



# Exploring Summer in WLC Schools:

A Landscape Analysis of Programs, Purpose, Challenges,  
and Future Implications

**Wilmington Learning Collaborative**



## **| Executive Summary**

This report presents findings from a mixed-methods study of 18 summer learning programs operated by Wilmington Learning Collaborative (WLC) member schools. Through site visits, interviews with program coordinators, classroom observations, and a supplemental family survey, the study aimed to assess program effectiveness and identify systemic challenges and promising practices.

### **Key Challenges Identified**

The challenges identified in this study have been grouped by the program timeline—planning, execution, and post-program follow-up—to illustrate how specific issues emerge at different stages and require tailored solutions.

1. During the planning phase, many programs faced unclear ownership and late start dates, which limited their ability to prepare staff, coordinate logistics, or advertise effectively. Short program durations and limited daily hours also posed barriers for working families. Outreach was often generic or last-minute, leaving many parents confused about enrollment and scheduling.
2. In the execution phase, staffing shortages—particularly of paraeducators and support staff—created operational strain. Some summer instructors lacked access to student data or guidance on using provided curricula. Programs with minimal enrichment offerings and no field trips struggled to keep students engaged, and low attendance frequently disrupted classroom dynamics.
3. Post-program follow-up was limited across sites. Few programs collected structured feedback from families, and opportunities for debriefing with district or partner staff were inconsistent or absent. As a result, valuable insights into what worked—or didn't—were often lost before the next planning cycle began.

Together, these challenges reveal the need for a more coordinated, proactive approach to summer learning that integrates year-round planning, stakeholder input, and mechanisms for continuous improvement.

## Promising Practices

Despite these challenges, several programs stood out for their strong design and execution.

### Common success factors included:

- Regular communication between schools, partners, and families
- Thoughtful accommodations for diverse learners
- Project-based and student-centered curriculum
- Enrichment activities paired with academic content
- Strong external partnerships and community engagement

## Recommendations

To build on what's working and address persistent pain points, the report outlines four key recommendations for WLC and its partners:

1. Start Planning Earlier
2. Foster Cross-Functional Communication
3. Extend Programming Length and Hours & Address Transportation Issues
4. Balance Academic Instruction with Enrichment Activities

A proposed year-round engagement model for the WLC and shared Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) between the WLC and community partners are also included to offer actionable recommendations and to support continuous learning and improvement across the summer learning ecosystem.

## Conclusion

This report is not intended as a final word, but as a foundation for deeper discussion, cross-stakeholder collaboration, and systemic change. By aligning resources, timelines, and priorities, WLC and its partners have an opportunity to transform summer learning into an equitable, engaging, and student-centered experience.

## | Introduction

Summer learning has long been a key component of students' education. Research has shown that when well-planned and attended, summer programs can enhance both academic achievement and social development<sup>1</sup>

The Wilmington Learning Collaborative has allocated approximately \$1.5 million to support summer learning across nine schools in the Christina, Brandywine, and Red Clay school districts in summer 2025. While we have a funding breakdown and a general overview of the programs offered from Pre-K through eighth grade, we lack the perspectives of key stakeholders—ranging from program coordinators to families. Without these voices, we do not fully understand the day-to-day realities of summer learning.

This study aims to conduct a landscape analysis to explore how programs are being implemented on the ground from multiple perspectives, using a student- and family-centered approach.

## | Main Research Questions:

Our inquiry was guided by a set of research questions designed to explore the planning and on-the-ground execution of summer learning programs.

- **What summer learning experiences are currently offered at the nine partner schools, and what makes each unique?**
  - This question seeks to understand the types of programs offered at each site, who is delivering them, who they serve, how many students participate, the number of staff supporting them, and the program timelines.
- **What challenges and gaps do program coordinators, district leaders, and families perceive in the current summer learning offerings?**
  - We aim to understand how the voices of instructors, coordinators, and families are incorporated into planning and decision-making for summer programming.

---

<sup>1</sup> McCombs, Jennifer S., Catherine H. Augustine, Fatih Unlu, Kathleen M. Ziol-Guest, Scott Naftel, Celia J. Gomez, Terry Marsh, Goke Akinniranye, and Ivy Todd, *Investing in Successful Summer Programs: A Review of Evidence Under the Every Student Succeeds Act*, RAND Corporation, RR-2836-WF, 2019, accessed August 5, 2025, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2836.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2836.html).

- **What opportunities and recommendations should the Wilmington Learning Collaborative (WLC), program-level leaders, and district leadership consider to better serve students and their families in future summers?**
  - This includes exploring the extent to which current support systems meet stakeholder needs, identifying unmet needs, and determining how districts and partners can be better supported.

## **| Approach**

The initial aim of this project was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the summer learning opportunities available both within the nine WLC schools and through external programs offered by partner organizations. We also hoped to explore families' overall summer plans for their children during the break between school semesters.

However, due to time constraints, we had to narrow the scope and methodology of our research. Rather than sacrificing the quality of data collection for broader coverage, we chose to focus exclusively on programs operating within the nine WLC schools—specifically those run by urban school districts or in partnership with community- and youth-serving organizations.

We believe summer programming involves a range of stakeholders, and it is essential to incorporate all relevant perspectives—students, families, instructors, program staff, and district-level leaders. As such, we prioritized capturing insights from program coordinators and families on the value they place on these programs, the challenges they encountered, and their recommendations for improvement.

While this report is limited to WLC school-based programs (see the “Limitations” section for more detail), we hope this research serves as a catalyst for deeper exploration into summer learning in the Wilmington area. Our goal is to spark further questions and future studies that build upon this foundation.

## **| Methodology**

We recognize that quantitative data alone cannot provide a complete picture of the summer learning experience. To understand the challenges and opportunities faced by various stakeholders, we employed a mixed-methods approach, gathering primary data from those directly involved in planning and implementing summer learning at multiple levels. This included instructors, program coordinators, families, and district leaders.

## Program Level

### Program observations

Fifteen program observations were conducted over the course of one month to gain rich, contextual insights into how programs were executed on the ground. Each visit lasted between 3–6 hours, and multiple visits were made to sites hosting more than one program.

### Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were conducted with instructors and program coordinators during site visits. To avoid disrupting daily operations, many of these conversations were informal and occurred during breaks or between activities.

## Family level

### Survey

A bilingual (English & Spanish) 13-question survey was distributed to families with students in the nine WLC schools to gather feedback on their children's summer plans and experiences. The survey targeted two distinct groups:

1. Families whose children participated in summer programs—either at WLC sites or elsewhere—were asked for feedback on their experiences.
2. Families whose children did not participate were asked about their summer plans and the reasons for non-enrollment.

The survey was made available in both physical and electronic formats, distributed by school and district staff.

## District level

### Semi-structured interviews

Six interviews were conducted via phone or video call with program directors, district leaders, and summer learning coordinators to collect district-level insights into summer program planning and execution.

## **| Data Collection and Analysis**

The findings in this report are drawn from multiple primary sources, including ethnographic observations of programs in action, interviews with instructors, program coordinators, and district leaders, and survey responses from families.

Our team analyzed the data by organizing field notes and interview transcripts around central themes. Responses were then coded thematically within broad categories using the MAXQDA software to identify patterns and insights.

The family survey, created using SurveyMonkey, yielded 194 responses. It primarily consisted of closed-ended questions, and results are reported in aggregate. Open-ended responses were also reviewed and analyzed for key themes and recurring topics.

## **| Limitations**

Several limitations affected the scope and depth of this study, which should be considered when interpreting the findings.

### **Limited Timeframe**

The research planning, data collection, and analysis were conducted within a condensed seven-week period by one WLC Strategic Support Fellow. The constrained timeline and limited manpower reduced the breadth of data we were able to gather. For example, we did not have sufficient time to design or execute focus groups with parents or to expand outreach efforts to ensure broad survey participation. As a result, some community perspectives may be underrepresented.

### **Limited Statistical Analysis**

Due to time constraints, the survey data were not subjected to in-depth statistical analysis such as hypothesis testing, correlation analysis, and ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) to identify significant patterns, relationships, or differences among groups. The findings presented are primarily descriptive from family perspectives and were used to complement the qualitative

data from program observations and interviews with program staff.

### **Absence of Student Perspectives**

This study did not include direct input from students, which is a notable gap. Student voices are essential to understanding program relevance, engagement, and impact. Future research should prioritize youth participation through interviews, focus groups, or student-led feedback mechanisms.

### **Representation and Scope of Interview Responses**

Interviews with school and district staff were conducted under tight time constraints, and availability varied widely. As a result, recurring themes may not reflect the full spectrum of experiences. Some respondents lacked insight into particular operational or planning aspects, limiting the completeness of the data. Additionally, the semi-structured nature of interviews meant that not all topics were addressed uniformly.

## **| Findings**

### **Program Overview**

A total of 18 summer learning programs were conducted across seven WLC-partnering schools within the Brandywine, Christina, and Red Clay school districts. No summer programming took place at Stubbs Early Education Center or Joseph E. Johnson Jr. School. On average, these programs lasted five weeks, with most starting on July 2nd and concluding by August 3rd. All 18 programs were offered at no cost to families.

We found that the primary objective of these programs was to support students' academic growth. All 18 programs emphasized literacy and math. While each district employed different strategies to reach this goal, district leaders consistently described their programs as intentional efforts to bolster academic learning during the summer months.



Program Name	School	District	Funding	Program Hours	Student Enrolled	Daily Average Student Attendance	Attendance Rate	Number of Staff	Student-Staff Ratio
Freedom School	Maurice Pritchett Sr. Academy	Christina	\$253,398.80	110	85	52	61.18%	12	4.3:1
Freedom School	The Bayard School	Christina		110	92	59	64.13%	13	4.5:1
REACH Program	Maurice Pritchett Sr. Academy	Christina	Not being funded by WLC	110	10	7	70.00%	8	0.9:1
Enrichment	Maurice Pritchett Sr. Academy	Christina	\$218,954.40	110	81	35	43.21%	8	4.4:1
Extended School Year (ESY)	Pulaski Early Education Center	Christina		70	11	10	90.91%	2	5:1
Entitlement	Pulaski Early Education Center	Christina		110	28	15	53.57%	4	3.8:1
Entitlement	The Bayard School	Christina		110	21	9	42.86%	16	0.6:1
Extended School Year (ESY)	The Bayard School	Christina		70	29	17	58.62%	12	1.4:1
Enrichment	The Bayard School	Christina		110	87	40	45.98%	13	3.1:1
21st Century (United Way)	Pulaski Early Education Center	Christina	Not being funded by WLC	110	40	18	45.00%	9	2:1
21st Century (United Way)	Maurice Pritchett Sr. Academy	Christina	Not being funded by WLC	110	73	38	52.05%	10	3.8:1
YMCA	Pulaski Early	Christina	\$208,652	180	47	26	55.32%	10	2.6:1

Program Name	School	District	Funding	Program Hours	Student Enrolled	Daily Average Student Attendance	Attendance Rate	Number of Staff	Student-Staff Ratio
	Education Center								
Boys and Girls Club <sup>2</sup>		Christina	\$150,000						
Freedom School	William Lewis Elementary School	Red Clay	\$397,859	156	200	110	55.00%	21	5.2:1
XSTREAM Explorer	Cab Calloway School of the Arts	Red Clay	\$153,985.40	125	58	40	68.97%	66	0.6:1
Summer Quest	Shortlidge (Evan G.) Academy	Red Clay	\$41,255.12	120	60	34	56.67%	10	3.4:1
ESY (Extended School Year)	Warner Elementary School	Red Clay	Not being funded by WLC	60	148	62	41.89%	40	1.6:1
MLL (Multi Language Learner)	Warner Elementary School	Red Clay	Not being funded by WLC	60	37	22	59.46%	5	4.4:1
Harlan Summer Academy	Harlan Elementary School	Brandywine	\$48,332	210	150	100	66.67%	20	5:1

<sup>2</sup> Not within the scope of this study, as the program does not take place at one of the WLC partner school sites.

Program Data	
Total Programs	18
Total Student Served	1257
Total Program Staffs	279
Average Student-Staff Ratio	2.8:1
Total Average Attendance	694
Average Attendance (%)	57.30%
Total Funding from WLC	\$1,472,436.72
Average Program Length (hrs)	113.4
Average Program Length (weeks)	5.1
Average Program Start Date	July 2, 2025
Average Program End Date	August 3, 2025

## Initial Discovery: Low Student Attendance

One of the most immediate findings from the data was a surprisingly low average student attendance rate of just 57% across the 18 summer programs.

This statistic raises an important question: What does such low attendance indicate? In financial terms, it suggests that nearly half of the allocated funding is not being fully utilized to reach students—raising concerns about the return on investment (ROI) for these programs.

### More importantly, the low attendance rate prompted further inquiry:

- Why are students not attending summer programs consistently?
- What barriers are preventing higher participation?
- What challenges are stakeholders facing during program planning and execution that may contribute to these attendance issues?

These questions shaped our investigation into operational and structural barriers across the planning, outreach, and delivery phases of the programs.

## Challenges

Respondents described a variety of overarching challenges affecting their districts and summer learning programs. These included barriers related to transportation, student access, attendance, staffing, communication, and stakeholder engagement. To better illustrate how these issues appear across the program lifecycle, we have organized the challenges into four categories: program planning, family outreach, program execution, and post-program action.



## Program Planning

Program planning emerged as one of the most critical and complex stages of summer learning implementation. Based on interviews and site visits, three key issues surfaced repeatedly: unclear ownership of responsibilities, insufficient planning time, and program schedules that misalign with family needs.

## Lack of Program Ownership

The lack of communication between school-based program coordinators and district-level staff was one of the most frequently cited challenges during interviews and program visits. This issue showed up in two main ways:

- **Unclear Distribution of Responsibilities:**
  - Many planning responsibilities—such as site selection, student registration, and family communication—were assumed to be handled by the other party. This lack of clarity resulted in last-minute scrambling and misaligned expectations.
- **Lack of Consistent Communication Touchpoints:**
  - Several school coordinators mentioned that communication with the district was irregular and often occurred only when issues arose. In many cases, there were no scheduled meetings or dedicated check-ins specific to summer program planning.

*"I think there just needs to be more frequent communication with our community partners to make sure we're all on the same page, getting them information as early as we can, and then designing their attendance sheets, their classroom assignments, things like that, and getting that back to us before the first day of the program."*

*- District Summer Program Coordinator*

## Insufficient Planning Time

Summer learning is often not treated as an extension of the school year and is typically not prioritized during the fall and spring semesters. As a result, planning for summer programs often begins just a few weeks before the programs start—leaving limited time for preparation, coordination, or refinement.

This compressed timeline leads to several operational challenges:

- **Limited Time for Cross-Program Coordination:**

- Planning efforts often fail to account for the number of programs operating at a single school site. In many cases, multiple programs run concurrently in the same building, but partnership and coordination between them is minimal. This leads to confusion over classroom usage, supply distribution, and communication breakdowns among staff.

- **Smaller Programs Overlooked in Planning:**

- Late-stage planning leaves little room to consider the unique logistical needs of smaller or specialized programs. Programs related to special education or supported by community-partners often face compounded challenges when navigating shared spaces and resources without proper integration into the broader planning framework.

*In a 1st-grade classroom, students were watching a cartoon on the smartboard while the instructor—visibly stressed—scrambled to create individual lesson plans. “I don’t have access to anything!” she said. Because she wasn’t a regular teacher at the school, she had no access to student profiles or IEPs and had been unable to contact in-year instructors.*

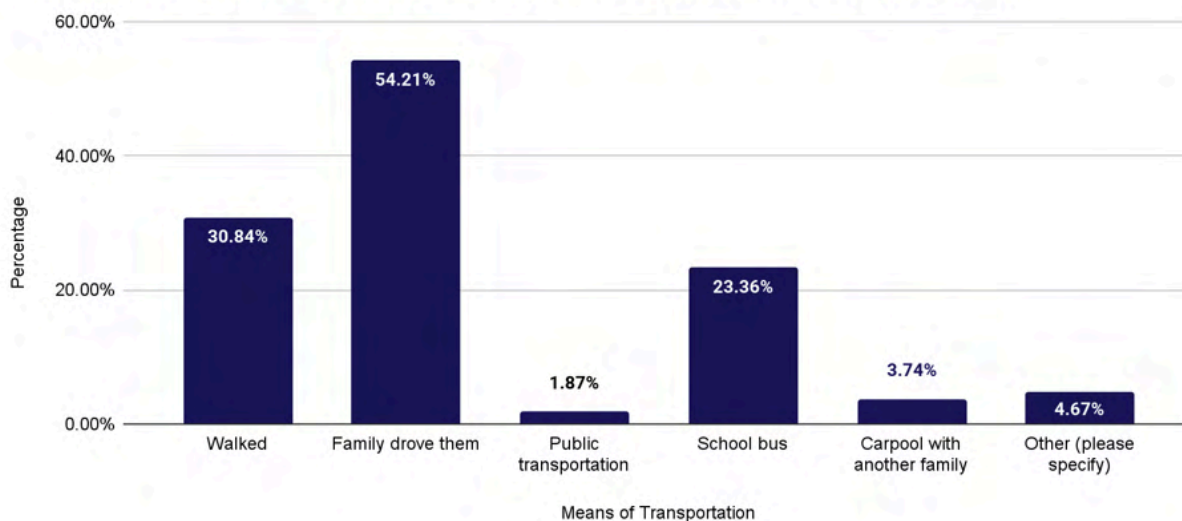
**- Field note**

## **Program Length and Hours**

The average program lasted five weeks, running from July 2 to August 3. However, this covered only about half of students’ full summer break. Many working families struggled to find childcare and alternative options during the weeks before and after the program.

Compounding the issue, more than half of the programs ended around 2 p.m. due to bus schedules—an inconvenient time for working parents. When asked how students typically got to the program, more than 50% relied on family pickup and drop-off. When parents were asked about potential challenges and feedback, the most common concerns were the program’s length, daily hours, and transportation. Parents expressed a desire to extend both the duration and daily schedule of the program to create a more impactful and supportive summer experience for their children.

What type of transportation did your child use to get to the program most days? (N=107)



*The only challenge my family faced was adjusting to the program's hours. Making sure we could adjust our work schedules to pick my student up on time so she would not be kicked out.*

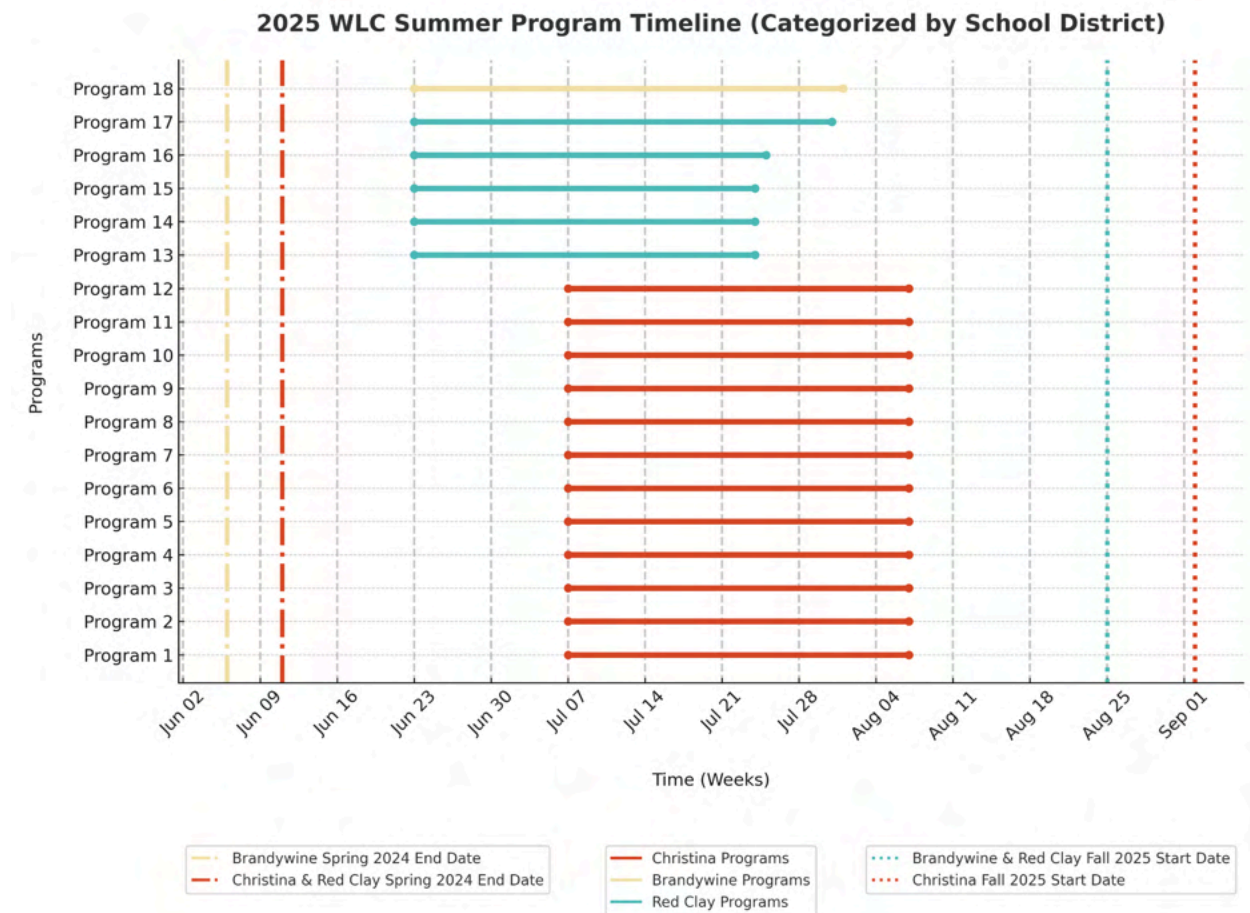
**- Parent**

*I recommend extended hours. Either 8-3 or 8:30-3. It's more feasible for working families. Also the time placement of the program. Maybe have it more towards the end of July into August to have flow seamlessly into the school year.*

**- Parent**

*Aug 15 should be the last day of summer academy!*

**- Parent**



## Family Outreach

Engaging families in summer program planning and participation proved to be a significant challenge. While schools and districts made efforts to share registration information, many families remained unaware of the full range of offerings—or misunderstood which programs their children were enrolled in.

### Lack of Program Visibility

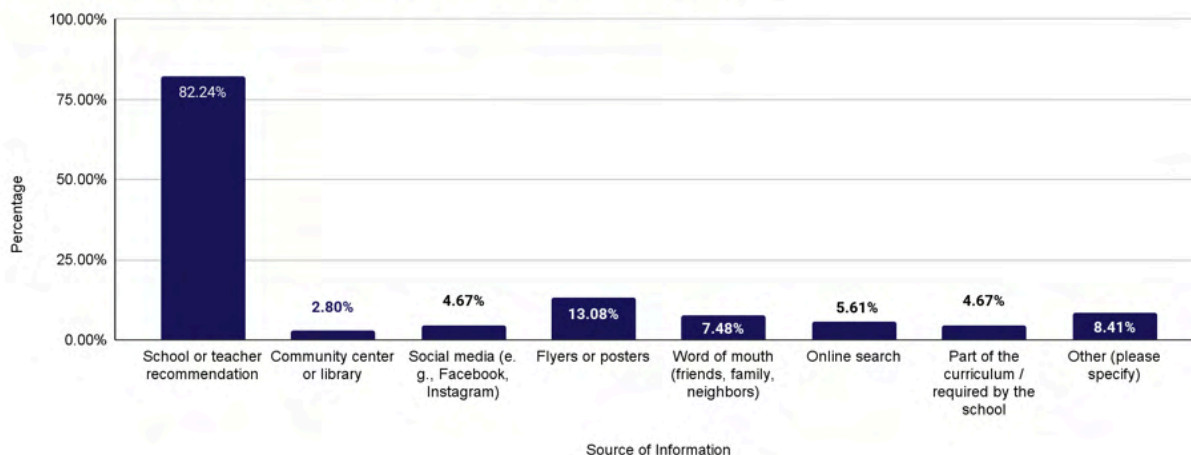
Many schools hosted three to four different summer programs simultaneously, yet families often struggled to understand the distinctions between them. Program staff consistently noted that communication strategies—such as QR code flyers or brief email announcements—were insufficient to drive awareness or enrollment.



## Survey data reinforced this gap:

- Only 5% of families learned about summer programs through social media
- 6% via online search
- 14% from flyers or posters

How did you hear about the summer program your child enrolled in? (N=107)



During site visits, we observed that many schools lacked visible signage or messaging about which summer programs were running. As a result, some families were unaware their children were enrolled in certain programs or mistakenly double-registered for overlapping offerings.

These communication gaps not only affected enrollment but also contributed to logistical confusion, missed opportunities for engagement, and reduced attendance. Program coordinators emphasized the need for more proactive and sustained outreach, ideally beginning in the spring semester and continuing through the start of the program.

*"There are parents who are unaware that their children were registered in the ESY program; they also enroll them in the Freedom School and drop them off without realizing the conflict."*

**- Program Coordinator**

*"There was limited information provided at sign up about the camp itself. Several weeks after registering and I hadn't received a confirmation/acceptance notice I called to double check the status of my son's enrollment."*

*- Parent*

*Please make it clear who the direct contact for my child is!*

*- Parent*

## **Program Execution**

While planning and outreach set the stage, the real test of summer programming occurs during execution. Several operational barriers emerged once programs were underway, including staffing shortages, inconsistent engagement, and limited enrichment opportunities. These issues often impacted the quality of student experiences and the effectiveness of instructional delivery.

### **Staffing**

Staffing emerged as the most persistent and foundational challenge across nearly every site. Programs struggled not only with hiring enough qualified personnel, but also with retaining staff throughout the summer and ensuring they felt supported in their roles.

Key issues included:

- **Inadequate Compensation:**
  - Many instructors reported being paid significantly less than during the school year, despite being expected to manage classrooms independently, often with little guidance or curriculum support. The discrepancy between expectations and pay led to frustration and, in some cases, attrition.

- **Lack of Preparedness and Support:**

- New staff, including those unfamiliar with the school or student population, frequently lacked access to student profiles, IEPs, or curriculum plans. Programs often launched without extensive orientation, and staff had minimal support from aides, interns, or volunteers.

- **Limited Backup or Relief Staff:**

- Several sites had no secondary support staff available to assist with behavioral challenges, breaks, or classroom transitions. This placed additional strain on already under-resourced instructors.

*"I was getting paid less and expected to do more. You see why people are leaving. Don't you?"*

*- 4th Grade Summer Instructor*

## Low Student Attendance & Engagement

In addition to the overall attendance rate of just 58% across the 18 programs, site visits and interviews revealed widespread concerns about student engagement—particularly among older students, such as those in the final years of middle school.

Several key issues contributed to these challenges:

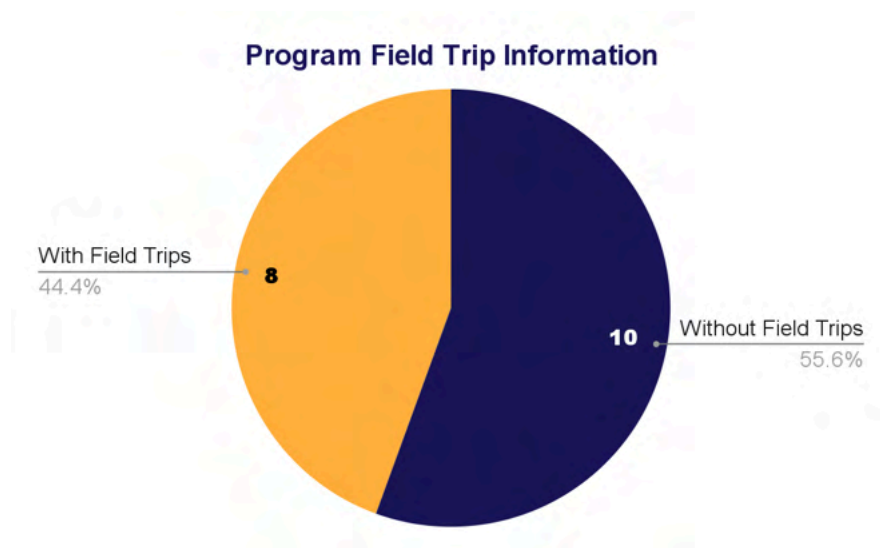
- **Mandatory Enrollment Without Motivation:**

- For many students, participation in summer learning was semi-mandatory due to academic risk. However, the academic nature of these programs—often lacking variety or creativity—did not incentivize consistent attendance or genuine engagement.

- **Limited Enrichment Activities & Lack of Field Trips:**

- Most programs focused heavily on literacy and math remediation. While this aligns with district goals, students reported feeling bored or disengaged, especially without hands-on or exploratory learning experiences. Only 8 of the 18

programs included field trips, despite strong feedback from both students and families on their value.



- **Lack of Student-Centered Design:**

- Programs were often built around adult schedules, transportation logistics, or resource availability, rather than what would spark interest or ownership among students themselves.

Without a balance of academics and enrichment, many programs missed the opportunity to re-engage students in learning during the summer months and to make education feel exciting, relevant, or personally meaningful.

*It would be fun to incorporate a field trip with the camp. You could invite parents to volunteer—single time, once weekly, etc.”*

**- Parent**

*“It’s like summer school, but they get to have fun as well. Most importantly, offering field trips free of cost so kids that have busy working parents are still able to go places and enjoy their summer.”*

**- Parent**

## | Post-Program Action

While the primary focus of summer programs is often on planning and execution, what happens after the program ends—or doesn't happen—can have lasting implications. Across sites, we found that post-program evaluation, reflection, and follow-up were largely inconsistent or missing altogether.

### Lack of Program-District Communication

Nearly all program coordinators emphasized that what's discussed during planning meetings often diverges significantly from what unfolds on the ground. Many noted that unless district Staff physically visit program sites, they cannot fully understand operational realities such as curriculum misalignment, resource gaps, or shifting student needs.

Despite these challenges, very few programs had structured opportunities for debriefing with district staff during or after the program. The absence of feedback loops limits the system's ability to make informed adjustments in future summers.

In an 8th grade math class at an enrichment program, only five students were present. The instructor—who teaches high school math at another school—shared:

*"I hardly use this provided curriculum. It's just too hard for the kids. It's completely two different levels. If I didn't have a strong background in math instruction, I wouldn't know what to do."*

**- Field note**

### Limited Family Feedback

Among all 18 programs, only a few had developed a formal process for gathering input from families. Most relied on passive methods, such as waiting for parents to approach staff if concerns arose. Without structured tools for collecting feedback—such as surveys, reflection forms, or family exit interviews—valuable insights into program satisfaction and impact are lost.

Coordinators expressed interest in strengthening family engagement after the summer, but noted that time, staffing, and system-level support are often lacking to build these follow-through mechanisms.

## **| Promising Practices**

Amid the challenges identified across planning, execution, and post-program reflection, several programs stood out for implementing effective practices that enhanced coordination, engagement, and overall impact. These promising approaches point to actionable strategies that could be adopted or scaled in future summers.

**The key themes that emerged include:**

### **Regular Communication Between Program, Family, and District**

Programs with the strongest operational stability emphasized the importance of cross-functional communication. At Pulaski Early Education Center, the YMCA-run program demonstrated exemplary coordination:

- The YMCA provided detailed curriculum and logistical guidance.
- The Community Executive Director maintained open and proactive communication with the on-site coordinator.
- Daily classroom walk-throughs allowed the site coordinator to offer real-time support.
- The school principal regularly debriefed with the program lead to ensure alignment and resolve issues early.

These layers of communication fostered a culture of transparency and responsiveness—allowing both staff and families to feel supported.

### **Understanding Students' Unique Needs and Avoiding One-Size-Fits-All Approaches**

One standout example was the REACH Program at Maurice Pritchett Sr. Academy. As a year-round program designed for students ages 2.5 to 21 with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, the program highlighted the importance of designing with, not just for, specific student populations. District leaders and coordinators emphasized that inclusive summer

learning must go beyond broad academic goals and account for the nuanced needs of all learners.

When planning summer learning, staff should avoid a one-size-fits-all model and instead prioritize the voices of on-site coordinators and families to better understand and meet individual needs. For example, the REACH program director highlighted how critical classroom location and layout are for students with disabilities. To properly accommodate these students, classrooms must:

- Have adjoining doors and shared changing rooms
- Include in-room bathrooms equipped with specialized equipment
- Be located on the ground floor, avoiding stairway access
- Be near emergency evacuation exits with accessible ramps

These design considerations are essential to creating safe, functional, and inclusive environments that support the success of all students.

## **Interconnected, Project-Based Curriculum**

At Cab Calloway School of the Arts, the XSTREAM Explorer program used a project-based model anchored in a unifying theme. That summer's theme—Aladdin—guided instruction across disciplines:

- Students learned about music, theater, dance, science, math, and English through connections to the story and setting of Aladdin.
- The program culminated in a student-led performance, giving learners a shared goal and a strong sense of ownership.

This approach made learning more engaging, interdisciplinary, and relevant—while reinforcing creativity and collaboration.

## **Balance of Academic and Enrichment Activities**

While academic instruction was prioritized across most programs, those that paired it with hands-on enrichment saw better attendance and engagement. For instance, at the Freedom School hosted at Maurice Pritchett Sr. Academy:

- Mornings focused on literacy and reading comprehension.
- Afternoons featured rotating enrichment activities, such as cosmetology, culinary arts, karate, DJing, and financial literacy.

This mix helped students see learning as both fun and practical, fostering greater enthusiasm and retention.

## **Family and Community Engagement**

Programs that cultivated relationships with families year-round—not just during registration—reported stronger trust and participation. One successful model was SummerQuest at Evan G. Shortlidge Academy:

- The program targeted rising kindergarten and first-grade students.
- At its conclusion, families were invited to a final showcase where students presented their work and instructors shared insights from the summer.

Events like these helped strengthen school-family connections and gave parents a more meaningful window into their child's learning experience. Multiple programs also have existing feedback collection mechanisms in place, such as sending mid- and post-program surveys to parents, to ensure their voices are heard and improvements can be made.

## **External Partnership and Collaboration**

Partnerships with community organizations were vital to addressing staffing gaps, enriching curriculum, and offering wraparound services such as before- and after-care. Notable examples include:

- The Freedom School at The Bayard School, which partnered with the Boys and Girls Club to provide transportation and extended day support.
- The Freedom School at William Lewis Elementary, which collaborated with local universities to bring in student interns who assisted with instruction and logistics.

These partnerships enhanced the sustainability and impact of programming while expanding the range of experiences available to students.



## Call to Action

### Recommendations and Next Steps for the Wilmington Learning Collaborative

To address the recurring challenges identified throughout this study and to build on promising practices, the Wilmington Learning Collaborative (WLC) can take a more proactive and systematized approach to summer program planning and evaluation. By embedding continuous feedback loops, aligning timelines with family and student needs, and leveraging cross-sector collaboration, WLC can improve both program quality and student outcomes.

### Engagement Model

Below is a proposed Engagement Model that WLC could use to support sustainable summer learning improvements. This model aims to reposition summer learning as an intentional, year-round initiative rather than a reactive, short-term effort. By grounding planning in data and sustained stakeholder engagement, WLC can ensure its summer programs are better aligned with student needs, operational realities, and long-term educational goals.

Engagement Model for WLC			
Program Stage	Timeline	Goal	Action Item
Pre-Program Planning	Previous Spring Semester	Support districts and schools in providing early visibility of summer learning programs to families	Support schools in organizing and funding workshops to raise family awareness of summer learning opportunities.
	End of previous summer (August - September)	Evaluate prior summer and allocate funding	Analyze program data and survey feedback; allocate funds based on student need, performance, and prior success.
	August -	Establish visions and	Identify and meet with touchpoints

Engagement Model for WLC			
Program Stage	Timeline	Goal	Action Item
	October	goals	who are most familiar with the needs of the student and family—such as community advocates—to align on the student’s needs, next summer’s vision, target outcomes, and guiding principles. Share and discuss visions and goals with district leaders.
Program Planning	November - December	Plan and develop programs for PreK-5th grade students	Conduct monthly check-ins with district staff, school coordinators, and program partners, focusing on program planning tailored to early childhood and elementary students. Identify and build external partnerships that support the unique needs of this age group, such as STEAM initiatives and educational field trips. Additionally, identify non-negotiables such as program length and schedule to ensure alignment and consistency.
		Plan and develop programs for middle and high school students	Conduct monthly check-ins with district staff, school coordinators, and program partners, focusing on program planning tailored to middle and high school students. Identify and build external partnerships that support the unique needs of this age group, such as college visits and early career development preparation. Additionally, identify non-negotiables such as program length and schedule to ensure alignment and consistency.
Program	December -	Support districts	Share summer program

Engagement Model for WLC			
Program Stage	Timeline	Goal	Action Item
Communication	February	and schools with summer program marketing and recruitment efforts	information in the form of newsletters, flyers, and social media posts. Conduct family outreach.
Program Enrollment and Attendance	February - May	Establish recourse options for different scenarios related to student attendance	Maintain communication with program coordinators, schools, and district leaders regarding projected enrollment, registration, and attendance data.
Program Execution	May - August	Monitor in real-time and adjust responsively	Conduct on-site visits and interviews to identify emerging challenges and needs. Conduct outreach to parents whose child is not enrolled in the summer program and ask about the reasons behind it.
Post-Program Review & Feedback	September - October	Understand impact and plan for improvement	Collect structured feedback through interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Evaluate effectiveness through data and reflect on unmet needs.

## Recommendations and Next Steps for Partners

As schools, districts, and community organizations plan and execute summer learning programs, four strategic priorities can help address the recurring challenges of low student attendance and limited engagement:

### 1. Start Planning Earlier

- a. Early and intentional planning is critical to success. Many of the challenges highlighted—such as staffing gaps, communication breakdowns, and logistical confusion—stemmed from timelines that were too compressed. By initiating summer planning in the fall or early winter, programs can secure staff, clarify roles, coordinate with external partners, and effectively engage families.

## **2. Foster Cross-Functional Communication**

- a. Regular, structured communication between district offices, school coordinators, and external program partners is essential. This includes setting consistent check-in points, creating shared planning documents, and clarifying responsibilities across all levels. Strong communication prevents duplication of effort, aligns expectations, and ensures real-time problem-solving.

## **3. Extend Programming Length and Hours & Address Transportation Issues**

- a. Many families expressed that five-week programs covering only part of the summer—and ending as early as 2 p.m.—did not meet their childcare or scheduling needs. In addition, strict bus schedules limited flexibility and constrained participation. Programs should explore ways to:
  - i. Extend program dates to better align with the full summer break
  - ii. Offer longer hours, particularly for working families
  - iii. Collaborate with transportation providers or external partners to offer expanded transit and before and after care options.

## **4. Balance Academic Instruction with Enrichment Activities**

- a. Programs that integrated hands-on, interest-driven activities—such as field trips, creative workshops, or community guest sessions—reported higher levels of student enthusiasm and attendance. While academic recovery remains important, pairing it with enrichment opportunities helps students reconnect with learning in joyful, meaningful ways.

These recommendations should be adapted to local contexts, but they offer a starting point for program partners looking to create more equitable, engaging, and sustainable summer experiences.

## **Shared Recommendations**

### **Engagement Model**

A clearly defined set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) will provide the WLC, schools and district leaders with measurable metrics to assess program effectiveness and demonstrate the impact of funding efforts, helping to guide planning and decision-making for future summers.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)		
Goal	Metric Name	Description
Demonstrate measurable improvement in core academic areas	<b>Academic Progress</b>	Measures academic growth and literacy skills through pre- and post-program assessment data.
Increase average daily student attendance to match industry standard of 75% <sup>3</sup>	<b>Student Engagement</b>	Utilize average daily student attendance to reflect student engagement.
Achieve ≥85% satisfaction rating from both students and families.	<b>Student and Family Satisfaction</b>	Captures feedback from students on their summer experience and perceived learning, along with post-program input from families.
Ensure representation reflects district demographics; increase inclusion of special needs students by 10%.	<b>Program Inclusion</b>	Analyzes student demographics, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and the number of students with special needs participating in the program.
Maintain or reduce cost per participant while preserving program quality	<b>Cost Per Participant</b>	Calculates program cost efficiency by dividing total program funding by the average daily student attendance.

## Lingering Questions

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to summer learning. This study was designed to elevate on-the-ground insights, but it also uncovered important gaps that warrant further exploration. Continuous data collection, real-time evaluation, and long-term investment in understanding summer learning systems will be key to ensuring all students are engaged, supported, and learning year-round.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, Catherine H., Jennifer Sloan McCombs, John F. Pane, Heather L. Schwartz, Jonathan Schweig, Andrew McEachin, and Kyle Siler-Evans. *Kids Who Attend More Benefit More: Voluntary Summer Learning Programs*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016.  
[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9924.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9924.html)

To strengthen and reimagine summer learning, the following questions can help guide planning and decision-making:

## Target Audience and Program Design

**Who is the intended focus of summer learning in terms of:**

- Program length
- Daily schedule
- Content and type of activities
- Feedback gathered from staff, families, and students

## Summer Programming at Non-WLC Schools

**What does summer learning look like in non-WLC schools with regard to:**

- Program offerings
- Program length
- Daily schedule
- Curriculum/content
- Funding sources/total funding
- Attendance rates
- Differences between Title I and non-Title I schools

## Sponsored Programs

**For sponsored programs (e.g., Freedom School, YMCA, 21st Century), how closely do they align with:**

- Their respective national models or proposals
- Implementation at other schools
- Identified model sites and best practices

## Measuring Impact


- How is the impact of summer learning measured by data?
- What does data-driven education mean in this context?
- What metrics are used to evaluate effectiveness?
- How might we reimagine summer learning as an intentional extension of the school year—both academically and operationally?

## Fiscal Stewardship and Attendance


- If district leaders choose to extend the length of summer programs in future years, how does that reflect sound fiscal stewardship, especially given historically low attendance rates?


Addressing these questions will deepen our collective understanding of how to make summer learning more accessible, effective, and student-centered—both in Wilmington and beyond.

## | Appendix

 Blank Survey.pdf

 Survey Postcard.png

 YMCA @Pulaski Summer Themes & Schedule .docx

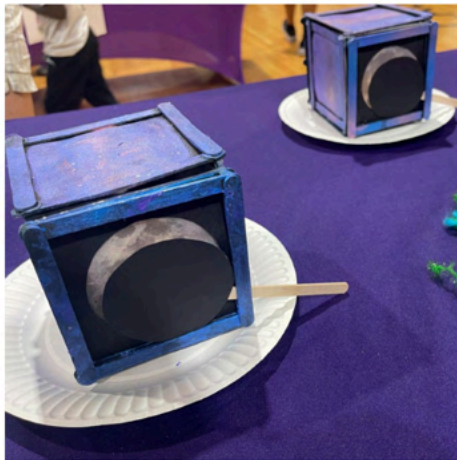
 Pulaski Summer Enrichment Curriculum - Week 1 .docx

## | Report by Franklin Cheng

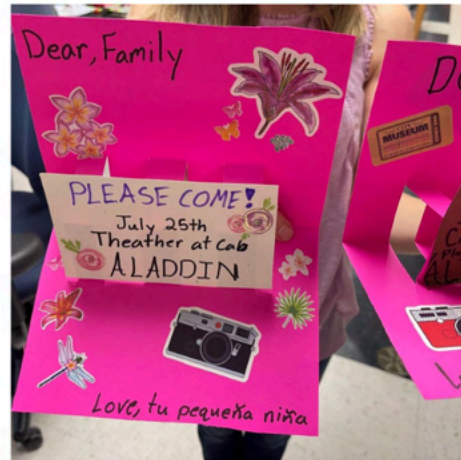
### Strategic Support Fellow

For questions, please email [franklin@wlc-de.org](mailto:franklin@wlc-de.org).





Moon Phase Lantern - made by students in the X-Stream Explorers program at Cab Calloway.



Final showcase invitation for families made by the student - X-Stream Program at Cab Calloway



Germination Experiment - Made by students in the X-Stream program



X-Stream Final Showcase - Aladdin



Extended School Year (ESY) classroom at Warner Elementary School. Students working on individual tasks



Pre-K classroom at SummerQuest at Shortlidge Academy

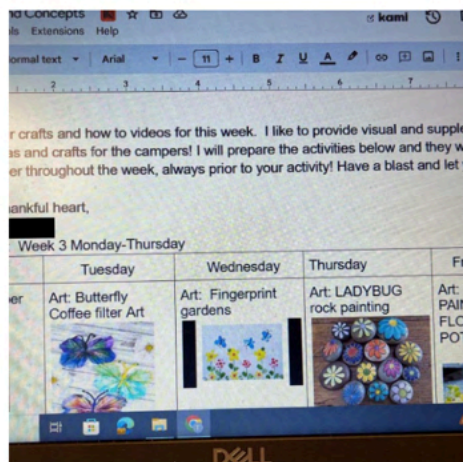


SummerQuest final showcase at Shortlidge Academy. Family was invited to participate in classes.



Pre-K students in SummerQuest were able to author and illustrate their own book





YMCA craft planning guide created by the on-site coordinator at Pulaski



YMCA student's craft work



Kindergarten Entitlement classroom at Pulaski



Books provided at Freedom School to enhance literacy