

The Key to Engaging Every Student: Building Greater Linkages Between National, State, and Local System Leaders

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated how essential summer and after-school programs are for youth and their families. Policymakers took note of the needs and the evidence base, and prioritized stimulus funding to expand access and accelerate learning. American Rescue Plan (ARP) and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds were quickly released to schools through different mechanisms, initially prioritizing speed over infrastructure design. The funds were intended to fuel robust school-community partnerships to provide students who suffered from pandemic-related learning and developmental setbacks with comprehensive, high-quality programming; yet the timeline for planning and implementation often hindered progress toward that vision. This article discusses the challenges to scaling critical services, the strategies that states and partners are putting into place, and opportunities to strengthen relationships and infrastructure at the national, state, and regional or local level.

Key words: after-school, out-of-school time, state education agency (SEA), COVID recovery, American Rescue Plan (ARP), elementary and secondary school emergency relief fund (ESSER), statewide after-school network (SAN)

We have visionaries and champions, exemplary systems and program models, ample evidence of effectiveness—and now, unprecedented funding to expand access to after-school and summer programming. So, what are some of the greatest hurdles to sustaining programs beyond American Rescue Plan & ESSER funding—and what are our greatest opportunities for lasting impact?

Background

Two decades following the publication of Alexander and Entwistle's (2003) Baltimore Beginning School Study, which coined the term "summer learning loss," this year held great significance for the field of out-of-school time. The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated how essential summer and after-school programs are for youth and their families. Policymakers took note of the needs and the evidence base, and prioritized stimulus funding to expand access and accelerate learning. As we wind down 2022 and look toward 2023, it's time to both celebrate progress and reflect on the systemic obstacles that we have yet to overcome to provide enriching and engaging programming for all young people.

While 2021 marked the first year that stimulus funds were widely available to support summer and after-school programs for learning recovery and acceleration, 2022 offered school and program leaders more time to plan strategies to disperse funding and support implementation. American Rescue Plan (ARP) and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds were quickly released to schools through different mechanisms, initially prioritizing speed over infrastructure design. The funds were intended to fuel robust school–community partnerships to provide students who suffered from pandemic-related learning and developmental setbacks with comprehensive, high-quality programming; yet the timeline for planning and implementation often hindered progress toward that vision. With a December 2024 spending deadline ahead, the field has limited time to act.

In July 2022, the United States Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona and Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh—along with five national partners from AASA (the Superintendents Association), Afterschool Alliance, National Summer Learning Association, the National League of Cities, and the National Comprehensive Center at Westat—announced a bold vision to Engage Every Student¹—providing access to summer and after-school programs to all families and youth who want to participate. The call to action is intended to continue momentum and provide schools and communities the connections and assistance they need to expand partnerships, quality, and access.

Beyond ARP, public and private funding for summer and after-school is largely fragmented and siloed. We see the impact of this through all levels of the system, and more importantly, on the ground in schools and programs. Each funding stream reflects its unique priorities,

¹ To learn more about the Engage Every Student launch and initiative, visit the [website](#) and July 14 [event blog](#) and [recording](#).

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requirements, and jargon. We spent several summers of our early careers visiting programs across the country, including privately funded networks, 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC), and migrant education programs. The challenge of stacking funding sources was immediately visible at one school we visited where students in separate programs wore t-shirts reflecting the federal funding stream that provided discrete funding: 21st CCLC, migrant education, and so on. Following the visit, we shared feedback about opportunities to promote positive program culture and to stack funding. We also sympathized that the t-shirts reflected the complexity that hard-working educators annually confront when designing and implementing programs. These kinds of policy-to-practice barriers create uncertainty and led to lack of coordination, innovation, and expansion on the ground. School-based program leaders find themselves in a repeat cycle of applying for new funding and awaiting notification of final budget allocations far later in the planning process than is optimal for planning for quality with community-based partners. At the system level, we see how fragmented funding inhibits scale and continuous quality improvement. Ultimately, a lack of predictability of services among providers and families along with other factors impedes the long-term sustainability of our efforts.

Despite the siloed nature of our funding and a very diverse landscape of out-of-school programs (OST) that historically competed for scarce funds, a number of communities across the country have successfully promoted diverse portfolios of programs. These communities, like those belonging to the [Every Hour Counts](#) network, have recognized that one size does not fit all; not one approach or model will appeal to all kids or meet the needs of all families. They coordinate program offerings through [centralized websites](#) and 311 community phone-based hotlines, allowing families to locate and access programs offered by different providers—from their school to their library or mosque—with different objectives, hours, and timeframes. Some communities also point to places where families can simply access meals, books, and digital resources for their children when school doors are shut. The unfortunate news is that even in cities where this infrastructure exists, it is often not sustained and too easily forgotten. This kind of critical infrastructure requires that grassroots system-level leaders and grassroots program providers are meaningfully connected within their community ecosystem, funding is aimed at system-building, and families and community members demand continuity of summer and after-school programs as essential and reliable year-round services.

Learning From State ARP Strategies

Over the past year, the National Comprehensive Center at Westat has led a community of practice focusing on the Strategic Use of Summer and Afterschool Set Asides in partnership with

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over 10 states and the United States Department of Education. Participating state leaders—representing their state education agencies, statewide after-school networks, and other state agencies or organizations—are committed to confronting systemic challenges to achieving greater access, quality, and outcomes that they alone cannot address. States formed action plans that coalesced around four facets of summer and after-school sustainability to strengthen their systems and grassroots-to-grassroots connections: (a) data to promote access, quality, and outcomes; (b) technical assistance systems to build capacity and promote quality; (c) strategies to promote robust partnerships; and (d) strategic and sustainable funding. States reflected where additional connections with national, state, youth-serving intermediary, and/or district and community partners might benefit their strategies and sought input from a wider range of stakeholders to inform their work.

This year, participating teams will more deeply test various tools and strategies with district and community program providers from their state. At the close of our first year, one state team reflected that the regular meetings and community of practice provided them with a reflective space that helped them balance power differentials related to scale of services and funding sources and priorities, allowing them to work more cohesively on unified strategies.

While we are awaiting evidence to demonstrate how effectively states and communities managed stimulus funds, we have reflected on features that seemingly enabled progress toward access, quality, and outcomes within our community of practice. These themes have also begun to surface in Westat's forthcoming Summer Learning and Enrichment Study and framework-in-development on the decision points that states have considered to respond to the U.S. Department of Education's call to action.

- **States with existing out-of-school time infrastructure and cross-system relationships were better equipped to meet youth and family needs.** Specifically, state education agencies that historically prioritized summer learning and after-school, through state-based sources or other prioritization, held an advantage. The more they were connected nationally and throughout their state, the greater they were positioned to call on and activate partners and existing systems to expand quality youth services through ARP.
- **The ways that states chose to release ARP and ESSER funds had an impact on their ability to influence access, quality, and outcomes.** While some states deployed funds through grant programs—either through the state education agency or through a partner such as the statewide after-school network (SAN)—others deployed via formula or used a mix of grant and formula funding.

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- **Despite the need for speed, state leaders' moves reflected their concerns and perceived opportunities for influence.** Some states moved away from competitive funding programs due to equity concerns for rural districts that may not have had the same grant writing capacity as larger suburban or urban districts. States that opted for formula funding or that did not specify data collection requirements shared that they have limited opportunities to collect consistent and meaningful data on how dollars were spent and what programs looked like. In contrast, states that specified data collection and reporting requirements in conjunction with the release of funds will presumably have greater information on programming and impact. Collaborations between state education agencies (SEA) and SANs were viewed positively and promoted attention to a shared vision for quality and data collection.

State education agencies within the Strategic Use of Summer and Afterschool Community of Practice reflect the diverse range of strategies to manage ARP and ESSER funds. Regardless of where they entered the community in their cross-agency partnership and strategy development, they are all implementing new and enhanced strategies to respond to provider needs and sustain to their work, including strategies to

- Provide enhanced guidance on stacking and organizing federal and state funding for summer and after-school, to help districts draw from multiple sources and provide comprehensive programming.
- Develop or strengthen communications protocols within their SEA to better reach districts and community partners.
- Offer or increase technical assistance to ensure quality.
- Promote increased partnerships among districts and community-based organizations to support high-quality enrichment programming and sustainability.
- Support the collection and use of data on program availability, implementation, and outcomes.

Notably, multiple state partnerships are working to identify exemplary models and adapt web resources and toolkits to help districts and partners adopt evidence-based practices. The Community is also working together to tell our stories of impact.

Looking Ahead

As the National League of Cities' Robert Blaine pointed out, ARP and ESSER funds provide us with an opportunity to move from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset. We would assert that there is no greater opportunity to embrace diverse, evidence-based summer and

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after-school models and to build out and strengthen cross-system partnerships at every level. But we know that opportunity is time limited and time sensitive. *What can we do over the next year to make a lasting impact?*

Through our work with states and nationally, one thing is clear: **There is a great need and opportunity to use this time to strategically connect districts, community providers, intermediaries, systems leaders, and capacity building organizations within states.** State level OST systems leaders should know all of the intermediary and capacity-building organizations in their state. School district leaders should know all of the direct service providers and cultural institutions in their community. All of these groups should also have access to state and national thought leaders who can support their planning, share coherent stories of access and impact,² and promote long-term sustainability. Statewide after-school networks will continue to play an important role in this effort. Similar to youth-serving intermediaries at the community or regional level, approximately 30 after-school networks have built maps of varying levels of detail and sophistication to help understand the landscape of assets and gaps in services throughout their state. They are well-positioned as conveners who can drive statewide visioning, partnership, and sustainability planning.

If we regularly convened and connected statewide summer and after-school partners at all levels of the system, states, and communities, districts and program leaders would experience numerous and immediate benefits, such as

- greater ability and efficiency in identifying and activating existing community assets—including education service centers to help build the capacity of program providers and measure impact;
- more easily identifying exemplary partnerships that draw from various public funding sources that support summer and after-school programming;
- better organization and communication about diverse portfolios of OST offerings throughout the state to help families and youth navigate opportunities and access programs;
- avenues to amplify youth voice, identify and discuss barriers to access, and strategies to reach students traditionally underserved in OST who could benefit from programs;

² Two important examples are the Afterschool Alliance's America After 3 p.m. survey and data set, and the National Summer Learning Association's partnership with InPlay on the discoversummer.org national program locator website.

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- collection of stories of impact from grassroots organizations to aggregate, make meaning of, and share with grassstops as we make the case for sustained investments in our field; and
- greater ability to identify gaps in services and plan for sustainability locally, regionally, and nationally.

To that last point, near-term strategies should be considered to build additional infrastructure for summer and OST in rural areas. Youth-serving intermediary organizations primarily serve urban areas and surrounding counties. Former United States Deputy Secretary of Education and National Comprehensive Center Advisory Board Member, Terry Peterson, recommended that states invest a portion of their remaining ARP & ESSER dollars to plan for sustainability. As part of this, state partners could work with community foundations and United Way agencies to build needed infrastructure and backbone support for rural communities beyond stimulus funding. This type of sustainability and infrastructure planning could be a priority of statewide summits around the country.

Conclusion

Now is the time to step up collaboration at all levels of the system to better serve youth and families. We need strongly connected grassroots organizations and grassstops leaders at the national, state, and local levels in order to effectively tell our stories of impact and ensure that all communities are equipped to meet the needs of youth and families. If we strengthen the connections between statewide partners, communities, districts, and program leaders, we will be better positioned to make the case for dedicated and reliable funding for summer and after-school for all.

Reference

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