The Summer Learning Program, 2013-2014

Nolan Rett Mickelson

At-a-Glance

The Dallas Independent School District’s (Dallas ISD) Department of Summer Learning and Extended-Day Services provided summer programming for thousands of elementary, middle, and high school students across the district.

The Thriving Minds Summer Camp, a partnership between the district and Big Thought (a non-profit organization devoted to integrating core-subject curriculum with artistic exploration), extended traditional and bilingual instruction to elementary students at eight sites through core curriculum integrated with studies in the arts. The summer of 2014 marked the fifth year implementing this program. It began district-wide in 2010 and has served between 5 and 10 sites each summer. During 2013 and 2014, the Thriving Minds Summer Camp hosted the National Summer Learning Demonstration Study and Project. The RAND Corporation conducted the study with funding from the Wallace Foundation. The Dallas ISD provided a remedial Summer Learning Program for elementary students at three traditional elementary sites and one Summer Learning Lab. The learning lab did not differ from the traditional sites in either duration or curriculum. Teachers at these sites received additional observations, coaching, and professional development.

Six traditional middle schools and one alternative school provided credit-recovery in core courses; three additional middle schools hosted Summer Learning Labs. Junior Players, a non-profit organization promoting creative expression particularly through drama, provided enrichment courses at two of the learning lab campuses. The High School Summer Learning Program remained similar to previous years and offered opportunities for credit recovery and test preparation at nine campuses and one alternative school. Several other enrichment programs were offered across the district, focusing on various ages and needs. These programs presented opportunities in music, dance, science, and karate among other subjects.

Elementary School Summer Learning

The district provided three elementary extended-year programs in summer 2014. The district partnered with Big Thought to provide the Thriving Minds Elementary Summer Camp at eight elementary schools. These campuses were identified from an existing partnership with Big Thought for after-school programming. Three elementary schools provided the Traditional Elementary Summer Learning program and were managed by the district. One campus – Kennedy – hosted a Summer Learning Lab, which afforded teachers one-to-one coaching for the entire day and professional development every afternoon. Students at Kennedy attended Monday through Thursday from 8:00 to 12:00 while teachers stayed until 3:00. The traditional sites operated only from 8:00 to 12:00. The Thriving Minds program operated Monday through Friday from 8:00 to 3:45. Teachers delivered instruction in core classes in the morning and community artists delivered arts enrichment programming in the afternoons.

Evaluation staff observed classrooms across all grade levels at 7 Traditional Elementary program locations, 5 Thriving Minds Summer Camp locations, and the Summer Learning Lab during the third week of the programs, visiting 97 classrooms in all. Evaluators took notes in the following areas: grade level, subject, number of teachers and students, classroom setting, class lesson and instruction, and use of technology in lesson.

These observations revealed that the traditional sites averaged 9.2 students per class, Thriving Minds sites averaged 10.4 per class, and the learning lab at Kennedy averaged 12.4 students per class. Each learning lab class had one teacher paired with one Instructional Coach. Further, the instruction in learning lab classrooms was likely to have students working in pairs or groups of three or more and use technology such as laptops and projectors. Nearly one-fourth (24.5%) of observed classrooms at traditional sites were not observed in a lesson. In general, evaluators reported that these classes’ tasks were to complete a worksheet or read a book or text. In most of these classes, the students sat and did nothing. Teachers were not instructing and students were not producing. However, among the three programs’ observed classrooms, the depth of instruction increased from the previous year. The current year’s instruction demonstrated activities that illustrated subjects in ways that students could easily recognize, relate, become engrossed in, and expand upon.
Exactly 981 students attended at least one day of the Traditional Elementary Summer Learning Program; 3,702 students attended the Thriving Minds Summer Camp, and 371 students attended the Kennedy learning lab. Across all types of programs, 3,606 students were recommended to attend because they were at risk for retention. To be promoted, these students must have attended at least 90 percent of the instructional days. At Thriving Minds sites, 65 percent of the recommended students met this criterion (see Figure 1). The percentages were lower at the traditional sites (45%) and the learning lab (56%). The Thriving Minds Camp lasted four more days than the traditional summer school.

Figure 1: Percent of Recommended Students Meeting and not Meeting the 90% Attendance Criterion for Promotion

![Chart showing attendance percentages](chart.png)

**Middle School Summer Learning**

District middle school students could attend one of two types of credit-recovery programs during the summer: traditional or Summer Learning Lab. As with the elementary learning lab, the duration and curriculum did not differ between the traditional and learning lab programs for students. The teachers at Dade, Edison, and Medrano received additional coaching and professional development. These 3 sites, 6 conventional middle schools and LACEY, an alternative school, provided instruction from June 30 to July 30. Classes began at 9:00 and ended at 1:00. Students attended enrichment courses from 1:00 to 3:00 at Dade and Edison. Junior Players, a non-profit organization promoting artistic expression, provided courses in various subjects, including: the performing arts, dance, modeling, business, and art.

The Summer Learning Program was offered to qualifying students in grade 6 through 8. Exactly 2,905 students accounted for 5,786 enrollments in 12 courses. Eighth-grade students attended fewer days than seventh- and sixth-grade students, on average. Learning lab students attended at lower rates than students at traditional sites. The course passing rates were comparable among the two middle school programs; however, students in the sixth grade at learning labs passed their courses at higher rates than their traditional counterparts. Also, students at learning labs who did not meet the 90 percent attendance criterion to pass the course tended to have high proportions of passing rates. Nearly 47 percent of eighth-grade language arts students, for example, did not attend enough days to pass, but received passing scores. Every U.S. Studies 8 student at the learning labs passed the course, regardless of attendance.

Evaluator observations during the third week of the middle school summer programs indicated that the traditional sites averaged more students per class ($M = 14.4$) than the Dade and Edison learning labs ($M = 10.7$) and the Medrano learning lab ($M = 12.8$). In nearly 71 percent of the classrooms across all middle school programs, students were working alone. But, students were working in pairs or groups in over 60 percent of the Medrano learning lab classes. Dade and Edison, as well as the traditional classrooms, were more likely to have most to all students engaged in learning. At Medrano, where a teacher and Instructional Coach were paired in every classroom, only half of the students were engaged in 60 percent of the classrooms observed. Almost 74 percent of the middle school classrooms experienced classroom management problems, whether they were isolated to a few students or pervasive across the entire class. In traditional sites, the problems were significant enough to disrupt the lesson in 71 percent of the observations.

**High School Summer Learning**

The Dallas ISD’s High School Summer Learning Program primarily provided credit recovery at 9 high schools and 1 alternative campus from June 30 to July 30. Classes were held Monday through Thursday from 8:00 to 12:00. The program was intended to allow students in grades 9-12 an opportunity to recover credit for courses not successfully completed during the 2013-14 academic year. To obtain credit for a course, the student must have attended at least 90 percent of the instructional days and received a course grade of at least 70 percent.
A team of evaluators visited five high school campuses during the third week of the program. Observation protocols were the same as for elementary and middle school sites. Hillcrest High School had the highest average observed class size with 14.4 students per class. The average observed class size at Madison High School was 4.3. Madison had the smallest enrollment overall. Indeed, when the evaluator visited Madison, three classes only had one student. The overall average for the observed high schools was 8.7 students per class.

Over 63 percent of the summer middle school classrooms had students who were working alone. Notes from observers indicated that students working alone were usually quietly completing assigned problems from a workbook. While the students worked independently, they were engaged in the task. Exactly 86.8 percent of the high school classrooms had most or all students engaged. Indeed, observation notes described students as focused while completing the assigned work, but doing nothing once that work was completed. The evaluator observed several classes where the learning expectations were very low and tasks accomplished very easily. Once completed, the students and teacher sat in the rooms and chatted.

Precisely 3,329 high school students attended the Summer Learning Program at one of 9 sites and 1 alternative campus. At every grade level, 50 percent or less of the students met the 90 percent attendance criterion for passing a course. Students enrolled in over 5,368 courses. Low passing rates were found in both Pre-Calculus courses (66.7% and 76.7%, respectively). Every student enrolled in the English IV courses passed despite over 33 percent of the English IV 1 and 48 percent of English IV 2 students not meeting the attendance criterion.

**Recommendations**

Enrolling students recommended for retention was the responsibility of the students’ home school staffs. Despite the Department of Summer Learning’s clear and early communication to the home school principals, counselors, and data controllers that all students at risk for failure or retention be enrolled by May 23rd, this responsibility was ignored. Recommended students should be enrolled earlier. Waiting until the last few days of school is confusing for all involved: students, parents, home schools, summer sites, and district administrators. Moving forward, this rule must be enforced.

Nearly all of the middle students attended the summer session because they failed a course during the regular school year. The instruction delivered during the regular school year was not sufficient for these students. For these struggling students to learn and achieve at higher rates, the instruction during the summer must be of higher quality than during the regular school year. Despite improvements in the quality of instruction from previous years, the lessons offered little in the way of activities that students could engage with authentically. The Summer Learning Program is short in duration and every instructional day weighs heavily. The more involved instruction at the Summer Learning Labs sites than at traditional sites due to the influence of Academic Facilitators, Instructional Coaches, and professional development indicates that this type instruction and engagement can be achieved with some investment guiding teachers during the summer. The evaluator recommends the expansion of summer learning programs that include direct teacher coaching and professional development to more sites across the district. Taking the learning lab concept to high school sites would increase the rigor and quality of instruction at that level.

For more information, contact Program Evaluation at (972) 925-6457. Information about other Dallas ISD summer learning programs may be found in EA14-160-2 and EA14-160-4.2.