Doing And What Are Our Next Steps To Building A Sustainable Program? (30 minutes)
- **Community Support and Stakeholder Engagement**
  - Do we have sufficient and proper staff to efficiently serve the enrolled student population?
  - Is there a robust plan for professional development for all staff?
  - Have we ensured that partners are prepared for the summer and share expectations with us?

- **Embedding Evidence-based Program in Policy and Practice**
  - Do we have a program handbook that will support students, teachers and families?
  - Have we created a continuous improvement plan?
  - Have we planned a robust program debriefing?

- **Affordability**
  - Have we worked with partners to obtain new sources of funding?
  - Do we have all the funding in place that we need to support our summer program?
  - What possibilities are there for obtaining district or other permanent funding?

4. Quarterly Strategies For Program Preparation

Goals for this quarter

Finalize student and staff recruitment. Prepare for professional development for staff and partner staff. Design and produce or revise a summer program handbook that reflects both program practice and policy. Continue efforts to obtain necessary funding.

Strategy	Action	Activities
Communicate with and engage stakeholders	Communicate/Share Information	• Check in with representatives of students, family, staff and community to ensure that communications/messaging has reached those identified as critical to sustainability
	Engage with Stakeholders	• Ensure messaging is effective for recruitment and attendance of staff and students/families • Facilitate professional development for summer staff • Hold regular meetings with partners • Support teachers during summer program
Embed your program in district policy and practice	Embed Program in Policy	• Create summer program handbook that includes purposes, goals, and program elements aligned with research
	Embed Program in Practice	• Provide professional development to teachers, leaders, and partner staff • Plan and calendar your debriefing
Work towards fiscal sustainability	Funding Analysis	• Confirm funds that will support program • Identify revenue gaps • Attend to grant and government compliance for ongoing funding • Identify and reach out to potential new funders and solicit summer funding • Collaborate with partners to solicit funding jointly

Agenda 4: Sustainability Check-In for Program Planning Quarter

About this agenda

This *Quarterly Sustainability Check-in for Program Preparation* is held in the late spring when summer program planning is close to complete. It helps the team to ensure that they begin summer program implementation with as strong a plan for sustainability as possible and identify any additional steps that can support their sustainability efforts.

Who
Core team plus operations, transportation, communications, finance, etc.

When
Late spring; 60–90 minutes

Key Resources
Program materials; professional development plans; program handbook

Introductions (15 minutes)
- Summer lead shares purpose for meeting. Each team member introduces themself, shares their plan for how their work and their staff's work will support a successful and sustainable summer learning program.

What Is Our Current Program Design And How Does It Support Students, Families, And Other Stakeholders? (20 minutes)
- Activity that supports team members to understand how the summer program is designed to build a high quality program that responds to student needs, is aligned with district priorities and is supported by a wide range of internal and external stakeholders and community members.

Sustainability Efforts: How Are We Doing And What Are Our Next Steps To Building A Sustainable Program? (30 minutes)
- **Community Support and Stakeholder Engagement**
  - Do we have a staffing policy to support the enrolled students?
  - Is there a robust plan for professional development for all staff?
  - Have we ensured that partners are prepared for the summer and share expectations with us?

- **Embedding Evidence-based Program in Policy and Practice**
  - Do we have a program handbook that will support students, teachers and families?
  - Have we created a continuous improvement plan?
  - Have we planned a robust program debriefing?

- **Affordability**
  - Have we worked with partners to obtain new sources of funding?
  - Do we have all the funding in place that we need to support our summer program?
  - What possibilities are there for obtaining district or other permanent funding?

Resources From the Field

Action Tools and Planners	Description
Facilitation Guide for Sustainability Planning Tools (wallacefoundation.org)	This facilitation guide provides an overview of the three sustainability planning tools – Self Assessment, Strategy Development, and Action Plan - available in the Wallace Summer Learning Toolkit. Large and comprehensive resource.
Framework for Sustaining Promising Investments (FourPoint Education Partners)	This one-page graphic provides a conceptual overview of key issues in sustaining initiatives. Helpful for establishing a common set of ideas and language for sustainability thinking and strategy among stakeholders.
Tools to Support Financial Decision Making (edunomicslab.org) including The Grid: A Framework to Explore Budgeting Choices	Edunomics Lab is a Georgetown University research center exploring and modeling complex education finance decisions to inform education policy and practice. They offer a newsletter, national data visualizations with state and local filters, and planning tools such as "the grid," a simple table for comparing programs. For district audiences.
Afterschool Alliance Funding Resources (afterschoolalliance.org) Including OST funding data	The Afterschool Alliance has a page dedicated to funding issues, including a link to their afterschool funding database and sustainability case studies. Particularly appropriate for partner organizations. Funding opportunities included are at district / program and school levels.

Research Reports	Description
Getting Support for Summer Learning: How Federal, State, City, and District Policies Affect Summer Learning Programs (wallacefoundation.org)	2020 Rand research report focused on the question: How do district, city, state, and federal policies support and constrain the scale, sustainability, and quality of district-provided summer learning programs?
Making Summer Last: Integrating Summer Programming into Core District Priorities and Operations (wallacefoundation.org)	2017 Rand research report on how leaders in three districts (Dallas, Pittsburgh, and Rochester) developed strategies to sustain their summer learning programs and the progress they made in terms of program quality and scale during a period of funding loss.

Six Fiscal Sustainability Strategies to Consider

1	**Reduce Costs** Look to reduce inefficiencies without compromising quality and evidence-based practice. Ensure that programs will be staffed according to "live" attendance patterns rather than total capacity. Be strategic in your design so that academic portions are supported by certificated staff and enriched with partnering staff such as teaching artists, youth workers, museum educators, Americorps and career exploration volunteers, pre-service teachers and other diverse and affordable players. Transportation can drive significant costs, but is also a critical lever for equitable access; avoid putting some families at a disadvantage.
2	**Share Costs** Some programs find ways to share costs with other organizations. For example: partnerships with community based organizations which have their own staff and /or facilities, municipally funded options through parks / cultural institutions, career exploration and internship opportunities funded by local employers, colleges, universities and volunteer service organizations such as Americorps or America Reads / America Counts. Some programs are able to share costs with families who pay camp fees.
3	**Blend Funds** When summer or OST specific funds are reduced at the federal, state, or local level, districts may find that they can make up all or a portion of the funds by "blending" additional sources of education funding that can be incorporated by the district. These commonly include Title I funding for direct service as well as materials and professional development; others specifically support– ELL, Migrant, Homeless, Prevention, Family Engagement). State and local initiatives that support activities and services that can be effectively offered in the summer can be included in the district's design.
4	**Braid or Layer Funds or Programs** What youth and family oriented services are your state and local governments offering? Are some of those activities well-suited to integration with the district's offerings? For example, is there a local agency offering youth employment or an Americorps-funded youth-services program? Can those services be offered as part of the summer learning program experience or adjacent to it, in ways that strengthen the overall program? Are there existing recreation programs you can align with to offer a more comprehensive program experience for no additional costs?
5	**Strategic Disinvestment** When districts find themselves facing funding cuts, it can be an opportunity to review current expenditures across the district for their importance and impact. Within the summer program, gather data about the quality and outcomes of services offered to students and families. For example, if there is only scarce evidence that the district's remedial summer program for students two or more years behind grade level is leading to academic gains when compared with similar students who have not attended the program, it may make sense to discontinue the program in favor of an evidence-based and enriching program that will attract more students and lead to greater student success.
6	**Broaden the Funding Base** Finally, programs can seek additional ongoing or one-time funding through unspent Federal accruals, government and foundation grants, corporate giving or workforce investments, local levies and bonds, legislative initiatives and innovative partnerships. The bar for securing this type of funding can be high, and programs should be ready to demonstrate the effectiveness and evidence based nature of their models.

As you review and discuss these strategies with your teams and district leadership, encourage stakeholders (including students and families,) to think out loud about which of these would best support long term improvements in the district priority areas as well as in equity, partnerships, whole child development, and academic quality for your program and district as a whole.