



2023 Connecticut State Department of Education Summer Enrichment Program Evaluation

JULY 2025

**Center for Connecticut
Education Research Collaboration**

Partner Institutions





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About CCERC

The Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration (CCERC) is a research partnership between the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and institutions of higher education across Connecticut. CSDE sets the agenda, identifies projects, and allocates funding for CCERC. The University of Connecticut manages funding and provides an administrative team. A Steering Committee composed of researchers from various Connecticut institutions guides the administrative team in developing and approving research projects and reports. Researchers from Connecticut universities and colleges constitute the research teams. The mission of CCERC is to address pressing issues in the state's public schools through high quality evaluation and research that leverages the expertise of researchers from different institutions possessing varied methodological expertise and content knowledge.

CCERC was formed initially using federal relief funds to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning and well-being and recovery efforts in the state's schools. The partnership was subsequently institutionalized to respond to ongoing evaluation and research needs of the CSDE, provide research opportunities for Connecticut researchers, and foster collaboration across the state's institutions of higher education.





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Executive Summary

In 2023, for its third consecutive summer, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) implemented its Summer Enrichment Grant Program. The CSDE introduced the initiative in Spring 2021 to provide Connecticut students with expanded access to summer enrichment programming in preparation for returning to in-person learning in Fall 2021, following the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past four summers, the Summer Enrichment Program has addressed students' social, emotional, and well-being needs by providing grant funds to hundreds of summer programs between 2021 and 2024. This round of funding supports summer programs across a two-year grant cycle, providing \$11.5M to 109 programs for the 2023 and 2024 camp seasons.

For summer 2023, the CSDE awarded 94 Expansion grants of up to \$50,000 and 15 Innovation grants of up to \$150,000. In keeping with prior years, Expansion grants were awarded to camps for “expanding existing programs or creating new programs to serve students who would otherwise not have access to summer camp or programs” (CSDE, 2023, p. 6). In contrast, Innovation grants were awarded to provide camps “programmatic and operational funding to organizations that can serve Connecticut children at a greater scale, provide holistic learning opportunities that blend educational and enrichment components, and remove financial and other types of barriers that have typically precluded participation” (CSDE, 2023, p. 6).

METHODS

The Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration (CCERC) commissioned a program evaluation of the 2023 Summer Enrichment Program. The goals of Connecticut's Summer Enrichment Initiative include: (a) expanding or creating opportunities for children to engage in high-quality summer programming; (b) employing a community-wide approach to plan and deliver such programming; (c) addressing students' academic, social, and emotional needs, especially in response the pandemic; and (d) focusing on serving historically marginalized student populations. The evaluation team implemented a mixed-methods evaluation design that included data collection from 15 comprehensive site visits to all Innovation grantees, wherein researchers facilitated multiple focus groups with staff and students and collected extensive field memos from each visit. An evaluation team member conducted shorter check-in visits at a random sample of 20 Expansion grant sites, stratified by CSDE's educational service center region after excluding those visited in the 2022 evaluation. The program evaluation also included a student survey, electronically administered to all 109 camps and completed by 2,086 students. Additionally, evaluators surveyed all 109 site supervisors, collecting data on various topics, including the use of grant funds, types of activities offered, and enrollment patterns. Lastly, similar to the 2022 evaluation, we examined student-level administrative data to estimate the effect of camp participation on school attendance.



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Key Findings

Positive Impacts on Chronic Absenteeism:

- Statistical models demonstrated statistically significant and positive effects of camp participation on chronic absenteeism among grade 6-8 students.
- The first model statistically controlled for student background characteristics and showed that camp-goers were less likely to be chronically absent (10.5%) than non-campers (12.3%).
- The differences were even more pronounced for students who participated in camp for at least 20 days -- 9.1% vs. 12.3%. Said another way, campers and high-dosage campers were, respectively, 17.1% and 35.2% less likely to be chronically absent than non-campers.
- A second analysis adopted a quasi-experimental design, in which campers in both treatment conditions were matched to non-campers with similar characteristics.
- We were able to successfully match 47.1% of the 5,342 campers and 59.0% of the 1,647 high-dosage campers to students who did not go to camp.
- The analysis showed that campers were far less likely to be chronically absent at school (12.0%) compared to a matched group of non-campers (18.3%).
- Smaller differences were observed for the high-dosage campers, who were less likely to be chronically absent than a matched group of non-campers (11.8% vs. 16.0%).
- Said differently, campers and high-dosage campers were, respectively, 52.5% and 35.6% less likely to be chronically absent than non-campers. Put in practical terms, out of 1,000 matched pairs of campers and non-campers, 63 fewer of the camp-goers would be chronically absent.

High Student Satisfaction with Camps :

- Students broadly enjoyed their summer camps and wished to continue attending them, even when they had recommendations for improvement.
- Three-quarters (75%) of students surveyed rated their camp an "8" or higher on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being "the best."
- Over 70% of campers reported having "a lot" of fun while attending their summer program.
- Lastly, 72.8% of students said they would attend their camp next summer if they could.

Field Trips, Free Time, Outdoor Activities, and Counselors Received Highest Ratings

- The survey asked students about their enjoyment regarding various aspects of the summer program they attended. The features that garnered the highest percentage of students reporting that they liked them "a lot" included field trips, free time, counselors/teachers/adults, and outdoor activities.
- Students appreciated acting/music/dance, learning activities, and computer/technology activities to a lesser extent.

- Food/drink/snacks were viewed more positively by the 2023 sample of students relative to last year's evaluation, where this category ranked among the lowest features.
- For those attending camps that provided learning activities, 45.5% of students reported they liked them "a lot," and another 34.5% said they liked them "somewhat."

New Experiences for Students

- Camps offered students new experiences and learning opportunities that enhanced their personal development. One staff member noted, "students are doing robotics, baseball, drones, theater, things they have never done before."
- Camps offering field trips found they exposed many students "to things that have not been experienced before."
- Several camps partnered with organizations such as the Girl Scouts, Quinnipiac College, and the Connecticut Science Center to offer their students "a lot of exposure to many different things."

Camps helped Prepare Students for School

- The survey asked students the extent to which their summer program helped prepare them for school in the fall.
- Over a third of students surveyed (34.1%) indicated it had made them feel "much more prepared," while another 26.1% said it made them feel "a little more prepared." These positive perceptions are notable.
- According to the site supervisor survey, 73.2% of camps offered "a lot" or "a moderate amount" of academic learning experiences at their camps.

Intentional Focus on SEL and SEWB

- Camps attended to students' social-emotional learning (SEL) and well-being (SEWB).
- Nearly half of the camps we visited had specialized staff trained in SEL, such as social workers and behavior therapists.
- A third of the camps employed regular staff who either attended SEL training or were guided by a curriculum embedded with SEL.
- At one camp, a trauma specialist and occupational therapist provided staff with strategies to help regulate students' social and emotional well-being.

Successful Camp Leader Summit

- The inaugural AccelerateCT Camp Summit brought together camp and school leaders from around the state to share best practices and problematize common challenges.
- Some camps faced logistical issues with the grant process and implementation of programs, which in turn impacted students and parents. Camps faced similar problems but implemented varying solutions.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CAMPS:

Continue to Recruit Students from Underrepresented Backgrounds

- Although student camp enrollments remain racially and ethnically diverse, overall, White students participate at modestly higher rates than expected in relation to Connecticut public schools.
- Hispanic/Latino students of any race constitute about a third (31.1%) of Connecticut's school population, yet roughly half of that amount (16.4%) were represented at summer camps.

Offer Targeted Programs for Older Students

- Camps could consider encouraging older students to join programs, such as offering flexible schedules or paid job training opportunities.
- Teen-focused programs might enable older students to balance their commitments outside of camp, such as familial or work responsibilities, while still benefiting from camp and summer youth programming participation.
- STEAM-related activities may be more appealing to older students with academic or vocational interests in these areas. Camps could also offer opportunities for students to develop hands-on skills in financial literacy, entrepreneurship, or data science. Incentives could also come in the form of college credit.

Promote Equity and Structure Opportunities for Cultural Exchanges

- Nearly three-quarters of students (73.9%) responding to the survey indicated that they “always” or “mostly” interacted with campers who were different from them.
- These cross-cultural interactions represent a promising opportunity for summer programs to promote intercultural learning. Such programming requires knowledge of how to do this in the right ways.
- A shared understanding of how to define and deliver socially just summer programming would assist camps in serving their racially and culturally diverse students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CSDE:

Re-Convene the AccelerateCT Camp Leader Summit

- The first AccelerateCT Camp Summit, held in January 2024, offered grant alums an opportunity to discuss pressing topics such as practices for promoting social justice and equity, developing and supporting social and emotional learning, and establishing strong partnerships between camps and school districts.
- Camp leaders brought their organizations' unique strengths and questions to collaborative, workshop-style discussions throughout a half-day summit. Also, they had opportunities to communicate with the CSDE during a question-and-answer panel with CSDE personnel.
- Feedback from summit attendees overwhelmingly supported holding the event annually, suggesting camp leaders around the state are eager to continue building connections between organizations and to learn new strategies that will help their programs' development.

Provide Staff Professional Development Opportunities in Social-Emotional Learning

- Summer program professionals expressed concern about students' rising mental health needs and shared interest in increased support for social and emotional support programs.
- As programs strive to meet the growing needs of their participants, the state should consider sharing SEL resources with camps, such as SEL curriculums, and offering ongoing training and support about evidence-based practices related to implementing SEL strategies at each program.

Full Report

Introduction

In Spring 2021, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) introduced the Summer Enrichment Initiative to give Connecticut students opportunities for socialization and fun as COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted and the state prepared to return to in-person schooling in Fall 2021. Due to the positive impact and continued need resulting from the ongoing effects of the pandemic on students and families, CSDE decided to extend the Summer Enrichment Initiative through 2024.

In Fall 2022, CSDE issued a call for applications for two years of summer programming – 2023 and 2024. Organizations that offered summer programs throughout the state were encouraged to apply for financial support through either an Expansion Grant (up to \$50,000) or an Innovation Grant (up to \$150,000 each year). These summer programs intend to help students continue their academic and social-emotional growth. The grants allow camps to increase capacity, enhance services and activities, and offer scholarships to low-income families.¹

The CSDE distributed over \$11.5 million to 15 Innovation and 94 Expansion grantees for the 2023 and 2024 summer camp seasons. This report represents an evaluation of the 2023 programming provided by grant recipients. Most camps operated during daytime hours from 8 am to 5 pm. A third of the camps (33.0%) extended their hours from 8 am to 8 pm, three (2.8%) offered overnight sessions, and one was active in the afternoon or evening.

Evaluation Design and Methods

The Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration (CCERC) funded research to evaluate the 2023 Summer Enrichment Initiative to determine how well it met its stated goals. These objectives included (a) expanding or creating opportunities for children to engage in high-quality summer programming; (b) employing a community-wide approach to plan and deliver such programming; (c) addressing students' academic, social, and emotional needs, especially in response to pandemic; and (d) focusing on serving historically marginalized student populations.

The evaluation team aimed to determine how camps used funds to provide enriching experiences for their populations and assess their impact on students' school engagement. Evaluators also identified significant challenges and successes with the implementation of programs. Additionally, in line with the initiative's equity focus, the evaluation team explored how camps addressed issues related to social justice.

The evaluation employed a concurrent mixed-methods design, drawing on multiple data sources. A key element of the study involved comprehensive half-day site visits to all 15 Innovation summer programs where evaluation team members observed camp activities and recorded detailed field notes. Additionally, evaluators conducted focus group interviews with students and

staff at each site.

Another significant source of data came from student and site supervisor surveys. We asked all 109 camps to self-administer the student survey; 2,086 students submitted responses. Surveys were also distributed to 109 site supervisors, gathering information on camp enrollment, activities, challenges, and successes, among other topics. Further data collection included brief check-in visits to an additional 20 camps, randomly selected among Expansion grantees not visited in the prior year's evaluation and stratified by Connecticut's educational service center regions. Finally, to assess the impact of camp participation on subsequent school attendance, we also analyzed student-level state administrative data sets in conjunction with camp data. This comprehensive evaluative approach allowed us to gauge the effectiveness of the Summer Enrichment Initiative across multiple dimensions.

A new and unique component of this year's evaluation included offering a Summit for camp leaders. In partnership with CCERC and CSDE, the evaluation team organized and hosted the first-ever AccelerateCT Camp Summit. The AccelerateCT Camp Summit brought camp leaders together in the form of a professional learning community to share practices and discuss the impact of the grant on their programs. A primary objective of the Summit was to leverage the expertise and experiences among camp leaders to collectively strategize ways to address their most pressing challenges—challenges that surfaced from our prior evaluations. A secondary purpose was to collect additional data for the 2023 evaluations; the evaluation team gathered data via observations, field notes, and an electronic survey of participants.

Data Collection

A range of data sources informed our evaluation. We describe each below.

Summer Program Grant Applications

The application form submitted by summer programs applying to the Summer Enrichment program included a range of information, including camp name, location, activities, contact information for site directors, requested budget, number of students intended to serve, age ranges, schedules, and planned activities.

Site Supervisor Survey

We slightly adjusted the online site supervisor survey from the 2022 evaluation, aiming to keep most questions consistent to facilitate longitudinal comparisons. Developed in collaboration with CSDE program personnel, the 33-item survey incorporates closed and open-ended questions. Its purpose is to collect comprehensive information on student enrollment and attendance, financial spending, assessments of camp activities, camp successes and challenges, and staff preparedness. As with the previous year, the completed survey serves as each site's final report to the CSDE.

In Fall 2023, we distributed the survey link to site supervisors managing all 110 camps that received Summer Enrichment

Funds. We conducted follow-up communications to confirm receipt and encourage completion of the survey. Ultimately, we gathered information from all 109 camps (one camp dropped from the initiative) for a 100% response rate for all 15 Innovation and 94 Expansion grantees.

Student Survey

We administered a survey designed for Summer Enrichment students in grades 3 through 12. The 16-item questionnaire gathered demographic details and inquired about campers’ experiences, including camp climate, favorite activities, and overall camp rating. It also asked about their interactions with other campers, exposure to different cultures, and enthusiasm about returning to school in the fall.

We emailed 109 site supervisors with instructions to distribute the survey one time between July 21 and August 21, 2023. The email provided a link to an anonymous electronic survey hosted on Qualtrics. Printed copies were made available upon request. Given the variety of camp schedules and the large number of participating sites, site supervisors determined the optimal time for students to complete the survey.

Survey Participants

In total, 2,086 campers completed the student survey. Because it was anonymous, we do not know the final representation of the camps. The vast majority of surveys (79%) were completed online. The 439 printed surveys were entered into a database and merged with the online survey data. Since the survey was sent to all camps, some of which had different groups of students each week and excluded students below grade 3 while prioritizing student anonymity, we cannot determine response rates for each camp.

Our sample represents roughly 10% of students who attended a camp. Relative to the population of enrolled campers reported on the end-of-program student intake forms (see Table 3), our sample shared similar characteristics regarding grade level, race, and gender.

With nearly three-quarters (74.0%) of the students in our sample attending

their camp for three or more weeks (as detailed in Table 1 below), it offers some confidence that their responses reasonably reflect their camp experiences.

Nearly 60% (59.2%) of the respondents were entering grades 3 through 6 (Table 1).

TABLE 1. SELF-REPORTED GRADE LEVELS AMONG STUDENT SURVEY RESPONDERS (N=1,945)*.

Grade Level	N	%
3rd	324	16.7
4th	355	18.3
5th	256	13.2
6th	217	11.2
7th	185	9.5
8th	140	7.2
9th	58	3.0
10th	35	1.8
11th	26	1.3
12th	33	1.7
Other:	316	16.2
Total	1,945	100.0

*Grade levels were missing for 141 survey respondents.

A small group (7.8%) of respondents were entering high school. The “other” grade level category is considerably large at 16.2% of the total and likely attributable to camps distributing the survey to students below grade 3. The sample of students that completed the survey included 941 male students, 951 female students, and 22 nonbinary/gender-fluid students. Another 23 students checked “prefer not to say,” while 149 left the item blank.

In addition to gender, students also self-reported their race/ethnicity on the survey. A little over 92% of respondents reported their race/ethnicity by choosing from a list of over 25 races/ethnicities. Of these, 4.7% selected “other” and wrote in descriptions such as American, Irish, German, and Guatemalan. The most written in ethnicity was Haitian, which showed up eight times. Combining like-categories revealed the following demographic breakdown of students who took the survey: Black or African Amer-

ican (15.6%), Hispanic (21.6%), White (42.0%), and Asian (.6%). The racial composition of students from the survey sample was comparable to that of the total population of students attending camp as reported on the end-of-program student intake form.

Student-Level Data for Impact Analysis

The CSDE mandated that all participating sites submit an end-of-program student intake form. This form required site supervisors to collect comprehensive data on each camper, including their full name, date of birth, town of residence, demographic details, and state-assigned student identifier (SASID), if known. Additionally, site supervisors estimated the number of “exposure days” for each camper, with one exposure day equating to a full day at camp (approximately from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm). While most sites were able to provide estimates of exposure days or complete data for all campers, a small percentage was missing.

Using a combination of intake data variables, the CSDE successfully matched over 80% of campers to the state administrative data sets.^{2,3} The CSDE routinely collects administrative data on approximately 450,000 public school students in Connecticut. We accessed specific student-level information relevant to our analysis, such as SASID, home school district, free and reduced-price meal status, EL status, special education status, attendance rates, and state test scores.

We focused our analysis on students in grades 6-8, given the greater likelihood of middle school students--relative to students in earlier grades--of having poorer attendance outcomes.⁴ We screened out a small portion of students with fewer than the maximum number of 96 possible attendance days between September 2023 and January 2024. That left us a sample of over 100,000 students, including 5,342 campers across all grades with complete data in all relevant fields. The remaining students in the dataset who did not attend a Summer Enrichment-funded program served as the control group. We could not, however, be sure if students in the control group attended camps outside of those

funded by the Summer Enrichment program.

Comprehensive Site Visits

The primary source of qualitative data was site visits to a sample of camps throughout Connecticut. In July and August of 2023, the evaluation team conducted comprehensive site visits at all 15 camps that received Innovation Grant Funds. We chose to visit all of the Innovation grantees because these sites received approximately three times the funding of Expansion grantees. We ensured that if a site had been visited during a previous grant year, a new evaluator conducted this year's site visit.

Innovation camps ranged in their self-described focus, students served, RESC region, and duration (Table 2). The most popular focus was “recreation,” with six camps falling under that category. Another five camps delivered multiple programs. The program evaluation team used literature related to recreation, leisure, and youth development fields (e.g., Outley, Bocarro, & Boleman, 2011) to define “recreation” programs as those that focus on play and leisure, where the primary goals of the program are to support students’ participation in group activities like games, sports, and the arts. While these programs are not intended to deliver specific “interventions” to students, students’ social and emotional development may benefit from participation, and camps with other focuses (e.g., academics, disability support, SEWB) may incorporate recreational activities into their programming to supplement students’ learning.

TABLE 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF 2023 INNOVATION CAMPS (N=15). (SOURCE: SUMMER ENRICHMENT PROGRAM GRANT APPLICATIONS).

Camp Focus	Age Range	Intended Camp Enroll	RESC Region	Camp Duration
Academic Support	5 to 21	199	CES	6 weeks
Disability Support	5 to 15	2,100	CREC	9 weeks
Food Knowledge & Security	5 to 13	175	ACES	10 weeks
Multiple Programs*	7 to 12	30**	EdAdvance	5 weeks
	5 to 15	1,400	EdAdvance	5 weeks
	10 to 14	442	Learn	4 weeks
	4 to 13	500	ACES	6 weeks
	5 to 17	160	ACES	4 weeks
Recreation	3 to 16	170	ACES	10 weeks
	5 to 12	900	EASTCONN	8 weeks
	5 to 14	475	CES	9 weeks
	5 to 22	175	ACES	8 weeks
	5 to 15	450	CES	9 weeks
	2 to 14	675	ACES	10 weeks
SEWB	5 to 15	250	ACES	10 weeks

*“Multiple Programs” refers to camps that offer more than one focus. For example, a camp may offer a rotation of Sports, Arts & Crafts, and Academic Support services throughout the day.

** These represent 30 full-day campers. There were also 58 students in the same building attending the summer school program in the morning, but only a portion of those kids joined the camp group in the afternoon.

The comprehensive site visits took place from July 19th to August 1st, 2023, with all visits conducted in person at the camp locations. Each site visit included one or more focus group interviews led by an evaluation team member, engaging groups of three to five students. These students, selected by site supervisors, paused their scheduled activities to join the focus groups for 15 to 30 minutes. The evaluation team aimed for these groups to be demographically representative of each site’s student body. During the interviews, students discussed their participation and enjoyment of camp activities, interactions with peers and staff, how camp activities related to their academic studies, and their views on the camps’ support in managing interpersonal and social justice issues. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with participants’ permission.

Additionally, evaluators facilitated focus groups with three to four staff members at each site. Discussion topics included utilizing grant funds, the effectiveness of specific activities and additions, student engagement, challenges faced, and the camps’ emphasis on social and emotional well-being and social justice. The evaluation team engaged with 108 students and 53 staff members across all the focus groups.

During each visit, evaluation team members also had the opportunity to observe camp facilities and activities offered to campers

firsthand. These observations included guided tours led by camp staff and independent exploration by the evaluators. Throughout these visits, team members carefully noted the organization of the programs, the engagement level of students, staff conduct, the availability of resources, and the overall structure of the camp. Extensive field notes were taken during these observations to capture detailed insights.

Check-in Site Visits

In addition to the comprehensive site visits described above, we conducted informal check-in visits at 20 Expansion grantee locations. The 20 sites represented just over one-fifth (20/94) of all Expansion grantees and were randomly selected, stratified by the number of camps in each educational service region and excluding the sites visited in the prior year's evaluation. An evaluation team member contacted coordinators at these sites to schedule the visits, which lasted roughly one hour. The visits, which took place in July and August of 2023, included informal observations of camp activities. They were typically accompanied by a tour with the site coordinator or their representative, providing context for what was being witnessed. Evaluators took field notes that were incorporated into their analytic memos.

Summit Data

Throughout the half-day AccelerateCT Camp Summit in January 2024, the evaluation team observed discussions and drafted field notes in the collaborative workshops. We also administered an anonymized electronic survey after the Summit to gather participant perspectives on various components of the Summit. Field notes focused on the content of the workshop discussions, including recurring themes across group conversations and areas where participants identified needing more systemic support to meet their programs' needs. The electronic survey focused on participants' overall satisfaction with the Summit, including the timing and location of the event, the variety of workshop topics, the content of their group discussions, and their experience during the question-and-answer forum with CSDE. The

survey also asked participants to identify practices they learned throughout the Summit that they could independently implement in their own programs to positively impact their students. The evaluation team received approval from the University of Connecticut's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before collecting anonymized data, and all summit attendees provided informed, written consent before participating in the electronic survey.

Data Analysis

Student and Site Supervisor Surveys

Quantitative data from the two surveys were analyzed descriptively, including averaging scores and reporting on frequency distributions for individual items. Where relevant, results were disaggregated by student characteristics. Bivariate analyses, such as statistical correlations, were employed as appropriate. Responses to open-ended questions underwent content analysis and were organized into themes for a summarized presentation.

Impact Analysis

We investigated whether participation in the summer program had an effect on school attendance during the following school year. Ideally, estimating the causal impact of camp participation would involve an experimental design with students randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Because random assignment was not feasible, we employed correlational and quasi-experimental methods to estimate the effects on school attendance.⁵

We created two categories of camp participation based on exposure days, which included students who attended camp for at least one day, T1 (n=5,342), and students who attended camp for at least 20 days, T20 (n=1,647). The latter category represents a "higher dosage" treatment condition. Our outcomes constituted two measures of school attendance. The first was attendance rate or the total number of days a student attended school divided by the total number of possible membership days. In our case, we obtained attendance data from the beginning of

the 2023-24 school year through the end of January, which yielded a maximum of 96 membership days. We screened out students with fewer than 96 membership days. The second measure was chronic absenteeism, defined by the CSDE as being absent at least 10% of the time (thus, an attendance rate of 90% or below).

Our statistical models incorporated a vast array of student-level variables that we used as controls. We also generated additional neighborhood-level indicators to serve as additional covariates in our models. To do so, we geocoded more than 100K student home addresses to identify census block group estimates for various demographic, socioeconomic, and housing-related characteristics.⁶ Although block group averages may not necessarily represent the characteristics of the individual households in question (i.e., families in our sample), we take assurance in the fact that there is greater variability between neighborhoods than within them.

We employed various modeling strategies that would help isolate the effect of the treatment on attendance. As in the 2022 analysis, we attempted propensity score matching to estimate the causal effect of the treatment on the outcome variable. To do so, we fit two logistic regression models, where each treatment indicator served as the outcome variable, and various individual-level variables were used as predictors. Individual-level predictors included grade level, membership attendance days, math test score, ELA test score, free and reduced-price lunch status, homeless status, EL status, special education status, high-needs status, sex, and race.¹ However, because the estimated propensity scores from the 2022 analysis could not effectively predict the treatment condition, we added neighborhood-level indicators for this analysis. Unfortunately, the estimated propensity scores again failed to reflect the distribution of the treatment group and thus could not be used. Consequently, we moved to alternative modeling techniques.

Next, we applied covariate-adjusted statistical models to estimate the predicted probabilities of school attendance rates

¹ For this analysis, race was defined as a four-level variable: Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Other, using White as the reference category.

for both camp treatment conditions (i.e., T1 and T20) relative to non-campers. The generalized linear models (GLM) procedure was used given the substantial skewness in school attendance rate, as most students had high attendance rates, inherently limited by the maximum rate of 100%. When the outcome variable was chronic absenteeism, we used logistic multiple regression. Our estimates accounted for various factors, including grade level, prior year school attendance rates, gender, race, free and reduced-price lunch status, English learner status, special education status, state math and science test score performance, and neighborhood-level characteristics.

Covariate-adjusted multivariate regression analysis offers valuable statistical controls for examining differences between treatment and control groups. However, since regression is based on correlational techniques, we face limitations in making causal inferences about treatment effects. Therefore, we also adopted a quasi-experimental approach. Quasi-experimental designs are used when random assignment is not an option, requiring researchers to form treatment and control groups that closely resemble one another on observable characteristics. In our case, we employed nearest-neighbor matching to pair each camper with a “comparable” non-camper. The technique finds a match for each treated individual based on a shared set

of observed characteristics. The nearest neighbor method reduces selection bias by ensuring that the treatment and control groups are comparable regarding these characteristics. Although the two groups are created to be similar in observed characteristics, they inevitably differ in other unmeasured ways. Upon identifying matched pairs for the two treatment conditions and their respective control groups, we estimated their mean probabilities, again using covariate-adjusted regression models.

Comprehensive Site Visits

Following each comprehensive site visit, researchers drafted structured memos, drawing on what was learned from the staff and student interviews,⁷ camp observations, and field notes. The memos were structured to assemble available evidence on key aspects of the evaluation, such as student engagement, camp successes and challenges, quality of facilities, student-staff relationships, student social-emotional wellbeing, and promotion of equity and social justice. To enhance trustworthiness, two team members jointly coded and analyzed memos from camps they did not visit and, subsequently, checked their initial findings with evaluators who did conduct the visit. Memos were coded consistent with outlined processes in related texts using priori and emergent codes.⁸

The data from the memos were pro-

cessed to unearth main themes and noteworthy exceptions across all camps. As themes developed, emergent codes were accommodated that captured narratives from campers and staff. The thematic coding underwent multiple revisions with consultation from all interviewing team members.

Check-in Site Visits

Field notes were taken during the shorter check-in visits and recast into brief reflections that attended to specific elements, including grade levels represented, enrollment versus expectations, program duration, camp focus, description of facilities, a summary of informal observation of camp activities, description of staff members present (e.g., volunteers, paid staff, qualifications), and how directors reporting using the grant funds.

Summit

The evaluation team analyzed field notes taken throughout the Summit and identified themes that emerged from each workshop. Survey data were analyzed descriptively and disaggregated to reveal participant feedback on workshop experiences, takeaways from group discussions, outstanding systemic needs to improve summer programming, and recommendations for future Summits.



Stock Image

Findings

Students Served by Summer Enrichment Programs

Student Enrollment

The CSDE’s student intake form asked site supervisors to identify the list of unique students who attended their camp. The aggregate number of unique students participating in 2023 camps was 20,326. The distribution of enrollments across grade levels is shown in Table 3. Just under half the students (47.1%) were in grades PK through 2, while 16.7% were in grades 6 through 8, and only 2.1% were in high school. This pattern is consistent with nationwide camp participation, in which relatively few secondary school students attend a summer program. This is somewhat expected for this age group given the pull of other activities, including part time employment. Nevertheless, it may also signal a missed opportunity for getting mid to late teenagers involved in summer camps in some capacity (e.g., staff in training).

TABLE 3. 2023 UNIQUE STUDENT CAMP ENROLLMENT BY GRADE LEVEL
(SOURCE: 2023 END-OF-PROGRAM STUDENT INTAKE FORM)

Grade	N	%
PK	1,395	7%
KF	2,428	12.2%
gr1	2,919	14.6%
gr2	2,644	13.3%
gr3	2,515	12.6%
gr4	2,346	11.8%
gr5	1,951	9.8%
gr6	1,653	8.3%
gr7	1,057	5.3%
gr8	624	3.1%
gr9	212	1.1%
gr10	123	0.6%
gr11	78	0.4%
gr12	1	0%
Total*	19,946	100%

*Grade level data were missing for 380 students or 1.9% of the population.

Table 5 displays the racial/ethnic composition of the camp population relative to that of Connecticut’s public schools. Camps funded by the Summer Enrichment Initiative were racially and ethnically diverse. However, relative to public schools statewide, Hispanic/Latino students were substantially underrepresented in camps. To a lesser degree, Asian students were also underrepresented while White students were modestly overrepresented.

TABLE 5. RACE AND ETHNICITY OF CAMP POPULATION IN 2023.

Race/Ethnicity	Camp N	Camp %	All CT public Schools%
American Indian or Alaska Native	14	0.1%	0.2%
Asian	583	3.2%	5.2%
Black or African American	2,817	15.7%	12.5%
Hispanic/Latino of any race	2,955	16.4%	31.1%
Native Hawaii. or Other PI	10	0.1%	0.1%
Two or More Races	1,939	10.8%	4.7%
White	9,647	53.7%	46.2%
Total	20,326	100.0%	100.0%

*Race/Ethnicity was unavailable for 11.6% of campers in the CSDE student intake database.

**Extracted from Edsight.com, 2022-23 data.

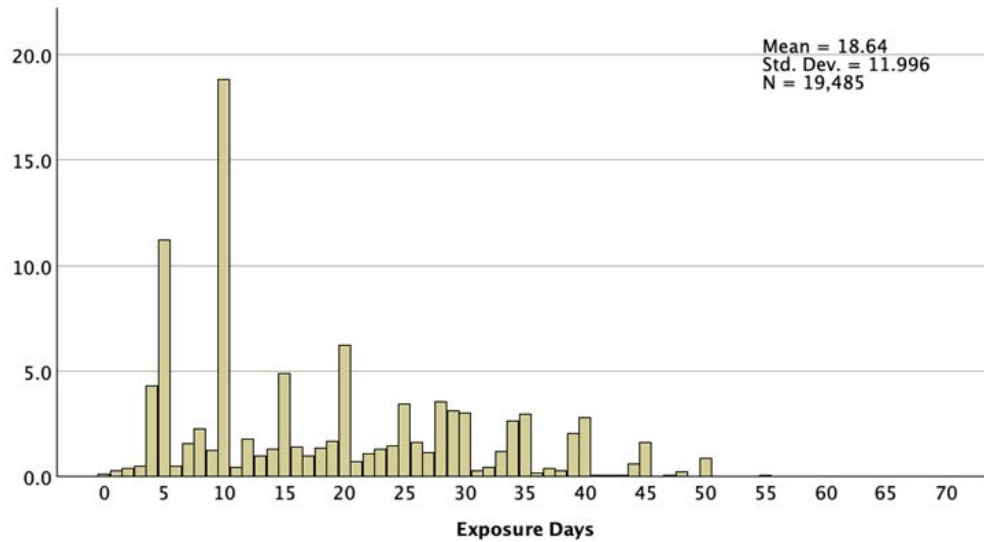
Exposure Days

Site supervisors also estimated the number of camp “exposure days” for each student. One exposure day equates to a full day of camp (e.g., 9 am to 5 pm). Exposure days offer a common metric for student participation across camps that differ in schedule. The distribution of exposure days across camps is displayed in Figure 1, which exhibits three prominent clusters at 4/5 days, 10 days, and 20 days. These modal scores are consistent with camps that operate on a weekly schedule.



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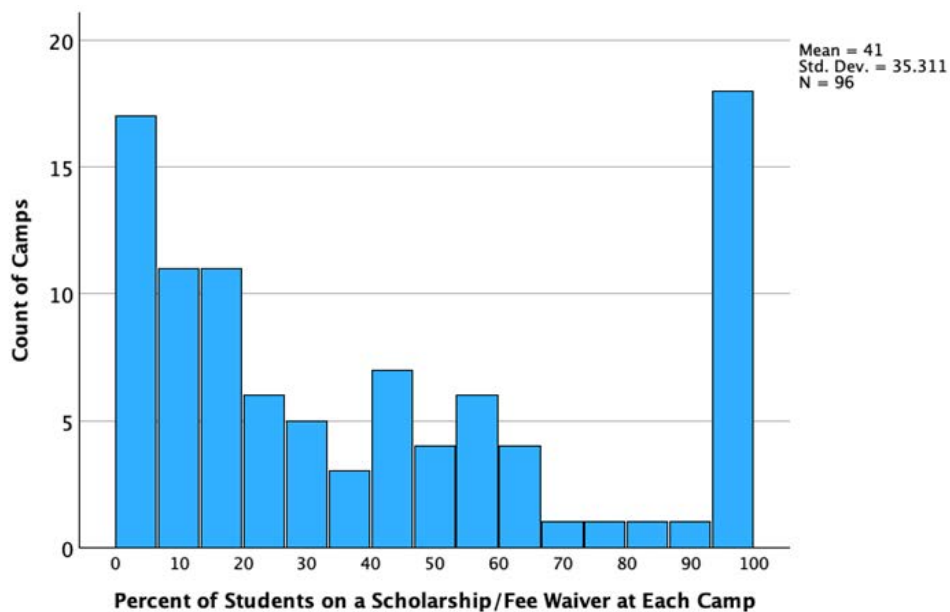
FIGURE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF CAMP EXPOSURE DAYS, 2023.



Scholarships for Students

Site supervisors reported on the percentage of campers who benefited from scholarships or fee waivers, regardless of the funding source. Figure 2 displays the distribution of the percentages of scholarships or fee waivers camps offered. About one quarter (24.0%) of camps provided between 0 and 10% of their students a fee remission, while on the other end of the spectrum, 16.7% of camps offered 100% of their students free enrollment.

FIGURE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF CAMPS' PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ON SCHOLARSHIP/FEE WAIVER (N=96). (SOURCE: 2023 SITE SUPERVISOR SURVEY)



Site supervisors were asked to name the funding sources if their programs offered scholarships or fee waivers. Of the 86 camps² that reported using such funds, 17.4% used Summer Enrichment funds only, 33.7% used Summer Enrichment funds and other sources, and 48.8% used only other funding sources. Sources beyond CSDE funds included individual donors, municipality funds, non-profits (e.g., local United Way, Girls Scouts, YMCA), and private foundations. The data above suggest that, in general, camps prioritize using supplemental funding to support economically disadvantaged families.

² Five sites reported their students received scholarships or fee waivers, but did not name sources (thus 5 sites had missing data on this indicator).

Student Camp Attendance

Site supervisors estimated weekly attendance levels among their campers. We received 108 responses, including one we considered an outlier, so our total usable responses for this item are 107. Approximately two-thirds (67.3%) of camps reported average weekly attendance between 90-100 percent. Roughly 16% of camps reported 80-89 percent average weekly attendance and about 13% saw average weekly attendance between 70-79 percent. Fewer camps (3.7%) saw attendance between 50-69 percent. Table 5 illustrates estimated weekly attendance among students as reported by site supervisors.

TABLE 6. ESTIMATED WEEKLY CAMP ATTENDANCE AMONG STUDENTS AS REPORTED BY SITE SUPERVISORS (N=107).

Est. Camp Attendance	N	%
90%-100%	72	67.3%
80%-89%	17	15.9%
70%-79%	14	13.1%
60%-69%	3	2.8%
50%-59%	1	0.9%
Total	107	100%

When asked why campers missed attendance at summer programs, the most mentioned reason was family vacations at 74.3% (Table 7). About one-fifth of supervisors indicated family work obligations (21.1%) and transportation (22.2%) were reasons for missed attendance. Approximately 36% of supervisors indicated that the reason for students missing attendance was unknown. Nearly half (47.7%) wrote in a reason not listed by the forced-choice option, and among some other reasons listed included non-COVID illness (17.4%), children sleeping in, conflicting

sports activities such as swimming lessons, summer school, and doctor's appointments.

TABLE 7. REASONS FOR MISSING CAMP AS REPORTED BY SITE SUPERVISORS (N=109).

Reason	N	%
Family vacations	81	74.3%
Family work obligations	23	21.1%
Transportation	22	22.2%
Family funds	9	8.3%
Student work obligations	8	7.3%
COVID-related	7	6.4%
Unknown reasons	39	35.8%
Other	52	47.7%

How Camps Used Grant Funds

Site supervisors reported using grant funds for various reasons (Table 8). The top reason given was for hiring additional staff (83.5%), followed by purchasing additional materials (65.1%), supporting new student activities (62.4%), scholarships and fee waivers (62.4%), and field trips (61.5%).



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TABLE 8. USE OF GRANT FUNDS AS REPORTED BY SITE SUPERVISORS (N=109).

Used For	N	%
Purchasing additional materials	71	65.1%
Hiring more staff	91	83.5%
New student activities	68	62.4%
Scholarships/Fee waivers	68	62.4%
Field trips	67	61.5%
Staff training	44	40.4%
Facility updates or renovations	8	7.3%
Providing Meals/ Snacks	56	51.4%
Other: Transportation	12	11.0%

TABLE 9. SUMMER PROGRAM ACTIVITIES AS REPORTED BY SITE SUPERVISORS (N=108).

Please indicate the extent to which these activities were part of your summer program	A lot	A moderate amount	A little	None at all
Outdoor activities	82.4%	14.8%	2.8%	0.0%
Arts & Crafts	70.4%	21.3%	6.5%	1.9%
Sports	58.3%	34.3%	4.6%	2.8%
Learning (e.g., math, reading)	41.7%	31.5%	20.4%	6.5%
Field Trips	24.3%	43.9%	13.1%	18.7%
Acting, Music, or Dance	36.1%	28.7%	27.8%	7.4%
Computer or Technology	12.0%	33.3%	37.0%	17.6%
Free Time	8.3%	38.9%	50.0%	2.8%
Guest Speakers	14.8%	29.6%	40.7%	14.8%

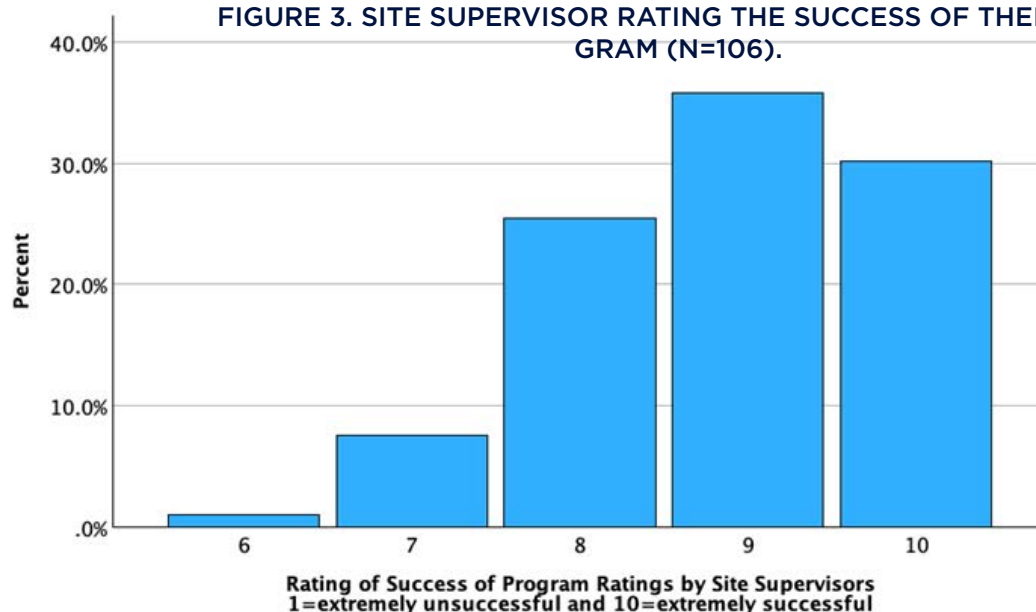
Activities Camps Offered

Supervisors described the extent to which specific activities were part of their summer program. Approximately 97% (n=105) indicated outdoor activities were included in their curriculum “a lot” or “a moderate amount” throughout the summer, and about 93% (n=100) said sports were part of their program “a lot” or “a moderate amount.” Approximately 91% (n=99) said arts and crafts were part of their program “a lot” or “a moderate amount” of the summer. Around 73% (n=79) said learning activities were included in their programs “a lot” or “a moderate amount.” Table 9 describes the details of the extent to which the following activities were part of the summer enrichment programs: outdoor activities, arts and crafts, sports, learning activities (e.g., math, reading), field trips, acting/music/dance, computers/technology, and free time.

Program Successes

Supervisors were asked to rate the success of their program in achieving their 2023 Summer Enrichment goals on a scale from 1-10, with 1 being extremely unsuccessful and 10 being extremely successful. Of the 106 supervisors who responded to this item, all rated their program a “6” or higher, with an average response of 8. Over one-quarter (25.5%) rated their program an “8,” another 35.8% a “9,” and 30.2% a “10” (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. SITE SUPERVISOR RATING THE SUCCESS OF THEIR PROGRAM (N=106).





Students' Camp Experiences

One of the main goals of the Summer Enrichment Program is to provide Connecticut students with enjoyable and enriching activities while nurturing their social and emotional well-being (SEWB). Evidence gathered from student surveys and on-site evaluations suggests that this objective has been effectively achieved. For instance, most students rated their camp experiences positively, showing enthusiasm for the camp atmosphere and activities. Nearly 70% of students indicated they like the counselors, teachers, and adults at camp “a lot!” The comprehensive site visit data revealed that most Innovation Camps (86.7%) support campers’ SEWB. During the focus groups, staff claimed to create “a safe place for students” and supported students’ SEWB through counselor training, hiring dedicated staff members (i.e., behavior specialists), or employing a curriculum that fosters SEWB growth. The subsequent sections explore different facets of students’ experiences at the camps.

Recruitment and Participation

When the student survey was conducted in early August of 2023, 41.4% of the students reported attending their camp for five or more weeks (Table 10). The survey also inquired whether campers had previously participated in any summer program before the current summer, and whether they had attended their present camp before. For 22.3% of students, the summer of 2023 marked their first time attending a summer program (Table 11) First-time participation rates of this magnitude suggest the Summer Enrich-

ment Initiative is achieving its objective of offering accessible summer programming to students who may not otherwise have the opportunity. Over half (53.9%) of students reported attending their current camp for the first time, as well (Table 12).

TABLE 10. HOW LONG STUDENTS ATTENDED CAMP AT TIME OF SURVEY (N=1,920).

Time at Camp	N	%
1-2 weeks	510	26.6%
3-4 weeks	616	32.1%
5+ weeks	794	41.4%
Total	1,920	100.0%

TABLE 11. ATTENDING ANY SUMMER CAMP FOR THE FIRST TIME

First time attending any summer camp?	N	%
Yes	430	22.3
No	1,497	77.7
Total	1,927	100

TABLE 12. ATTENDING THIS PARTICULAR CAMP FOR THE FIRST TIME

Attended this particular camp before?	N	%
Yes	887	46.1
No	1,035	53.9
Total	19,22	100

Students were also queried about how they became aware of the summer program, selecting from a range of options. Most students (43.0%) discovered the summer program through their families (Table 13). Other less common methods of recruitment included learning about the program from friends (19.2%), through school systems (17.6%), or via direct invitations from the summer program itself (6.4%). A portion of students, approximately 8%, stated they did not know or recall how they learned about the camp. Additionally, write-in responses included discovering the program through organizations like the Girl Scouts, internet searches, and afterschool programs, suggesting that potential relationships may already exist between some camps, schools, and other community organizations.

TABLE 13. HOW STUDENTS LEARNED ABOUT THEIR SUMMER PROGRAM (N=2,086).

How did you learn about this summer program? (Check any that apply)	Frequency	Percent
My family	897	43.0
My friends	400	19.2
My school	368	17.6
The summer program invited me	133	6.4
Other	159	7.6
I don't know or don't remember	242	11.6

Student Perceptions of the Camp Experience

A goal of the Summer Enrichment Initiative was to support programs that could provide an outlet for many students to nurture their social-emotional development and bring joy into their lives. The student survey asked three questions to assess students' level of enjoyment with their camp. Three-quarters (75%) of students rated their camp an “8” or higher on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being “the best” (Figure 4). Over 70% of campers reported having “a lot” of fun while attending their summer program (Figure 5). Not even 1% said they had no fun (after rounding up). Lastly, 72.8% of students said they would attend their camp next summer if they could, another 23.2% might attend, and only 3.9% would not (Figure 6).

FIGURE 4. STUDENT RATINGS OF CAMP (N=1,891).

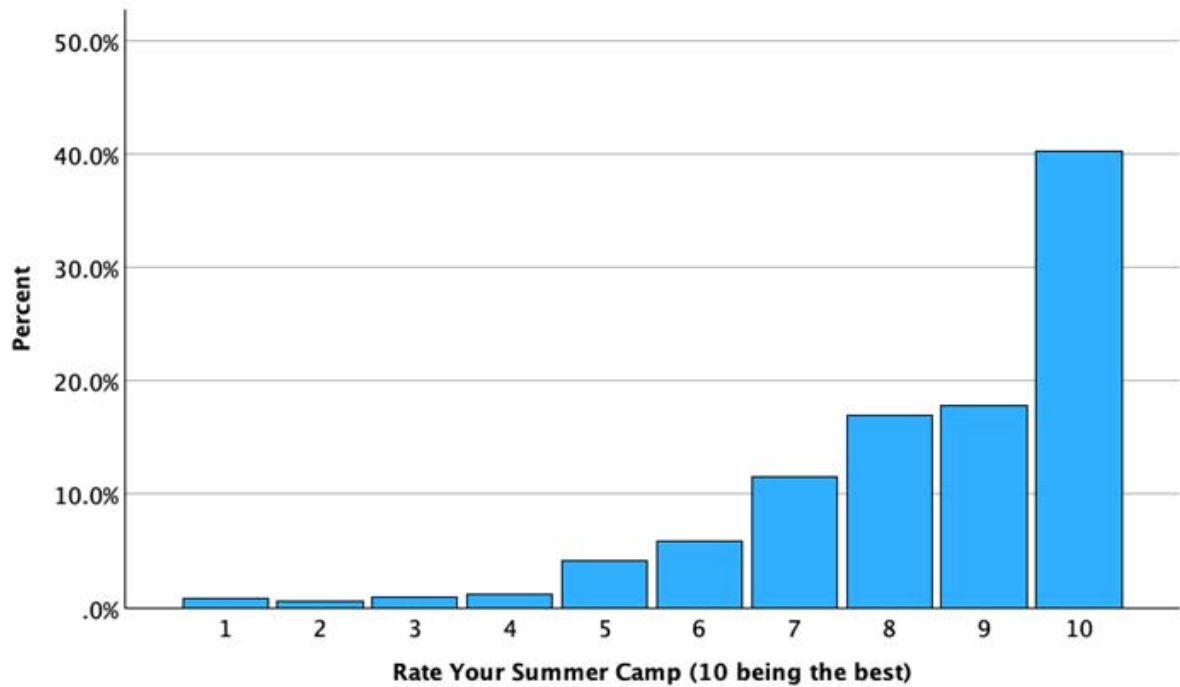


FIGURE 5. STUDENT ENJOYMENT RATING OF CAMP (N=1,905).

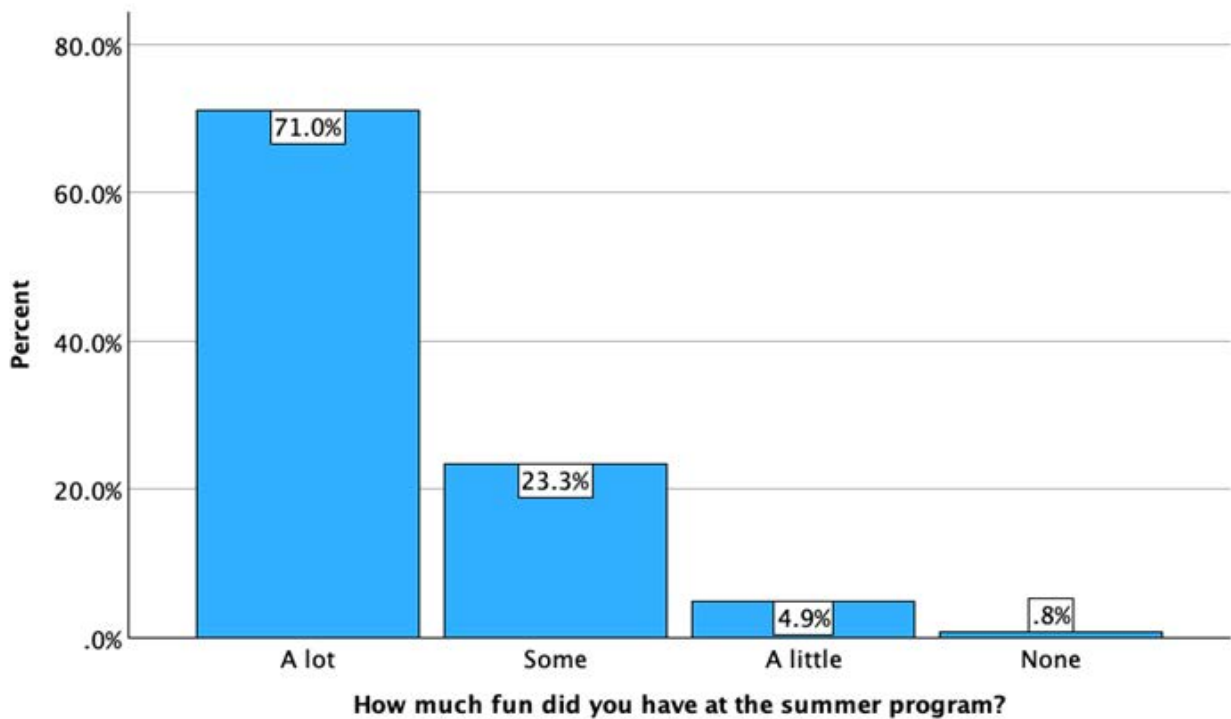
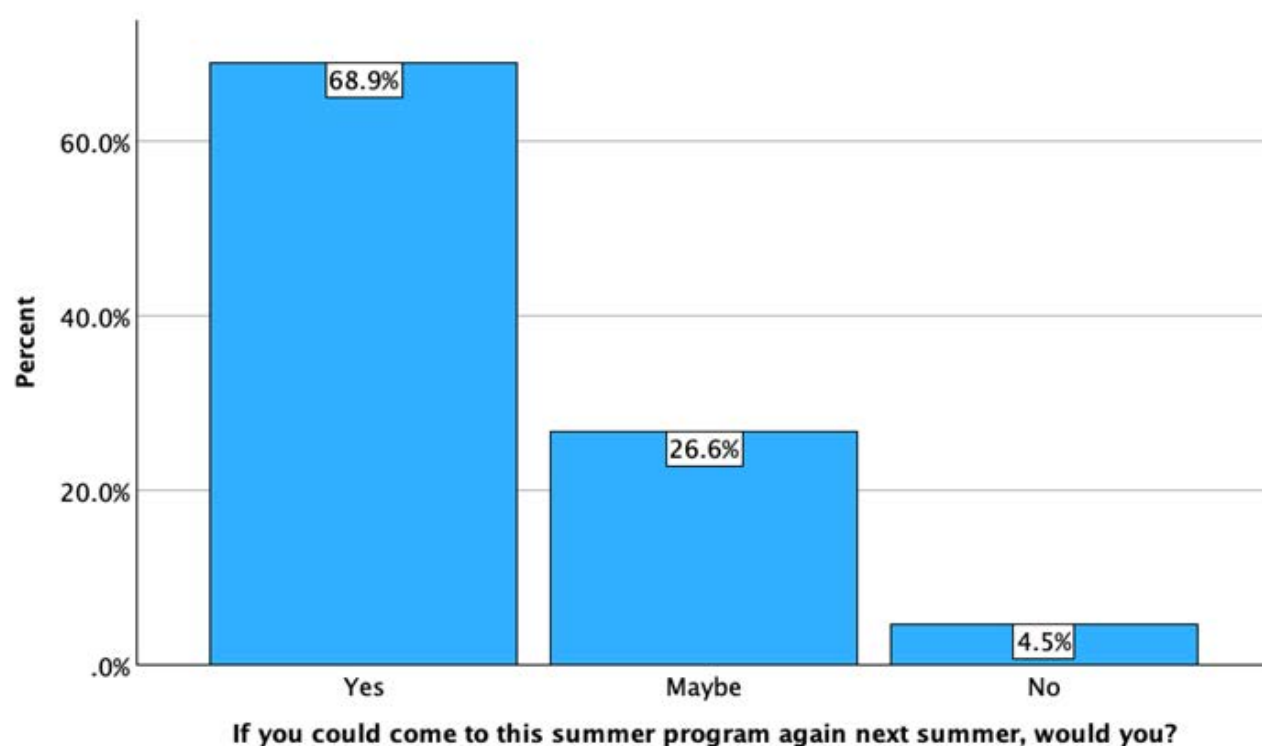


FIGURE 6. STUDENT POSSIBILITY OF RETURNING NEXT SUMMER (N=1,888).



Survey results were consistent with what we heard in our student focus groups. Nearly all students reported their enjoyment and engagement in their summer camps. The following quotes from the student focus groups help better contextualize students' experiences.

"It's really good! Everything's good!"

"The aquarium was actually really good. We got to see sharks!"

"I liked learning about energy and stuff."

Creating Positive Camp Experiences

Creating an educational environment that celebrates racial and cultural diversity is essential for fostering empathy and preparing children to become active members of a global society.⁹ Nearly three-fourths (73.9%) of campers reported consistently or mostly interacting with peers from different backgrounds (Table 14), and roughly 43% mentioned that camp activities always or mostly exposed them to other cultures. For example, students participated in activities designed to engage them in thoughtful conversations about religion, social justice, and homelessness. Furthermore, over 82% of students indicated that camp adults generally intervened when student issues arose, and about two-

thirds of students indicated that students were "always" (23.9%) or "mostly" (43.3%) nice to each other while at camp. Lastly, the data suggest that students did not perceive camp rules as overly strict and felt they were given opportunities to exercise autonomy in decision-making "always" or "most of the time" (68.1%). These results indicate that camps can provide environments for students to learn about new cultures, activities, and personal differences while receiving support from adults. These environments offer students agency and ownership of their learning. Table 13 illustrates these findings.

TABLE 14. STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF CAMP CLIMATE.

At your summer program...	Always	Mostly	Sometimes	Once in a While	Never	N
Activities exposed me to different cultures.	22.0%	20.1%	23.1%	15.6%	19.2%	1,794
I interacted with campers who were different than me (such as culture, ability, identity, etc.).	51.4%	22.5%	18.4%	5.8%	1.9%	1,808
I learned new things.	36.4%	27.6%	20.4%	10.6%	5.0%	1,826
Kids were given lots of choices.	36.3%	31.8%	21.4%	7.4%	3.0%	1,813
Students were nice to each other.	23.9%	43.3%	24.4%	7.2%	1.2%	1,825
The rules were too strict.	7.7%	8.5%	22.1%	24.2%	37.5%	1,797
When students had problems, adults stepped in to help.	55.1%	27.0%	12.2%	3.8%	1.9%	1,809

Student Perceptions of Camp Activities

Students were surveyed about their enjoyment regarding various aspects of the summer program they attended. The features that garnered the highest percentage of students reporting that they liked them “a lot” included field trips, free time, counselors/teachers/adults, and outdoor activities. Students appreciated acting/music/dance, learning activities, and computer/technology activities to a lesser extent. Food/drink/snacks were viewed more positively by the 2023 sample of students relative to the previous year’s evaluation, where this category ranked among the lowest features.

For those attending camps that provided academic learning activities, 45.5% of students reported they liked them “a lot,” and another 34.5% said they liked them “somewhat.” It is important to note that not all camps offered every activity listed in Table 15; however, these data reflect reports from our sample of students only and may not be fully generalizable to camps with different contexts or that did not utilize these characteristics.

TABLE 15. STUDENT RATINGS OF CAMP ACTIVITIES/CHARACTERISTICS.

How much did you like these parts of the summer program?	A lot!	Somewhat	Not very much	(not part of camp)	N
Field trips	78.1%	13.2%	8.7%	37.8%	1,824
Free time	70.4%	16.8%	12.7%	4.7%	1,821
Counselors, Teachers & Adults	69.1%	20.8%	10.1%	0.2%	1,825
Outdoor activities	64.3%	23.3%	12.4%	2.6%	1,826
Arts & Crafts	60.4%	27.6%	12.0%	9.1%	1,812
Sports	58.0%	24.9%	17.1%	7.9%	1,827
Food, Drink, Snacks	54.3%	32.2%	13.5%	11.5%	1,818
Computer/Tech	51.8%	30.2%	18.0%	73.7%	1,787
Learning activities (e.g., math)	45.5%	34.5%	20.0%	40.8%	1,789
Acting, Music, Dance	44.1%	31.2%	24.8%	45.5%	1,803

During our focus group visits, students highlighted experiences they enjoyed the most. For instance, for the camps that offered field trips, most students found this to be among their favorite activities. Students visited destinations such as the Mystic Aquarium, Connecticut Science Center, local zoos, and a trampoline park. Students at camps that offered sporting activities, like basketball, pickleball, and soccer, seemed to like team sports more than individual ones: “I like that it’s like a team sport, where you have to work together.” Additionally, pool time was a favorite for camps equipped with one: “It’s really hot out, and it’s good to cool down as well as to have fun, splash in the water,” and “I like swimming a lot.”

A Sense of Belonging

Student focus group data revealed that the staff was intentional in providing campers with the perception that they were welcomed. Campers were asked if they could provide examples of how the staff made them feel like they belonged at the camp. Except for one outlier, all students reported positively how the camp’s staff provided them with a sense of belonging. Below is a selection of student comments that evidence this idea.

“They are like technically a big family around us.”

“[Staff] help us be safe.”

“They make sure that everyone is treated fairly and gets the same respect.”

“They are kind, patient, nice, and they will listen to you if you have something to say.”

These students’ experiences suggest camp programs provide students with safe and supportive environments that help them feel like they belong.

Preparation for School

Students were asked how much their summer program helped prepare them for school in the fall. Over a third of students (34.1%) indicated it had made them feel “much more prepared,” while another 26.1% said it made them feel “a little more prepared” (see Table 16). These perceptions indicate that for campers, participating in camp programs contributes to their sense of school readiness—suggesting summer enrichment opportunities play an important role in preparing students for their return to school each fall.

In our focus groups, we asked students if they could draw any connections from their camp experiences to those they have at school, such as similar social or academic activities, to gain some insight into campers’ attitudes towards and preparedness for the upcoming school year. Campers initially made general connections like naming lunch and

recess as activities common to camp and school (“pavilions are kinda like a cafeteria in school with a lot of kids”; “outside reminds me of recess”). However, with approximately half of the Innovation sites offering some form of academic en-

Unsure was the most common answer (11.6%), followed by food (10.8%). The next most suggested changes included increased physical activities (7.4%), student choice/free time (7.4%), (more) field trips (6.7%), and facilities (6.6%).

TABLE 16. STUDENT PREPARATION FOR SCHOOL (N=1,828).

How much has camp prepared you for school?	Frequency	Percent
It’s made me feel much more prepared	623	34.1
It’s made me feel a little more prepared	477	26.1
I feel about the same	659	36.1
It has made me feel less prepared	69	3.8
Total	1,828	100.0

richment, the evaluation team asked to hear students’ perspectives on academic enrichment specifically (“We have math on Mondays, and we had spelling yesterday, and then today we have reading,” “I think that we just learn a lot here, and it helps you prepare for school.”). We also asked students if there was anything from school that they wished to see at camp. Once again, most expressed satisfaction with their camp (“there clearly is everything here”). Others hoped for a gymnasium (“we don’t have a gym, and school has a gym”). Some others wanted more reading activities or a “quiet room” for reading or mathematics activities. When asked the reverse, if there was anything from the camp that they wished to see at school, some campers wished their school offered more extracurricular activities (“Baseball...we don’t have baseball at our school”; “our school doesn’t have a pool”).

Student Suggestions for Change

In both the survey and the focus groups, researchers asked students about what they would like to change about their camps. Figure 7 is a bar chart reflecting student responses to the question: If you could change something about the summer program, what would it be? Given the open-ended nature of the question, similar responses were combined into discrete categories. Figure 7 provides a visual display of the most (and least) prominent response categories, signified by the length of each bar. Nothing/

In our student focus groups, many campers struggled to think of any changes they wanted to make to the summer camp (“We have the time of our lives, and I don’t think I could go to a better camp”). When prodded, many campers said they wanted to change the food (“Everybody’s great here...But the thing that I would change is what they give us for lunch. I do not like that lunch”). Some campers said they would change their art class (“I wish art was more fun” and “I wish we had more projects”). Others wished for more time doing activities they most enjoyed (“more pool time” and “go outside more often and longer”). Lastly, students wanted more autonomy at their camps (“let the kids have more choice... each kid gets to choose”; “it would be cool to pick your schedule”).

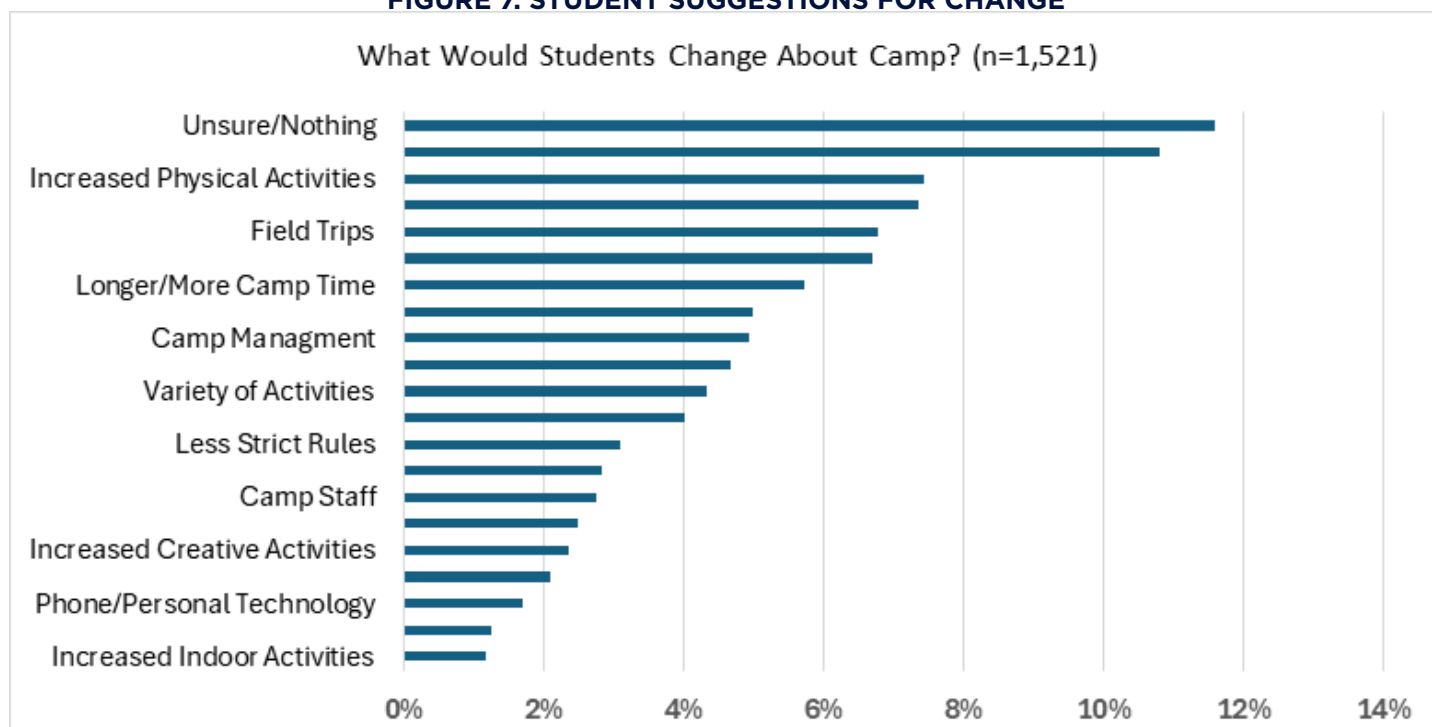
Staff Perceptions

We collected and analyzed data from staff focus groups conducted at the 15 comprehensive site visits to Innovation sites. In all, 53 staff members participated in focus groups. Thematic findings are presented below.

Innovative Practices

Staff members spoke about new practices at their sites. Two camps implemented special programming for middle school students. Hoping to increase the number of activities that “make middle schoolers want to come to camp,” one of those camps formed a Student Leadership Council. The Leadership Council devel-

FIGURE 7. STUDENT SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE



oped “Choice and Voice” enrichment programs where students were offered fencing, steel pan drumming, and dance lessons. Another camp implemented block scheduling to provide more time for certain activities. Other camps introduced Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) activities (“huge [emphasis] has been more STEM... every day doing STEM”).

Staff to Support Social and Emotional Wellbeing

All focus groups reported tending to their campers’ social and emotional well-being (SEWB). While most camps described reactive efforts to “create a safe space” for students to be themselves and to provide opportunities for students “to collaborate with each other” (e.g., facilitating conflict resolution as needed, or helping students through difficult emotional moments), some others were intentionally (and proactively) focused on a SEWB mission. Nearly half of the camps we visited had special staff such as social workers, behavior therapists, and staff specialists dedicated to social-emotional learning (SEL) for students. A third of the camps employed staff who either attended an SEL training or were guided by a curriculum embedded with SEL (“We’ve done several lessons on the SEL part, we’ve talked about how to manage our emotions... what are some strategies we can implement?”). One camp claimed that having a trauma specialist and occupational therapist consult with the staff has helped provide strategies for regulating students’ social and emotional learning “so they can communicate with us with a different level of respect.” Two camps that implemented “Morning Movement,” an activity where all camp members participate in a morning stretching routine, emphasized its importance for maintaining a positive community throughout the day. As part of attending to students SEWB, several camps focused on building student self-esteem and confidence. One camp credited the zipline, while

a handful cited swimming as helping build student confidence. One counselor told the story of a camper who overcame his fear of swimming (“he was scared to death of water...we have a lot of kids that conquer their fears here”).

Exposure to New Experiences

In the true spirit of enrichment, camps made authentic attempts to provide novel experiences for children. The knowledge students gained from experiencing new activities was mentioned as a “camp success” for over a quarter of the camps interviewed (“students are doing robotics, baseball, drones, theater, things they have never done before”). One staff member marveled at “[t]he excitement, the effort that they put in” when students engaged in a new learning activity. Additionally, camps that offered field trips found they exposed many students “to things that have not been experienced before.” Finally, in addition to local school districts, camps partnered with organizations such as the Girl Scouts, Quinnipiac College, and the Connecticut Science Center. Through these partnerships, camp staff believed that students would have the chance to receive “exposure to many different things.”

Preparing for School

We learned from our site visits that most camps offered academic enrichment opportunities that helped students transition back to school in the fall (“STEM has been a really big deal”). Staff noted that students would engage in activities where they were learning science without realizing it yet could connect this experience back to their time at school. One camp focused on inquiry-based learning, noting that “having kids do their own type of learning is the highest type of learning.” Another camp “tried really hard to break the traditional practice of school while helping children build foundations to go back to school with.”

From spelling bees to “Math Mondays,” the academic components of camps appeared to keep students connected to learning.

Many counselors also focused on students’ attitudes and social dynamics of returning to school (“some of them make friends with friends they wouldn’t have before”). Counselors believed that making “everything a teaching moment” and doing their “best to make them a little more independent and responsible for their things” can “get them mentally prepared” for returning to school. The structure of one camp allowed for smaller group instruction, which the students seemed to like (“We do smaller academic groups, and I feel like they like that intimate space”).

Commitment to Social Justice and Equity

We asked camp staff how their camp promoted equity or learning about social justice. Some staff were unsure how to respond (e.g., “I don’t know how to answer that question”). We received a range of other answers, such as “All the groups are very mixed,” “We have students from a lot of different backgrounds,” “Everybody is treated the same, boys, girls, whatever,” and “Oh, easy...we don’t allow discriminatory language or racial slurs.” We followed up by defining equity as providing extra resources to level the field for disadvantaged populations. Upon processing that definition, many groups offered thoughtful examples, such as “providing scholarships to those that need it most” or helping overcome “the barrier for students who might have had trouble with transportation.” One staff member said, “I really like choosing books that have been written by queer people or BIPOC and trying to show the children in this town, like, what other kids look like around the world.”

Camp Challenges

Staff cited challenges in four general areas: securing budgets, logistics, weather, and student behavior. Staff lamented that grant approval and funds were not dispersed promptly. Some camp directors expressed frustration over trying to plan for the summer without knowing their available budget for supplies and materials needed for the program. For example, at one site students were enrolled with the caveat that the STEM component of the camp might be canceled if the budget was not approved.

When asked whether they had added new programs, four Innovation Grant recipients named new initiatives but also explained they ran into some implementation challenges. Many challenges involved logistics, such as creating student schedules and attending to student dietary restrictions. Others were more fundamental, such as deciding which valuable learning experiences to choose for students, as program options were plentiful and difficult to select. One focus group participant described the challenge of selecting new initiatives for their program:

“It’s hard to have that balance. The academics are really important, the social-emotional learning is really important, and what they’re doing in the activity is important. So, how do we balance all of that importance?”

Another challenge staff cited was the weather. One camp director bemoaned “The heat!” and noted that their facility “can feel cramped, especially with hot weather.” Although many camps had contingency plans to move activities indoors due to excessive heat or inclement weather, others had few alternatives. Depending on

the facility, some camps were better equipped to accommodate students comfortably in the heat; for instance, by moving them to air-conditioned rooms.

Lastly, a significant challenge noted by five Innovation camps was addressing the day-to-day struggles of “kids being kids” with emotional swings and “behavior issues.” Two camps discussed how it took some time for systems to be put in place to deal with “runners” -- campers who take off running with no provocation. And, although all camps included some form of SEL learning in their curriculum, staff realized some students, when frustrated, struggled to express their emotions productively (“It’s a learning curve...that can be challenging”).

Impact Analysis

The first analysis involved a straightforward independent-samples t test to assess the unconditional differences in average outcomes between students who attended summer camp for at least one day (T1) or at least 20 days (T20) and the control group who did not attend camp. The t tests showed statistically significant differences in average school attendance rates between both treatment groups and the control group. However, these results do not account for the potential confounding influences of exogenous variables. In other words, a simple comparison of average school attendance rates across groups does not consider the possible selection bias among the students who opted to attend camp, which might influence their school attendance beyond just their camp participation. Therefore, we opted for modeling approaches designed to provide more robust impact estimates.

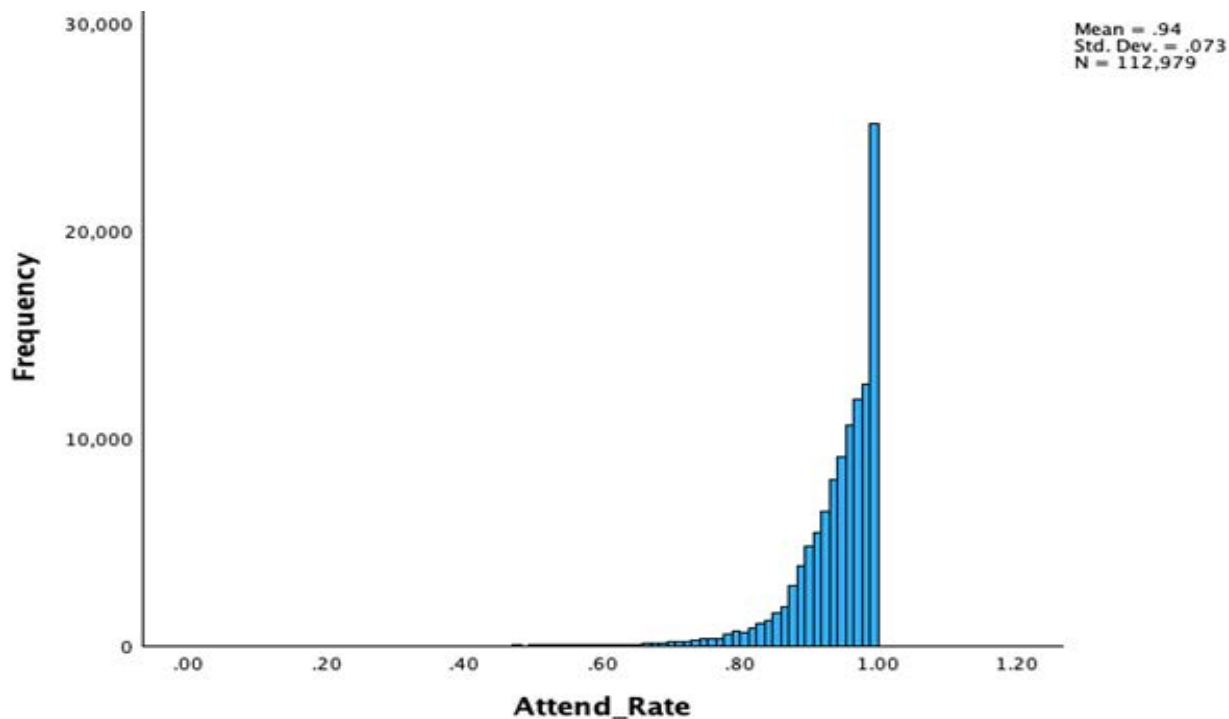
The estimates generated by our first covariate-adjusted GLM are presented in Table 17. They show that students who attended at least one day of camp had a marginally higher attendance rate (93.7%) than those who did not participate (93.3%). Additionally, we analyzed the attendance rates of students who attended camp for at least 20 days versus non-campers. Again, high-dosage campers demonstrated a slightly higher predicted average attendance rate than non-campers (94.0% vs. 93.7%). Both differences are statistically significant, although this is expected given the large sample sizes.

A ceiling effect is one plausible reason for the small estimated effects on school attendance rates. Consider the distribution for attendance rates is highly negatively skewed, with most scores bunched towards, but not exceeding, 100% (Figure 8). The restriction of range substantially limits the ability of treatment status to discriminate on this outcome variable.

TABLE 17. COVARIATE-ADJUSTED MEAN SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES ESTIMATES, GRADES 6-8.

Outcome	Campers (T1)	Control	Diff.*	High dosage Campers (T20)	Control	Diff.*
Attendance Rate	93.7%	93.3%	0.4%	94.0%	93.3%	0.7%
Chronic Absenteeism	10.5%	12.3%	-1.8%	9.1%	12.3%	-3.2%

FIGURE 8. 2023-2024 SCHOOL ATTENDANCE RATES, GRADES 6-8



*Statistically significant differences at the .001 level

Given a lack of sensitivity for detecting differences in school attendance rates, we also examined chronic absenteeism as an outcome. Because the chronic absenteeism variable is dichotomous, we employed a covariate-adjusted logistic regression model. The findings were consistent with the analyses from 2022 but showed slightly lower estimated effects.³ The estimated mean probabilities for chronic absenteeism are lower for both treatment groups (T1 and T20) compared to the control group (Table 17). For example, students who attended at least one day of camp had a 10.5% likelihood of being chronically absent, while non-campers had a 12.3% likelihood. The differences are even more pronounced for students with the higher camp dosage of at least 20 days. High-dosage campers in grades 6-8 exhibited a 9.1% probability of chronic absence compared to non-campers' likelihood of 12.3%.

Put another way, the odds of being chronically absent are 0.84 times lower in students who attended summer camp at least one day compared to students who did not attend camp.⁴ Similarly, the odds of being chronically absent are 0.72 times lower in students who attended summer camp for at least 20 days compared to students who did not attend camp. Converting the odds to probabilities implies campers and high-dosage campers in grades 6-8 were, respectively, 17.1% and 35.2% less likely to be chronically absent than non-campers.⁵

When matching cases based on observed characteristics, there are inevitable trade-offs involved. Using a large number of indicators for matching can reduce the chances of finding adequately matched pairs; in other words, as more variables are included in the matching process, the likelihood of identifying a suitable control group diminishes. Therefore, researchers must find a balance between choosing

³ The 2022 analyses of students in grades 3-8 yielded -2.3% and -3.5% differences in chronic absenteeism for T1 and T20 groups, respectively.

⁴ The odds are calculated by taking the exponent of the regression coefficient for T1, or $\exp(-0.179) = .84$.

⁵ The probabilities are based on the mean probability estimates in Table 22. For T1 $(10.5-12.3)/10.5 = 17.1\%$ and for T20 $(9.1-12.3)/9.1 = 35.2\%$.

matching variables and maintaining a sufficient sample size. We started with the full slate of our available covariates, but after running into convergence issues with the model, we ended up restricting our matching variables to student grade level, race, sex, and block group household median income. Matches for the T1 treatment group yielded 2,514 matched pairs (47.1% of all 5,342 T1 students). When we matched the smaller group of T20, the matched pairs were expectedly smaller, at 971 (59.0% of all 1,647 T20 students). Although the difference turns out to be significant, the value itself is small.

Results from the matching analysis showed that campers exhibited slightly higher average attendance rates (93.6%) relative to non-campers (92.5%) (Table 18). The differences were similar for campers who participated for at least 20 days (93.4% vs. 92.0%). These differences are statistically significant but small. Converting the percentage differences to days of school suggests that T1 campers attended school 1.1 more days per year and T20 campers attended school 1.3 more days per year, on average, out of the maximum 96 membership days (September 2023 through January 2024). Extrapolating across a 180-day school year,⁶ prior federal and state-funded improvement policies, was perhaps that the inclusion of planning would support the change process and increase the likelihood of success.¹⁰ the additional school days for each treatment group would be 2.0 and 2.5 days, respectively.

TABLE 18. MATCHED PAIR ANALYSIS: MEAN SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES ESTIMATES, GRADES 6-8.

Outcome	Campers (T1) (2,514 matched pairs)	Control	Diff.*	High dosage Campers (T20) (971 matched pairs)	Control	Diff.*
Attendance Rate	93.6%	92.5%	1.1%	93.4%	92.0%	1.4%
Chronic Absenteeism	12.0%	18.3%	-6.3%	11.8%	16.0%	-4.2%

Regarding effects on chronic absenteeism, campers were far less likely to be chronically absent (12.0%) than non-campers (18.3%). High-dosage campers were also less likely to be chronically absent (11.8% vs. 16.0%). Put differently, campers and high-dosage campers were, respectively, 52.5% and 35.6% less likely to be chronically absent than non-campers.⁷ These differences are statistically significant and practically meaningful. For instance, the differences equate to 158 fewer students who would have been chronically absent in the T1 group ($2,514 \times .063 = 158.4$) and 41 fewer students in the T20 group ($971 \times .042 = 40.8$). Expressed in terms of Cohen’s d effect sizes, the mean differences in chronic absenteeism are -.19 and -.13, respectively, for campers and high dosage campers relative to controls; in context, these represent noteworthy effects.

Several caveats should be considered when interpreting these results. First, we cannot confirm that camp participation directly caused lower chronic absenteeism, as other unaccounted factors might influence attendance, such as families who value school attendance and enrichment activities. Second, the treatment remains a “black box,” as we could not effectively account for differences across camps in activities, resources, staff, and structures, making it hard to pinpoint what aspects of camp might influence attendance. We attempted to classify all 108 camps to differentiate among their main foci. But when we did, the majority fell in the two very broad categories of “recreation” (38.0%) and “multiple programs” (31.5%). The next highest occurring classifications were “academic support” (10.2%), “social and emotional well-being” (7.4%), and STEM (4.6%). Given the lack of specificity for the two largest groups and the low sample sizes of the remaining (more clearly defined) types, we abandoned further analyses based on camp curricular focus. Third, some data was missing or unmatched with state datasets, and we cannot determine how this may have biased the sample. Fourth, because our data only included students attending CSDE-funded summer camps, our “no camp” control group might include students who attended other camps, potentially leading to an underestimation of the effects due to treatment diffusion. Lastly, the statistical significance of most results is likely due to the large sample sizes, as a high number of participants tends to yield significant results even when differences are minimal. Therefore, the focus should be on the size of these differences or estimated effects, which we have reported as mean probabilities and odds ratios. Despite this, the findings remain consistent across different scenarios, with odds ratios consistently favoring camp participants regarding school attendance.

Check-in Visits to Expansion Grantees

An evaluation team member conducted brief check-in visits to 20 Expansion site camps across Connecticut. Each camp was visited once for between 30 and 60 minutes. Each visit included informal interviews with a site leader, casual interactions with campers, and informal observations of camp activities and facilities. No irregularities were discovered, and all camps were in full operation. The visits generally showed that students were engaged in camp activities. Summary reflections for a sample of camps were provided to the CSDE outside this report.

6 Our model results are based on attendance rates over the time span of September through January, which account for 96 membership days. Connecticut public schools are required by law to have a minimum of 180 school days per year.

7 These probabilities are based on the mean probability estimates in Table 22. For T1 $(12.0-18.3)/12.0 = 52.5\%$ and for T20 $(11.8-16.0)/11.8 = 35.6\%$.

Camp Summit

This year, as an extension of the 2023 Summer Enrichment Grant program evaluation, the evaluation team organized and hosted the first AccelerateCT Camp Summit. The summit, sponsored by the Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration (CCERC) and endorsed by the CSDE, invited leaders of 2023-2024 grant recipient programs to share their expertise on delivering positive summer camp experiences through four collaborative workshops. The workshops, which featured discussion leaders from grant recipients and one local school district, encouraged participants to discuss successes, shared challenges, and partnerships with co-grant recipients related to how their programs might best develop school-camp partnerships, promote social justice and equity, and support campers' social and emotional wellbeing in their summer programs. The summit also included a 60-minute question-and-answer session with a representative from CSDE, providing a forum for camp leaders to ask grant-specific questions related to their programs' transitions into the 2024 half of the two-year grant cycle.

The AccelerateCT Camp Summit was initially conceptualized following the evaluation team's finding that although previous evaluation data highlighted ways the Summer Enrichment Grant supported summer programs in isolation, camps did not have opportunities to share or receive feedback from other practitioners about their practices. The summit created a space where camps could share practices and discuss the impact of the grant on their programs as a collective voice, provid-

ing them with opportunities to establish networks and refine practices, while also helping the evaluation team capture the larger impact of the grant on the Connecticut summer program landscape as a whole. As grant recipient programs varied greatly in program purpose and organizational affiliation (e.g., academic camps, purposeful play camps, private community camps, and those that operated in partnership with their local school district), it behooved the evaluation team to consider how gathering enrichment programs together, and encouraging them to share practices and identify areas of collective need, would result in a more comprehensive evaluation of the grant program's implementation and more colorfully highlight the nuances of its impact on children. Following a six-month planning effort and after soliciting input from CCERC and CSDE, the evaluation team hosted the Summit at a university in central Connecticut in January 2024.

Attendance and Participation

The program evaluation team extended summit invitations to all 109 grant recipients. Forty-seven (47) camp leaders from 31 different summer enrichment programs attended the event, resulting in an approximate 28% program participation rate across all summer enrichment grant programs. The opening meeting of the Summit included welcome messages from individuals representing the University of Connecticut, CCERC, and the American Camp Association. Three of the camp leaders in attendance volunteered to serve as discussion leaders during the collaborative workshops. One of these leaders facilitated group discussions during the SEWB workshop, and two facilitated group discussions

during the School-Camp Partnerships workshop. Additionally, two representatives from a local school district attended the event to lead a group discussion during the School-Camp Partnerships workshop. The School-Camp Partnerships workshop also featured a virtual presentation from a team of school-camp researchers from an American R1 institution. Following the workshops, during the last hour of the Summit, a representative from CSDE addressed participants' grant-related questions.

Collaborative Workshops

Throughout the 2021, 2022, and 2023 summer enrichment evaluations, and guided by the overall goals of the Summer Enrichment Grant program, the research team identified three workshop topics for the Summit: School-Camp Partnerships (SCPs), Social Justice and Equity, and SEWB. Before the Summit, participants were asked to select two workshops they would like to attend. The evaluation team assigned participants to each workshop based on participants' choices while accounting for group size and schedule allowances. At the beginning of the Summit, participants received their workshop assignments alongside copies of their agendas, consent forms, and other materials. Each workshop lasted approximately 45 minutes, which typically included time for group introductions, sharing practices related to the topic of interest, discussing questions about challenges programs face related to the topic, and developing strategies to address unmet needs related to implementing program changes about the topic. At least one member of the program evaluation team was present during each



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workshop. Below, we summarize the main points discussed during each workshop.

School-Camp Partnerships (SPCs)

The SPCs workshop asked participants to consider how camps can partner with local school districts to promote positive youth development outcomes. The workshop began with a presentation from an R1 university that shared evidence-based models of SPCs, which also included information about the relationship between desired partnership outcomes and the structure of partnership models. The workshop proceeded with an in-person presentation from representatives from a local Connecticut school district, providing a partnership model for participants to discuss. The final portion of the workshop involved group conversation, facilitated by camp leader volunteers, about overcoming challenges surrounding the establishment and maintenance of SPCS. Twenty-six attendees participated in this workshop.

Those who participated in the SPCs workshop discussed how different partnership models—such as half-day or full-day programs—offered specific benefits to their programs, student participants, and school district partners. For example, some programs discussed the benefits of facilitating a partnership model combining summer school and camp activities through two half-day programs, Monday through Thursday, and an entire Friday camp day. The benefits of this model included providing full-day coverage for students, having districts offer transportation services between program sites, and combining funding contributions from the camp and school. Another conversation focused on the feasibility of hiring teachers as summer staff, which offered teachers additional work opportunities while ensuring that highly qualified staff facilitated summer programs throughout their season. Some challenges the groups discussed included uncertainty about identifying districts interested in establishing SPCs, working with districts to develop mutually beneficial partnership models, and creating relationships with key district personnel who could facilitate the school side of hypothetical partnerships. Other challenges included the availability of funding to support partnerships and the process of ensuring camp and school curricula were complementary to maximize students' opportunities for growth in both their academic skill sets and their social-emotional development.

Social Justice and Equity

The Social Justice and Equity workshop addressed the camps' social responsibilities in delivering camp programming through a lens of equity and social justice. They focused on how camps can design programs that intentionally integrate these facets to better serve their campers' needs. This collaborative discussion was facilitated by a member of the program evaluation team, who also collected field notes throughout the conversation. The group discussed ways their programs work toward eliminating participation barriers for students. It reflected how their programs intentionally expose campers to populations different from each other, especially concerning racial and socioeconomic equity. Participants considered addressing opportunity and access gaps within and between their programs. They imagined how full and systematically uninhibited access might contribute to ensuring all campers access equitable summer programs. Nineteen attendees participated in this workshop.

Throughout the workshop, participants used the term “equity” to describe practices prioritizing resource distribution to achieve equal outcomes for common understanding. The group identified strategies to improve equitable access to summer programming, such as providing their campers scholarships, transportation, and food service. They also shared the names of specific groups around Connecticut that have historically supported these initiatives through community partnerships. The group also discussed ways to promote diversity within their programs by exposing campers to racially, culturally, or socioeconomically different people. Some of these initiatives included hiring staff with diverse backgrounds, explicitly facilitating conversations about race with students, celebrating International Day, and sharing foods from different cultures with their groups. Participants also shared advice about ways to approach their respective towns to receive assistance with supporting students with disabilities.

Social-Emotional Wellbeing

The SEWB workshop encouraged participants to consider how their camps understand, plan for, and promote social and emotional well-being in their programs. The participants in this workshop discussed how their curricula and available resources could afford students equitable SEWB development opportunities and how they assess whether SEWB growth is occurring. A camp leader volunteer facilitated this workshop. One member of the program evaluation team collected field notes during this workshop. Forty-one summit attendees participated in this workshop.

Across camps, some of the strategies leaders used to foster SEWB were self-esteem workshops, employing on-site social workers, hiring extra counselors to specifically support students with behavioral needs, and incorporating feedback from parent and youth surveys when designing and improving their programs. Some participants also shared how their programs supported students' SEWB needs by focusing on correction more than compliance and embedding restorative justice practices into their programs. One SEWB-focused curriculum that camps use is called “Character Strong.” One need that participants identified during the group conversation was for new strategies to engage middle school-aged campers in SEWB practices.

Question-and-Answer with CSDE

After the collaborative workshops, summit attendees had the opportunity to participate in a 45-minute, large-group question-and-answer session with a representative from CSDE. Participants submitted their individual questions to the program evaluation team ahead of the Summit, and the team developed six overarching questions that captured the themes from participants' question entries. The questions addressed details about the transition from the summer 2023 cycle of the Summer Enrichment Grant into the summer 2024 cycle, including ways to share updated logistical information with CSDE, what to expect regarding the reporting process for sharing camp data, how to support students' increasing needs for SEWB support, and the timing of summer enrichment funds, and the future of the Summer Enrichment Grant Program.

Participants learned they would have opportunities to share updated program information, such as contact or location changes, in early spring 2024, before the next summer camp season. Camp

leaders can share these updates using the same reporting system as years past and should expect to use this system to share program data throughout next summer. Participants also learned they will receive reimbursements for grant-supported program expenditures as they are submitted, using the same online system as years past. While CSDE did not indicate whether there are plans to continue funding the Summer Enrichment Grant after the conclusion of the current award cycle, participants shared their support for the program and expressed interest in sustaining the expansion and innovation of their programs across years to come. After the Summit, the program evaluation team received online SEWB resources, which we shared with summit attendees in a follow-up email.

Survey Results

Following the Q&A with CSDE, the program evaluation team concluded the Summit by administering an anonymized electronic survey to the group. All respondents provided informed consent before participating in the survey. The survey included multiple-choice items, Likert-type scale ratings, and open-ended questions. It asked participants for feedback on each workshop they attended and reflections about the Q&A session and the overall event details, such as timing and location. Participants were asked to respond to a total of 37 questions. The program evaluation team received 46 completed surveys, reflecting a 98% response rate from 47 attendees.

Workshop Feedback

Survey responses showed that while participants felt satisfied with the content of discussions, opportunities to collaborate, and practicality or usefulness of the conversations during all three workshops, a recurrent theme also showed participants felt they did not have enough time to discuss each topic thoroughly. For example, one participant shared about the Social-emotional well-being workshop, “I think you could make this a full-day workshop. It would be incredibly helpful to have time to sit and talk in groups and collaborate around specific issues.” A second participant noted that while the Social Justice and Equity workshop offered “great discussion and great ideas,” they believed having

“a bit more time with smaller group break-outs would be helpful for resource sharing and collaboration in problem-solving.” A third participant shared that extending the length of the School-Camp Partnerships workshop “would be great to expand upon [learning] the nuances of how to go about creating the necessary relationships and connections with community stakeholders that could assist with bringing a camper-ship to fruition.” This feedback reflects a common desire for continued opportunities to discuss camp programming and establish networks among summer enrichment professionals.

Of the 26 survey respondents who attended the School-Camp Partnerships workshop, 76.9% believed they learned something they could implement in their program. Furthermore, approximately 80.8% thought they connected with other professionals who shared similar goals related to partnership-focused programming and that their questions were answered. About 65% believed they were able to contribute their expertise to group discussions. A major area where attendees would like systemic support is in “[establishing] relationships with key stakeholders in the school system” to build partnerships that meet their campers’ and students’ needs.

Of the 19 survey respondents who attended the Social Justice and Equity workshop, 84.2% believed they learned something they could implement in their program. Approximately 79% of respondents thought they connected with other professionals who shared similar goals related to social justice and equity programming, that they were able to contribute their expertise to group discussion, and that their questions were answered. Attendees identified the need for increased program access and experiences. They suggested systemic-level support might include greater access to transportation (for students) and more equity-focused professional development opportunities. As one participant shared, “If [adults] can’t [talk about social justice in camp programming], how can we expect campers to?”

Of the 41 survey respondents who attended the SEWB workshop, 80.5% believed they learned something they could implement in their program. Additionally, 73.2%

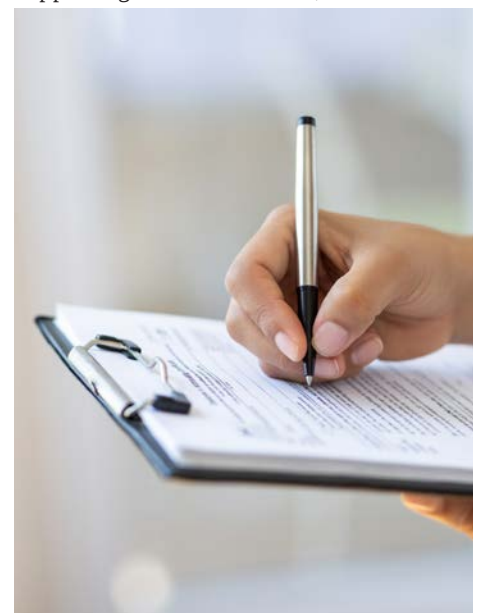
thought they connected with other professionals who shared similar goals related to SEWB programming, and approximately 70.7% believed they could contribute their expertise to group discussions. Roughly two-thirds (65.9%) felt their questions were answered. Systemic needs identified by participants in this workshop include increased access to coordinated SEWB resources and development opportunities.

Q&A with CSDE

Survey respondents shared overall satisfaction with the question-and-answer session with CSDE. Approximately 93% felt they were able to ask questions that were important to them, and about 91% felt all of their questions were answered.

Summit Logistics

While overall satisfaction with the Summit was around 92%, the most frequent suggestions for improvement revolved around the event’s timing. Most commonly, participants shared a desire for a more extended summit. Suggestions for improving the length of the event included extending the Summit to fit a full-day schedule or extending the Summit to take place across multiple days. Lengthening the duration of the Summit, participants explained, would allow for more time in each workshop and would also create time for additional workshop topics, such as integrating technology into summer programming, family engagement resources, differentiated programming based on students’ age, supporting behavioral needs, and SEWB



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for students in middle and high school. Survey respondents also shared they would like the Summit to start later to allow for more travel time.

Overall Impact

The AccelerateCT Camp Summit offered attendees opportunities to share their practices for promoting social justice, equity, and social-emotional well-being in their summer programs. Camp leaders also shared strategies and models surrounding establishing school-camp partnerships and discussed common barriers and solutions for each workshop topic. Moreover, the Summit created a space for leaders to identify ongoing systemic and organizational needs and established a centralized network for camp leaders within Connecticut. Conversation throughout the Summit centered on supporting summer learning programs as curricula, program initiatives, and student needs evolve.

Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations to camps and the CSDE to improve an already successful initiative.

Recommendations for Camps:

Continue to Recruit Students from Underrepresented Backgrounds

Although student camp enrollments remain racially and ethnically diverse, overall, White students participate at modestly higher rates than expected in relation to Connecticut public schools. Hispanic/Latino students of any race constitute about a third (31.1%) of Connecticut's school population, yet roughly half (16.4%) were represented at summer camps.

Offer Targeted Programs for Older Students

The site supervisor end-of-program intake data showed that students entering PK through grade 2 accounted for 47.1% of all campers. Roughly 16.7% were entering grades 6 through 8, and only 2.1% were attending high school. Camps could consider encouraging older students to join programs by offering flexible schedules or paid job training opportunities. Teen-focused programs of this nature might enable older students to balance their commitments outside of camp, such as familial or work responsibilities, while still benefiting from participation in camp programs and summer youth programming. STEAM-related activities may appeal to older students, although our data suggest otherwise for campers in the primary grades. For instance, camps could offer developmentally appropriate performing arts training or creative writing sessions for those passionate about developing creative skills. Camps could also provide opportunities for students to develop hands-on skills in financial literacy, entrepreneurship, or data sciences. Incentives could also come in the form of college credit. Camps could partner with universities to offer subject-specific programs that enhance students' education during the school year. For example, students wishing to have a career in the health-care industry could learn about biotechnology or get trained as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs).

Promote Equity and Structure Opportunities for Cultural Exchanges

Nearly three-quarters of students (73.9%) responding to the survey indicated that they "always" or "mostly" interacted with campers who were different from them. These interactions represent a promising opportunity for summer programs to promote intercultural learning. Such programming requires knowledge of how to do this in the right ways. Our evaluation indicates varied or inconsistent conceptualizations of equity and social justice across camps. A shared understanding of how to define and deliver socially just summer programming would assist camps in serving their racially and culturally diverse students. We recommend that the state offer professional learning opportunities where camp leaders can openly discuss and share practices promoting social justice, equity, and diversity in their programs.

Recommendations for the CSDE:

Provide Professional Development Opportunities in Social-Emotional Learning

Summer program professionals expressed concern about students' rising mental health needs and shared interest in increased support for social and emotional support programs. As programs strive to meet the growing needs of their participants, the state should consider sharing SEL resources with camps, such as SEL curriculums, and offering ongoing training and support about evidence-based practices related to implementing SEL strategies at each program.

Convene the AccelerateCT Camp Summit Again

The first AccelerateCT Camp Summit, held in January 2024, offered grant alums an opportunity to discuss pressing topics such as practices for promoting social justice and equity, developing and supporting social and emotional learning, and establishing strong partnerships between camps and school districts. Camp leaders brought their organizations' unique strengths and questions to collaborative, workshop-style discussions throughout the half-day summit. Also, they had opportunities to communicate with the CSDE during a question-and-answer panel with CSDE personnel. Feedback from summit attendees overwhelmingly supported holding the event annually, suggesting camp leaders around the state are eager to continue building connections between organizations and to learn new strategies that will help their programs' development.

ENDNOTES

1 <https://portal.ct.gov/sde/covid19/acceleratect/summer-enrichment>

2 Some of the un-matchable cases were students from out of state or who attended private schools, while others were due to data quality issues (e.g., missing, or incorrect name/date of birth).

3 We wish to thank Dr. Briana Hennessy for assembling this large dataset.

4 SchoolStatus. (2024). National K-12 attendance data insights: 2024 report. SchoolStatus. Our data also indicate that attendance rates are higher and chronic absenteeism lower among 3rd – 5th graders relative to 6th-8th graders.

5 We wish to thank Dr. Timothy Moore and Chaeyeon Yoo for their statistical consultations.

6 Those included 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-year estimates for: Population Density, Average Household Size, Socioeconomic Index, Total Population, Working Age Population, Population Under Age 5, Population Ages 5–9, Population Density Change, Unemployment Rate, Children in Educated Households, White Population, Black or African American Population, American Indian and Alaska Native Population, Asian Population, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Population, Other Race Population, Population Reporting Two or More Races, Hispanic or Latino Population, White, Non-Hispanic Population, Population with a Bachelor's Degree, High School Graduates, Population with a Graduate Degree, Median Household Income, Households with Income \$150,000 or More, Households with Income \$200,000 or More, and Gini Coefficient.

7 Evaluators listened to audio-recordings of interviews and focus groups to inform meaning-making.

8 Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2020). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

9 Banks, J. A. (2008). Diversity, group identity, and citizenship education in a global age. *Educational Researcher*, 37(3), 129-139.

10 VanGronigen, B. A., & Meyers, C. V. (2022). Exploring the association between short-cycle school improvement planning and student achievement in underperforming schools. *Journal of School Leadership*, 32(4), 339-361.



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