



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
FULL REPORT AVAILABLE
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RESEARCH REVIEW

Sustainability over Speed: The Role of Major Funding on the Field of Summer Learning

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In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2021 Congress directed \$122 billion in funds to state and local education agencies through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) as part of the American Rescue Plan (ARP). States were directed to use at least 5% of their funding to address lost learning time by implementing evidence-based interventions such as summer learning, and 1% of their funding was earmarked directly for evidence-based summer learning programs (Griffith, 2021). Those allocations, though small percentages, account for \$7.3 billion dollars of potential funding directed at summer learning programs. It is a historic investment that's packaged with a ticking clock—the U.S. Department of Education has set a deadline for states to liquidate their funds within 120 days of September 2024 (Afterschool Alliance, 2021).

To understand the impact of such a large investment in summer programming and help the field chart a path forward when the funding ends, Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR), with support from the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA), reviewed publications and research conducted between 2020 and 2023 on the impact of this funding on summer learning.

This review focused on understanding research conducted on the impact of ARP funding on summer programs with the aim to identify common themes and lessons

learned and to make recommendations that will benefit the field of summer education as we plan to capitalize on this investment and continue to grow and enhance summer programming into the future. We will release a full report in December of 2023.

Research Review

As part of this project, we have reviewed 58 publications to-date including reports from professional associations, advocacy groups, school districts, and universities (34%) and blogs focused on funding usage (33%) in each state. Fourteen percent of the publications we reviewed we classified as “Other,” which includes infographics, policy snapshots, funding trackers, FAQs, news articles, conference papers, and book chapters. Research briefs (9%) and fact sheets (7%) accounted for 16% of the total. Only 3% of the publications were peer reviewed, most likely owing to the newness of this topic and the lengthy process of conducting rigorous research (see Figure 1). We anticipate more peer reviewed publications will be released over the next year, and we will continue to incorporate them in this review as they are released.

We also looked at the focus of each report, publication, and blog to see how trends varied by year as the pandemic progressed (see Figure 2). The most common topic written about from 2021-2023 was funding use, an unsurprising finding given the aim of our review. We also



looked at articles and reports that focused on pandemic impact on summer programs and how they are being used to aid in the recovery efforts. Six publications covered the impact of summer programs or the impact of summer programming in general, with a few publications exploring policy considerations and other topics. Importantly, the publications we reviewed included the perspectives of several key stakeholders in summer learning including parents, providers, states, local education agencies (LEAs), and district superintendents.

Key Themes & Findings

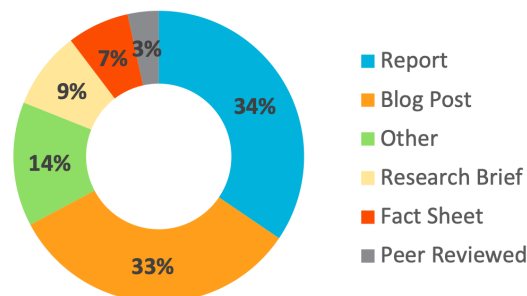
In our review, several key themes emerged that will help us better move forward post-ARP funding.

Summer learning spending was a top priority for states and districts during the pandemic.

Organizations tracking federal funding spending found that all 50 states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico allocated federal funding to summer learning programs (Afterschool Alliance & National League of Cities, 2023; Kidd, 2023). Many states gave control of funds directly to local districts (Munyan-Penney, N., & Barone, C., 2022). In 2021 when funding was first available, 75% of surveyed superintendents planned to use ARP funding for summer (AASA, 2021). While it was a federal requirement that 1% of funding was allocated to summer learning, it's important to note that it was also one of the top priorities for addressing learning loss, a federal mandate, but not required to be spent for the summer. Summer programs became a key delivery vehicle for reducing learning loss, which means that school districts across the country trusted summer to deliver in times of crisis. We will explore how states prioritized summer learning further in our full report.

Summer learning was the most popular strategy used by districts to address learning loss.

Fig. 1 Publications by Type



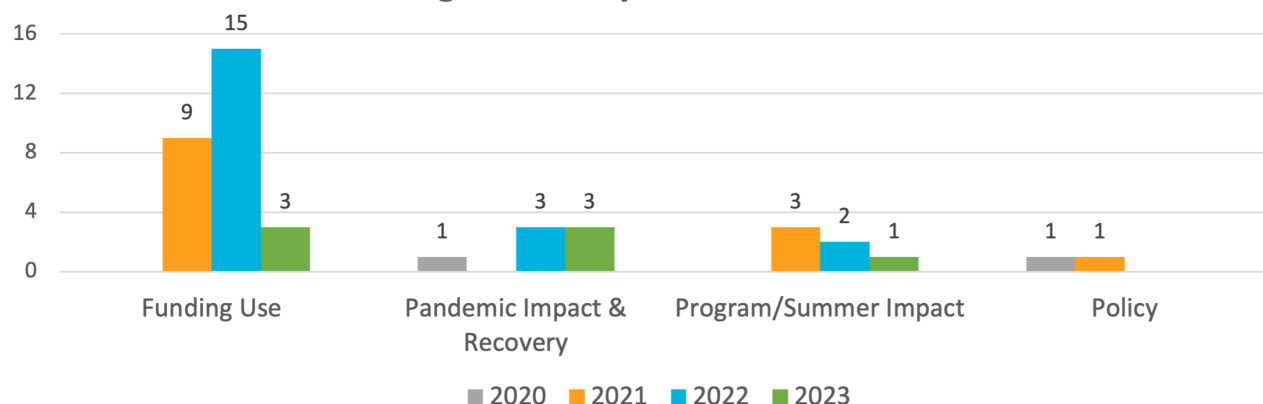
Analysis of 5,000 district spending plans found that spending on summer learning was the most common strategy used by districts to address pandemic learning loss (DiMarco & Jordan, 2022). A national survey of local education agencies (LEAs) launched in 2021 found that 75% of the summer programs that were implemented focused on learning recovery to address lost instructional time (Davis et al., 2022). A study of summer school's impact on academic outcomes estimated that summer learning closed the loss gap by 2-3% (Callen, et al., 2023). How much time was left for summer to be a fun and enriching time needs to be explored in greater detail.

The rapid funding timeline was difficult for states to implement and many predict cuts to summer programs when the funding ends.

In a June 2023 survey, superintendents reported they strongly considered sustainability when allocating funds, with 44% listing it as a top priority and 42% strongly considering it (AASA, 2023). However, some states reported only having eight weeks to create a statewide plan and only seven states were able to expend ARP funding during the summer of 2021 (Davis et al., 2023).

Analysis of state ARP plans and direct communication with staff found that state departments of education felt rushed and did not have the opportunity to engage thoughtfully with stakeholders, plan for program evalua-

Fig. 2 Focus by Publication Year



tion, or to consider how the funding could be used for sustainable investments in summer learning (Munyan-Penney, N., & Barone, C., 2022). When asked about the 2024 obligation deadline, superintendents in the previously referenced 2023 survey, ranked summer learning second on their list of top cuts (behind specialist staff) with 51% identifying summer learning as an area that would need reduction (AASA, 2023). This is a worrisome statistic as the superintendents are key decision-makers in allocation of funds. In future research, we will need to investigate the impact funding cuts have on summer programming. It is possible that the speed of funding increases for summer learning did not allow for needed sustainability planning.

Funding supported an increase in partnerships with community-based organizations, new tools, and technical assistance.

A 2022 review of state plans found that 14 state departments required collaboration between districts and local community-based organizations (CBOs) (Munyan-Penney, N., & Barone, C., 2022). Promisingly, research on ARP funding trends found that 22 states used their funding to increase their work with community-based organizations such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers, leveraging existing expertise and lessening the burden on districts (Munyan-Penney, N., & Barone, C., 2022).

A 2022 survey of program providers who received ARP funds confirmed the funding helped them hire more staff, serve more students, and expand program offerings (Afterschool Alliance, 2022b). As follow-up from the 2022 *From Recovery to Thriving: How American Rescue Plan is Supporting America's Students Summit!* the Department of Education and the National Public Education Support Fund shared a long list of summer programmatic commitments including grant funding to support school-community partnerships, new tools to access summer learning,

and increased technical assistance offerings for states, community based organizations, and program providers (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2022). This is important because it shows that the funds were not only used to expand available programs and “slots,” but also to increase the quality of offerings, resources, and professional development for staff.

Outlook

This unprecedented investment in summer led to the much-needed expansion of summer learning opportunities, particularly critical for youth from lower income families with less access to enriching summer experiences. While many are predicting a reduction in funds will lead to cutting programming, funding did more than just expand services, with many states and partners focusing on building tools and resources to improve programs. As a next step, we need to further examine the funding’s impact on program quality. There is already a movement to shift the approach from “summer school” to “summer programming,” supported by NSLA and its work with districts across the country to focus on best practices. That is just one example of how this federal funding can lead to increased program quality and student experience.

We are in the early days of research on the true impact of the pandemic and resulting funding on summer learning. We need to invest in further research to understand how to make long term investments in our youth and the programs that serve them. Several organizations have planned reports for the fall to update the data presented in this summary. We look forward to integrating these updated findings into our full report. Together, these reports and additional research can help make the case that summer programs and learning need to enjoy continued and growing (not diminishing) support.



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