AN ACTIVE IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION OF ESSER-FUNDED SUMMER PROGRAMS TARGETING LEARNING RECOVERY AND ACCELERATION WITHIN HIGH SCHOOLS IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

JULIE T. MARKS, ROSIE MIESNER

Education Policy Initiative at Carolina (EPIC)

Background

We leveraged an existing partnership between EPIC and the Dogwood Health Trust (DHT) to assess how districts implemented the School Extension Learning and Enrichment Program (Summer Learning), Summer Bridge Academies, and Summer Career Accelerator activities at high schools in the western part of the state. The Dogwood Health Trust is a foundation that partners with community organizations in the western part of the state to improve the health and well-being of people and communities, with education as one of its focal areas. The DHT currently has community partners within 18 of the 28 districts in education regions 7 and 8 and supported EPIC in its recruitment of school districts and high schools across the western region.

The Study

This study focuses on students, educators, and district administrators in the western part of the state comprised of State Board of Education (SBE) regions 7 and 8. We studied the "what, how, and why" of summer school extension impacts in this region, contextualizing quantitative measures of competency-based assessments, grade promotion, and credit recovery. Through interviews, focus groups, and surveys, we highlight how school stakeholders experienced and perceived these programs. Drawing on these data, we illustrate how these summer programs were operationalized, their perceived impacts, as well as elements that facilitated and inhibited implementation. This research contextualizes patterns regarding summer learning programs and highlights where extension activity resources may be concentrated for sustainability and scaling.

We identified education regions 7 and 8 due to the number of factors that place students in the western part of North Carolina at particular risk for learning loss and disengagement from school associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The mountainous landscape in western North Carolina presents unique challenges including limited access to high-speed internet and

increased transportation costs. In addition, most of the districts in the western regions are rural and many are economically distressed.

Within this area, we focused our study on school extension programs that served high school students. The effects of the pandemic on the educational experiences of high schoolers put students at risk of failing to attain credit for courses required to graduate from high school. Students may also be retained in grades, which increases their risk of dropping out of school. In addition, high schoolers face pandemic-related mental health impacts that can impair their progress in school. This study provides important information about how Summer Learning, career acceleration, and transitional supports provided through OLR-supported summer programs influenced school engagement and learning recovery for high school students in western North Carolina.

We developed this project as a single case study with an embedded design (Yin, 2003). We approached school extension programming as our case, with districts and schools in regions 7 and 8 as our embedded units of analysis in the years 2021 and 2022. We considered nested and vertical case study models; however, we felt that these approaches isolated focus on individual organizations in a manner that was not conducive to our study. Drawing on a single case study with an embedded design fostered continued interrogation of the activities and events that comprise summer programming within the Western geographical context, while also attending to elements unique to each district.

We initially encountered some barriers to conducting observations, as schools grappled with planning for summer programming amid the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic. We chose not to visit sites in the summer of 2022 so as not to place an undue burden on districts that were navigating multiple demands. We collected rich interview data from participants during Spring 2021 and Fall 2022, despite barriers to observations, and grounded our analysis in these data.

What We Learned

For the present series, we highlight findings in the following domains: Program Development, Staffing, and Attendance. We also summarize staff understandings of academic and social-emotional impacts.

Program Development

We expect to see impacts on program development in the next program cycle, as challenges and successes shared by participants regarding program development can inform approaches to summer program development. Factors that facilitated successful planning of

summer programs included the ability to start planning in the first semester, and a planning team that incorporates staff from different school roles. Early notification of parameters on expenditures and student enrollment from the district can further enable school-level staff to best leverage these resources to serve students.

Participants across programs and districts expressed that their first priority in hosting summer programming was the physical and mental health of their students. Staff noted that students faced amplified challenges related to isolation and disengagement during remote learning, especially those due to residing in geographically dispersed and economically distressed communities. This priority informed staff orientations toward summer programs and their development. Further, practitioners identified goals that aligned with the content of their specific programming, including academic support and career exposure. In discussing these goals, staff noted how their programs supported student outcomes in their school lives as well as in their post-secondary endeavors.

Participants at the school level identified the primary challenge for developing 2022 summer programs that met these goals as a lack of clarity around district expectations, particularly around the number of students to be served. School staff acknowledged that they appreciate the autonomy to design programs that best meet the needs of their students, but they would have liked more clarity about the parameters they were to work within. This was particularly evident as it related to the number of students the schools should serve, and relatedly, the best processes for recruitment and enrollment.

> *I think they were unprepared for the number of students that we were going to have as an influx at the last minute and so we didn't have a really great mechanism in place to identify who those students were when they arrived. I had no idea who those kids were. Maybe they came back and maybe they didn't. It was a little too freeform.*- Teacher

Staff
Participants shared how they dealt with ground-level staffing challenges to facilitate summer programming. These insights may be particularly impactful for schools in the region facing similar challenges. However, these practices may also be applied successfully across several contexts and regions.

Teachers, principals, and district administrators all noted challenges in staffing summer programs, which several attributed to teacher burnout. Some identified practices to mitigate burnout and address staffing gaps. Participants identified the following promising approaches to addressing staffing challenges: use of learning management systems (LMS); flexible staffing models; and leveraging student leadership.

An LMS provides a single software platform where teachers can integrate lessons, assignments, and assessments for independent online learning. Philosophies regarding the use of learning management systems for primary instruction varied. For some schools, the use of LMS was a logistical necessity as they lacked the staff capacity to meet students' needs. In other instances, the use of LMS was a programmatic decision to decrease teacher burden and increase receptivity to teach over the summer. LMS options helped schools adapt to a context in which staffing was limited.

Principals and teachers also relayed the benefits of implementing a flexible staffing model in Summer Learning programs in which teachers could split their instructional time within a day, and/or across the length of the program. Staff noted that this approach was paramount for staffing the program and minimizing further teacher burnout.
Flexible staffing models supported program implementation and held the potential to bolster teacher-student relationships, in exposing students to different teachers and teaching styles.

Finally, one district drew upon their upperclassmen to support a summer bridge program, expanding the capacity of staff-based leadership team to work with students. Participants reported this approach as also heightening student self-efficacy and peer support structures across grade levels. Additionally, engaging students who previously participated in summer programs in recruitment and enrollment can help diffuse concerns and increase the receptivity of prospective students.

> *I have one department that they've got 3 different teachers that are going to do one week each because no one wants to commit to the 3 weeks and I'm fine with that. And <u>it's a good thing for our students because it gives them the opportunity to see different types of teaching methods and it may show a kid, hey, I might not learn real well under this teacher, but this other teacher, I get along great with</u> and I understand everything they say, so that's a positive.* -Principal

Attendance
Limited attendance in summer programs is not a new topic of discussion, however, these findings remain impactful. Participants indicated that the students most marginalized in school spaces often remain so due to issues of access. These findings spur a need to consider how best to support these students and families, should summer programming not effectively address their needs.

Attendance issues— in terms of initial enrollment and continued attendance– limited the extent to which summer programming could impact students. Principals and teachers acknowledged that summer programs will always face scheduling challenges as they compete with travel and jobs. Yet, this challenge is amplified in communities where a student's summer income is essential for their family. The other critical attendance barrier is transportation, again

exacerbated by the rural mountainous regions where public transportation may not even be an option.

> *...these seniors, some of them are working in place of their parents or helping their grandparents because of their home life. So, they see the need more to have that cash flow instead of the value of their education. -Teacher*

Academic Impacts

Overall, *educators* characterized the academic outcomes stemming from their summer programs across three focal areas: increased graduation rates and drop-out prevention, increased academic engagement and self-efficacy, and expanded course access and alignment. Students participating in the Summer Learning program were able to graduate over the summer, return to school in the fall on track with their peers, and/or strengthen content knowledge in preparation for fall classes. Teachers consider credit recovery through the Summer Learning program as an impactful tool for dropout prevention. Students participating in Summer Bridge programs reported feeling more prepared for challenging coursework and more confident in their academic abilities. Staff reported students who participated in the Summer Bridge program were more engaged and had fewer disciplinary issues than their peers. Students participating in Career Accelerator programs reported selecting courses that align with their interests and were able to connect their academic performance with their future careers.

> *We had 770 HS credits earned last summer with students across our district. That's huge. We graduated 55 students at the end of summer academy and these students would have been students that would have been dropouts. Even though there's light at the end of the tunnel and you have one or two credits, sometimes, they'll just walk away rather than face that embarrassment. Sometimes, they're first-generation HS graduates, so they don't have that push behind them that others may have and so, to graduate 55, that's huge for our district. -LEA Director of Secondary Education*

Social and Emotional Impacts

Teachers and students perceived the social and emotional benefits of summer programs to include establishing connections with teachers and peers, increasing students' self-confidence, and exposure to new experiences. All programs emphasized the importance of attending to the social and emotional needs of high school students, particularly about persistently elevated anxiety levels. Staff perceived students who participated in the Summer Learning program to be more engaged and to have more self-efficacy in their ability to succeed academically. Students participating in Summer Bridge programs reported feeling less anxious about beginning high school and forming valuable relationships with staff and students. Career Accelerator staff spoke

about the social growth observed in students who can visit places and experience things they would never have been able to otherwise.

> *For me, once COVID happened, I felt very disconnected from everybody and I would only be friends with two people and then it had been hard for me to reconnect with people. And then I went to this camp and now, I have all these friends and even though I don't talk to some of you guys, <u>it's good to be able to smile at someone in the hall and know that they know me.</u>* -Student

Conclusion

Though we did not engage in a formal research-practice partnership, our connection with DHT was instrumental to this study. In addition to supporting recruitment, DHT's engagement with communities gave us a starting point for understanding the unique challenges present in this region. We will be sharing our findings with DHT through their annual partner meeting in October 2023, and we hope that insights from this study will provide useful and usable information to DHT, specific to learning recovery and acceleration in the Western part of the state.