# Expanding Summer Learning and Enrichment Opportunities for Michigan's Students through Partnerships: Conversations with Districts and Community-Based Organizations

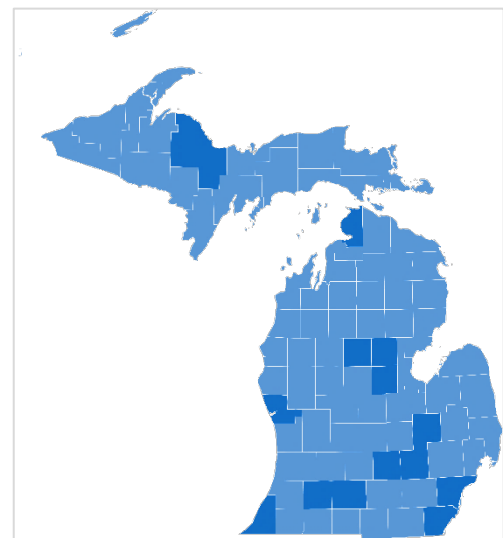A Region 8 Comprehensive Center Report

# Contents

# Introduction

The Region 8 Comprehensive Center (Region 8 CC) team joined Michigan's Statewide Summer Learning Network (SSLN) to provide support in furthering the goals of increased access, participation, and quality for summer learning and enrichment opportunities. The team's initial work for the SSLN was a series of listening sessions with representatives from school districts and community-based summer program providers across the state during winter 2022.

In response to the primary concerns of SSLN members, the listening sessions were designed to gather information about the **current state of partnerships**, the **barriers and challenges facing programs**, and **how statewide organizations could best support local programs**. In addition, we were interested in knowing more about the **configurations and benefits of summer programs**, **unique solutions for challenges** (especially those involving partnerships), and **perspectives about the feasibility of common data reporting** about summer experiences.

## Listening Session Participants

SSLN members identified a list of candidate programs to participate in listening sessions to ensure representation by location, community size, and type of program provider (e.g., school-community partnership, community recreation program, Boys & Girls Club, independent provider). After an introductory email from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), the Region 8 CC team made contact to set up virtual discussion sessions. While not all responded to the requests, we were eventually able to hold conversations with most of the recommended program providers. Listening sessions were held from late December to early March, which proved to be a challenging time for school districts that were coping with surges in COVID-19 pandemic outbreaks.

See Figure 1 at right for a map of locations represented in the listening sessions and Table 1 below for more detail on listening session participants by program type and role.

*Figure 1 Location of Listening Session Participants (in dark blue)*



*Table 1 Listening Session Locations by Participant Program/Program Type and Role*

| Location | Program/Program Type(s) | Participant Role(s) |
|---|---|---|
| **Battle Creek** | School district, 21st Century Community Learning Centers program | Director of secondary education, program lead |
| **Benton Harbor** | Boys & Girls Club | Program lead |
| **Berrien County** | 4-H | Michigan State University Extension lead |
| **Clare-Gladwin** | School districts, 21st Century program | Superintendent, assistant superintendent, director of general education, director of 21st Century program |
| **Detroit** | Downtown Boxing Gym Youth Program | Director and academic lead |

| Location | Program/Program Type(s) | Participant Role(s) |
|---|---|---|
| Genesee | School districts | Representatives from 5 districts including curriculum directors, grant coordinators, principals |
| Lansing | Parks and Recreation Department | Program staff |
| Marquette | School district | Program director |
| Midland | The Rock | Program director and staff overseeing afterschool program |
| Monroe | School district | Curriculum specialist (summer lead) |
| Parchment | School District | Special education director (summer lead) |
| Petoskey | YMCA of Northern Michigan | Program lead |
| Woodhaven-Brownstown | School district and community recreation partnership | Superintendent, principal, Title I director, community recreation director |

## Methodology

The Region 8 CC team drafted a discussion protocol to elicit responses to the topics described above, using slightly different versions of the protocol for school districts, community-based organizations, and joint partnership interviews. The draft protocol was reviewed at a meeting of the SSLN and member suggestions were subsequently incorporated.

Listening sessions were conducted by one or two members of the Region 8 CC team and were recorded and transcribed for summary and analysis. Each session was approximately one hour in length. We found all participants to be generous with their information and most expressed gratitude that there was statewide interest in gathering opinions about how to strengthen summer programming.

## Organization

The report is organized in sections, which correspond to the major topics of the inquiry, and are designed to be self-standing for discussion purposes:

- *The Special Role of Summer and Out-of-School Programming in Youth Development*—Captures the types of benefits that students may realize

- *Challenges, Barriers … and Some Partnership Solutions*—Describes what challenges programs are facing and how some districts and community-based programs have found solutions through partnerships

- *Keys to Partnerships*—Advice from experienced programs about what they have found to be essential for building and sustaining partnerships of all types

- *Roles for the State Education Agency*—A summary of the suggestions that program staff have for supports that the state education agency and other statewide networks could provide to improve access, participation, and quality

"Spotlights" that describe how a program exemplifies the points made in each section are included throughout. The report concludes with a summary and ideas for next steps.

# The Special Role of Summer and Out-of-School Programming in Youth Development

> *"I'm a lifelong member of the Girl Scouts and was a camp counselor so I had the chance to have many great experiences."*

In each of the interviews, we asked about the position of out-of-school and summer experiences in the trajectory of youth development. How is the experience different from what young people are likely to learn and experience in other environments? How is it different from "daytime" school? The responses offer a window into the heart of programs and what makes them tick. Program leaders and staff often reflected on their own experiences growing up and how a similar experience affected their future decisions to work with young people.

We felt the passion that program leaders have for summer programs when they talked about their place in youth development. In many ways, the phrase "positive place, positive people, positive experiences" sums up the responses to our question. But it is worthwhile to unpack this feedback further to understand the motivations that lead to the subtle differences among programs.

**The basics: a safe environment.** Some program leaders are most concerned that young people have a safe place to be while their parents are working—a place where students' basic needs, including food, will be addressed. The emphasis on a safe environment is especially important for students who are not thriving in school and who may have experienced trauma. Some emphasized the importance of exposure to a healthy lifestyle, including good nutrition and physical activity—an emphasis of some programs.

Others described safety in terms of a feeling of freedom, a place where students "can breathe and relax." One program leader, a mother of four children, described the out-of-school environment as a "safe place for kids to let down their hair, blow off steam, and have some fun."

**Expand horizons.** The notion of broadening experiences is a strong motivation for some program leaders. Young people get a chance to do "what they aren't able to do in the school year" by exploring their own interests. They can "focus on who they are as a person and what they want to be in the future." Students can develop their potential. In some cases, there are opportunities to introduce students to assets in their own communities (e.g., the public library, public gardening options, art studios, and learning how to bank). Providing field trips to museums, nature centers, and recreation areas as enrichment opportunities was noted as especially important for students living in rural and isolated locations.

> *"We're creating more touchpoints with the community."*

**Build life skills.** Summer and afterschool programs are opportunities to build skills that students will need to be successful, which may involve practical skills such as learning to swim or participating in driver's education. Several described social experiences and team building as "life-building experiences." One program leader described the intent of "building a sense of community so kids know they are part of something bigger than just their family unit."

> *"Students can find their identity and voice."*

**Developing relationships.** Forming positive relationships with adult role models can be a great benefit to young people. Connecting with caring adults has been especially important during the pandemic to help avoid isolation—and vital to young people who may have strained relationships at home. One program noted how younger students look up to the teen counselors who work during the summer. The positive intergenerational relationships build a sense of belonging.

Beyond developing relationships with adults, students in summer programs have the opportunity to develop friendships with a new mix of peers—students from different grade levels and different schools. One program leader highlighted the value of the more relaxed environment for students who have disabilities, providing a new environment in which to develop social skills.

**Learn in a different way.** Program leaders had much to say about how the differences in summer and out-of-school learning environments create a fresh learning experience for students. One school leader designing a summer program described her feeling of having "permission to be different from the school experience" with a goal of "reminding people of the joy than can be found in learning together." Another school leader emphasized "it has to be an environment that students want to be in."

For most providers, the goal of learning in out-of-school programs is to support learning activities that are occurring in the classroom. One program leader thinks of her program as providing the additional time that students need to meet increasingly high learning standards—but in a way that "doesn't feel like school." For those students for whom the regular school system is not supportive (students who are "pushed out"), afterschool and summer programs are an alternative way to offer instruction. Programs believe that staff who are not "driven by grades and test scores" can be more creative in the planning and delivery of lessons. In some cases, individualized support and the smaller group settings in a relaxed, less structured environment is what students need to get the academic learning they need.
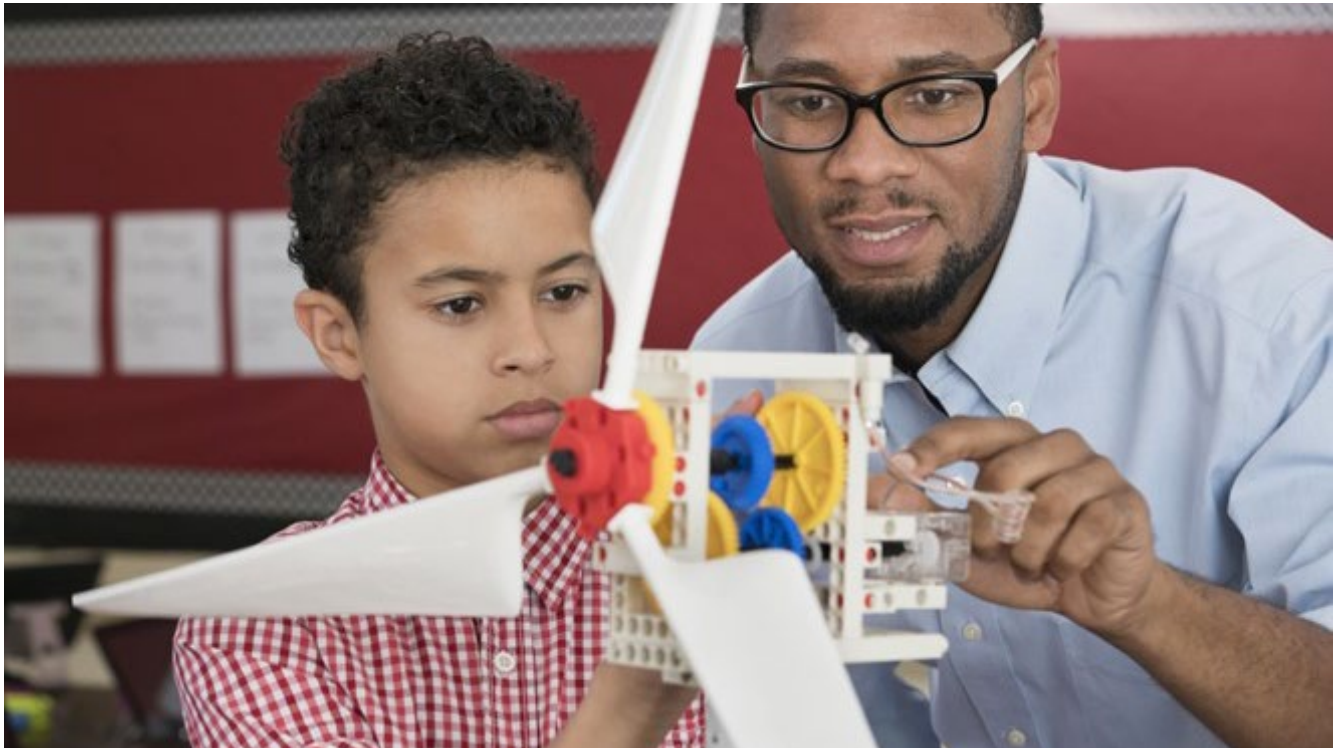
Several program leaders mentioned the success of summer and out-of-school programs in integrating social emotional learning with academics. Paying greater attention to the well-being of students (and staff) has come to the fore during the disruptions caused by the pandemic. To reinforce in-school learning, community-based out-of-school programs sometime have success in acting as a bridge between home and school, connecting families to teachers.

## Downtown Boxing Gym Youth Program – Detroit

The Downtown Boxing Gym (DBG) Youth Program is a free afterschool and summer academic and athletic program that provides Detroit students (ages 8–18) with the tools they need to succeed. DBG provides tutoring, mentorship, enrichment programs, college and career prep, social-emotional skills building, and basic needs support (transportation and meals), continuing to support students after graduation through college or career placement. At any one time, the program serves about 150 students from 57 schools across Detroit and its nearby suburbs. Students are selected randomly, roughly evenly distributed across grade levels; there is currently a waiting list of 1,300 students. Students commit to attending at least three times per week.

The program is designed for students who may feel "pushed out" of school and are not receiving the types of support they need from their schools. One program leader said, "We reach the students in a way that schools are sometimes not able to."

DBG strives for a close relationship to the student's families, schools, and teachers, employing teacher liaisons for that purpose and academic coaches to provide the academic support students need. Some parents volunteer in the program.

While "boxing" is in the title of the program, participation is not a requirement although program leaders find it builds personal discipline. DBG works to meet students' interests with a variety of options, including a music studio; science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) lab; and cooking classes.

DBG describes what it offers students as:

- "Endless possibilities.
- Caring, compassionate support from staff members, coaches, and community volunteers.
- Real talk.
- A safe place to learn, grow, and try new things.
- A family atmosphere.
- The chance to explore college and career possibilities and develop discipline, focus, and life direction.
- SAT/ACT prep.
- The opportunity to apply for internships and college scholarships.
- Exposure to corporate and community leaders, professional athletes, musicians, and others.
- Plus: Tutoring, mentorship, academic support, nutritious meals, athletics, enrichment programs (like computer coding, art and music), community service opportunities, and so much more."

# Challenges, Barriers … and Some Partnership Solutions

We wanted to learn about the challenges and barriers that summer program planners and implementers encountered—both the common and persistent ones and those caused or aggravated by the disruption of the pandemic. We were interested in the ways that districts and community partners had overcome those barriers, seeking lessons to share with others, and especially those cases in which partnerships were clearly instrumental in overcoming barriers. The potential exists for partnerships of different types—ranging from full collaborations to vendor relationships—to address common barriers. This section addresses six types of barriers:

- ◄ Recruiting and preparing adequate numbers of staff
- ◄ Securing appropriate facilities
- ◄ Transporting students
- ◄ Finding adequate and timely funding
- ◄ Maintaining student engagement
- ◄ Juggling schedules

**Recruiting and preparing adequate numbers of staff.** Schools and community providers found it especially difficult to staff programs in the summer of 2021 for several pandemic-related reasons. First, the unprecedented need (and the new resources available for expanded summer programming) created demand for staff beyond previous years. Second, teachers (and others) who might have formerly looked forward to the additional earnings from summer employment were exhausted from the 2020–2021 school year and needed a break from teaching. In some cases, they had received higher pay or bonuses during the year and had less need for additional work and/or they did not want to be away from their families during the summer.

Programs employed a number of recruitment tactics: higher pay, referral bonuses earned by existing staff, free tuition/camp for staff who are parents, modified schedules to accommodate the desire for flexible time (e.g., half-day sessions; 2- or 4-week cycles; no programming during the July 4th week), and the opportunity for teachers to instruct a different student level than they do during the school year. The increases in pay offered by some districts were perceived as problematic by others, either because the option was only possible for those receiving special grants and staff were drawn away by the higher amounts, or because the short-term increases would be unsustainable in the future, creating a longer-term problem.

A related challenge for school districts is finding (and funding) the right staff member to provide planning, coordination, and leadership for summer programs. The districts we interviewed typically added the tasks to a current district role, creating a stressful situation even for those staff members well suited to the challenge and limiting time available for planning and connecting with potential partners.

- ◄ *Partnership solutions.* One program director is developing a partnership for the current year to secure interns from a program that prepares college students to work with students as coaches and in other capacities. She is also tapping into the student teaching interns who do their practicum field work in the district in the fall, seeking to employ them under the

supervision of an experienced teacher during the summer prior to student teaching. We heard of one school district that offered additional dollars to its own staff to work in summer YMCA programs, augmenting what the YMCA was able to pay workers—enabling more students to participate in summer programs with qualified teachers.

**Securing appropriate facilities.** Locating appropriate facilities is a challenge for many community-based providers who do not have their own facilities or who wish to expand to accommodate more students. While schools often have the space, applicable regulations can pose a barrier (see details of regulatory barriers in [Roles for the State Education Agency](#)). School districts often use the short summer months for building repair, construction, and deep cleaning, which can limit usage for summer programs. Many schools are not air conditioned; at least one school district used U.S. Department of Education American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to air condition its facilities for summer programming while another district believed it was not allowed to spend ESSER/American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP) funds on air conditioning.

> *"Any time it's not your own space, it is challenging."*

◄ *Partnership solutions.* Community providers have found ways to overcome facility limitations by locating programs in schools. In some cases, the community provider pays a minimal rental fee. In other cases, an exchange for services covers the facility cost. The Rock receives space for out-of-school programming during the school year under the condition that it provides the *Discover You* social emotional learning curriculum to all students during the school day. In a different twist on use of space, the Lansing recreation center served as a "learning lab" for students when schools were closed due to COVID-19.

**Transporting students.** Many community-based providers find the costs of transportation a greater challenge than finding adequate facilities. In addition to the cost (and the shortage of bus drivers in the 2020–2021 school year and summer), the other major transportation-related concerns are the distance that students must travel in rural areas. When students spend an hour or more in transport, providers feel the need to operate longer programs (5 hours+) to balance the time spent in transit. If programs do not have resources for transporting students on field trips, the enrichment aspects of summer (e.g., trips to museums, nature centers, the beach, a ballgame) are limited—this is especially true in rural areas where students may be most deprived of enrichment opportunities.

> *"We are in a resource-scarce area and have not been able to develop partnerships."*

While ESSER funds were used to augment transportation, districts are conscious that they will not be able to continue supporting transportation in the future. In a part of the state with many schools of choice, we also heard about the challenge of students living at a distance from the schools they attend, making attending summer programs difficult.

◄ *Partnership solutions.* School districts and community providers have worked out different solutions to mitigate transportation challenges. The Lansing School District provides transportation to summer and out-of-school programs (except for high school) under the district's policy of underwriting transportation to all childcare settings. In one case where the YMCA is conducting programming in school facilities, school buses transport students to the facility and parents are responsible for transportation home at the end of the day. In another case, the YMCA provides bus transportation from their programs to school sites in students' neighborhoods.

**Finding adequate and timely funding.** As noted at several points above, funding issues loom large even now, when more resources are available for funding from federal and state governments. Districts are aware that Michigan did not distribute ESSER funds in the way that other states did and though some state funds were available, school districts did not know until close to the beginning of last summer whether or not they would have funding, causing a last-minute scramble to plan programs. Planning is difficult anyway for summer programs because there is always uncertainty about the number of students who will register—this is aggravated by not knowing whether they will receive funding. Further, in some cases, long-standing partners increased the fees for their services in 2020–2021.

Some community providers eliminated fees for summer programming in 2021 to attract families who otherwise would not be able to send their children, increasing the necessity of looking for alternative funding sources or partnering with others. Programs that are free or low cost believe they are perceived by some as less valuable than their competition. Real and perceived competition came up as a barrier in most conversations.

While programs may have access to additional funding in the short-term through ESSER/ARP, many are reluctant to invest in programs they feel they will not continue. Several that had used U.S. Department of Education Title I funds for small-scale summer programming remarked that Title I funds alone could not support programs at a larger scale in the future. One district noted they would like to be able to "blend and braid funds without supplanting" to support expanded summer programming but are nervous about how to do so, which limits their willingness to reach out to partners to enlarge programs.

**Maintaining student engagement.** Finding the right balance between academic programming and enrichment is tricky. We heard from several district leaders that they were wary of moving away from the "remedial-intervention" philosophy of summer school. They feel the pressure from federal and state government agencies to accelerate learning and address lost learning time. One individual said that the emphasis on social emotional learning is relatively new and untested.

> *"We want to show that we're doing something academically. No Child Left Behind is ingrained in our minds."*
>
> *— District leader*

In contrast, some districts welcomed the opportunity to put more emphasis on project-based learning and recreation and enrichment activities. One district that was experienced in providing academic summer programming recognized in the summer of 2021 that the intervention curriculum they had relied on in past summers was not really designed for summer; moreover, students found it boring. Another that had previously maintained a fixed schedule for credit recovery options provided more flexibility to students to leave when course work was complete. Several noted "COVID burnout" as a reason to reduce programming that depends on electronics (as many intervention programs do); after their pandemic experiences, students are tired of Zoom video conference learning.

◄ *Partnership solutions.* Community providers have much experience in maintaining high levels of student interest. Providing recreation and enrichment to complement academic programming is the basis for several of the summer partnerships, which is manifested in varied configurations:

- half-day academics provided by the school complemented by half-day recreation/enrichment provided by a community partner;

- a school-based program that engages partners (e.g., museum, YMCA camp, nature center) to provide portions of programming; and

- a community-based program that incorporates academic tutoring by maintaining close ties with students' teachers.

The latter program developed a stronger partnership with schools during the pandemic as they worked jointly to keep students engaged in learning and "attending" remote learning classes.

**Juggling schedules.** Leaders of programs face several types of scheduling challenges. Working parents find part-day programs (common in school-run academic summer programs) difficult to take advantage of because they need children to be in care for the full day—especially problematic when no transportation is offered between program options (e.g., a school and community provider). But we also heard in one case that parents want their children to have a break from school and find some program expectations (e.g., 8-week programs) too demanding. Other types of schedule conflicts arise when a centralized provider serves students from several districts with varying transportation schedules. Irregular student participation can create other problems; a district may need a critical mass of students to continue transportation and meal services.

> *"We want to partner with the school district but they don't get it. They could do academics and we could do enrichment—but they don't see it."*

◄ *Partnership solutions.* Several of the programming arrangements noted above can be helpful to parents—in other words, schools and community providers joining forces to offer a full day of activities. We heard about situations where the school underwrites meals and snacks for students in these cases. Even for programs operated by community providers, the school district may offer a contract vehicle for access to student food. Some community providers even offer parents the option of drop off and pick up beyond a regular transportation schedule. In the Lansing Parks and Recreation program, for example, parents can drop students off as early as 7:45 a.m. and pick them up at 6 p.m. In that case, the school district provides breakfast, lunch, and a snack for all students.

> *"The district perceives that the school population is not at high risk and therefore doesn't need summer programming."*

School districts can be helpful in promoting a full range of community summer options in a timely fashion so that parents, especially parents of the students who can most benefit, will have all the information needed to make summer plans.

**Other types of barriers.** Summer programmers experience some challenges that are not readily solved through partnerships. Many of those are grounded in state agency regulations and policies and are addressed in the section on [Roles for the State Education Agency](#). In some cases, local parent agencies may have additional requirements that are challenging to meet, such as an internal screening process that requires state and national background checks for all volunteers every 6 months.

## Lansing Parks and Recreation and the Lansing School District

Lansing Parks and Recreation offers afterschool programs for students in Kindergarten–Grade 6 during the school year and summer camp for children ages 5–13 in four sites. The Lansing School District provides transportation to sites and snack for afterschool and breakfast, lunch, and a snack for summer camp. The program partners with the library, an art studio, the zoo, a community garden, and others to offer a range of experiences. A goal is to help children understand they are part of a larger community.

The partnership with the school district has been in place for 15 years although the transportation service is newer and based on the camp identifying itself as a child care program. The Lansing School District provides childcare drop-off transportation as a matter of policy and therefore includes afterschool sites as well. While organizing transportation was a challenge at the beginning, in the words of the director, "We know the people, and we give each other grace."

Working parents are a focus so the summer program provides pre-care (children can be dropped off as early as 7:45 a.m.) and after-care (picked up as late as 6 p.m.) outside the regular 9 – 3 p.m. program. The school district works with Lansing Parks and Recreation to promote the program, placing information on the school district's website and inviting presentations at schools. Program fees are kept low ($50/semester for afterschool programs and $40/week for camp) and a scholarship program is available for any who cannot afford the fee.

# Keys to Partnerships

Experiences with partnerships varied widely across those we interviewed but most were able to offer some advice about the factors that are key ingredients in effective partnerships. While the factors are present to some degree in all types of work across organizations, they are especially important in sustained arrangements, i.e., those intended to be true partnerships with shared planning and decisionmaking. We highlight five major factors that are inter-related:

◄ Values alignment
◄ Clear and ongoing communication
◄ Flexibility
◄ Trust
◄ Responsiveness to youth

**Values alignment.** Shared values are a strong basis for partnership and are especially important when the partners are working together to achieve goals that involve young people. Several interviewees stressed the importance of mutual communication and understanding of the goals, vision, and expectations of partners. Partners who share values are likely to have mutual respect, which facilitates navigating the inevitable rough spots. One interviewee said that sharing values allows partners to "commit to asking hard questions" and recognize that they do not need to be experts on everything. Partners who share values can problem solve together.

A related point is that partnerships rest both on organizational *as well as* individual relationships. We heard several examples of partnerships that dissolved when key staff members left the organization. Relationship building among individuals who work together is important but organizational connections are equally valuable. The informality of relationships can lead to vulnerability.

**Clear and ongoing communication.** Whether for long-term partnerships or short-term client-vendor relationships, everyone agreed that frequent and regular communication is critical for success. Parallel to values alignment, explicitly sharing policies and protocols of each organization at the outset of an organizational relationship is a good practice. However, one of our interviewees warned not to "bureaucratize" expectations with "too many layers."

> *"We just don't buy into competition."*

Solid communication practices will help to overcome a sense of competitiveness that may creep into organizational relationships. More than one community-based organization described instances where school district educators perceived them as threats. In those cases, the organizations worked to build strong relationships with teachers, sometimes through liaison staff or academic coaches who themselves are certified and experienced teachers. External organizations can provide the most effective academic support to students when classroom teachers see the value of extended learning as a complement to their own efforts. As one provider noted, "There's too much expected of students to think they can learn it all during the school day."

Competition for students also occurs among community-based providers. One provider's solution is to be clear about the services that each organization offers and then not "feed the mental model that we're competing." This intent might be fulfilled, for example, by talking together to potential funders or explicitly planning how to leverage the resources each organization has to support the other, for example, one organization offering use of its vehicles to provide transportation.

**Flexibility.** The attitudes of leaders toward problem solving can reinforce both organizational and individual relationships. As noted in Challenges, Barriers … and Some Partnership Solutions, there are many examples of rule/procedure conflicts that can derail what may seem like natural opportunities for collaboration, especially in reference to facilities and transportation. The good will of leaders goes a long way in working through those and other potential barriers. As will become obvious in the profile at the end of this section, flexibility is key. From a school superintendent: "We didn't want to say 'no' to anything, and they didn't either. Working with someone who is so open and willing to tweak what they usually do or have done in the past was a big help."

**Trust.** We heard from several long-term providers that it is a "proven history of programming that builds trust." Parties to a partnership must follow through on commitments and agreements to build a track record of trust. One community provider noted the history of trusting relationships in explaining how they and the school district overcame a rough patch with transportation schedules.

> *"We know the people, and we give each other grace."*

As noted above, relationship building at all levels is important; partnerships for extended learning activities expand the need and opportunity for relationships to include students, their families, classroom teacher(s), and staff from partners/providers.

**Responsiveness to youth.** From a few providers, we heard about the importance of ensuring that partners are understanding of and responsive to youth. This factor is especially important in selecting and preparing short-term providers who may not be focused primarily on youth (e.g., groups that provide specialty training such as driver's education) or facilities and community assets that students visit (e.g., art or science museum). Providers have learned from experience that well-intentioned staff from organizations that have not had experience with the age group may be unprepared to deal with students' behaviors or needs for support.

One school provider noted the importance of ascertaining the provider's ability to engage young people in a culturally responsive manner, adapting curriculum and activities to the "climate and culture of kids." This school district provider makes a presentation to potential partners to ensure that their plans are "reflective of our goals," ensuring they know "what our student body looks like" and "what we hope they get out of experiences." The presentation is offered to potential partners before they are asked for proposals and prior to completion of memoranda of understanding.

## Woodhaven-Brownstown School District & City of Woodhaven Recreation Department

During the summer of 2020–2021, this partnership expanded a small Title I summer school program and a traditional recreation program that had served about 100 students in the past to serve over 600 students from 5 elementary schools. Partnering to provide academics and social emotional support along with recreation and fun in students' local school sites, the school superintendent and recreation director agreed that they achieved the "right balance" of fun and academics. Using ESSER/ARP funds to initiate the program, the superintendent is committed to "create[ing] a program that we couldn't live without once funds are gone. We want to make this our new 'sacred cow.'"

With 2 months to prepare, recreation staff worked with school principals in an "all-hands-on-deck" approach. Two 4-week sessions were offered. Teachers were onsite along with social workers 3 days per week, 3 hours per day. Park playground activities were led by 65 counselors 5 days a week, 7 hours per day. The playground activities emphasize collaborative games that are life-building experiences. The school district used ESSER funds to cover costs of participation, providing transportation along with breakfast and lunch.

The district used the summer opportunity to pilot new instructional resources to give teachers experience before full roll-out in the fall. Because teachers did not necessarily teach at the same levels in the summer, they were able to learn curriculum at other levels. The superintendent observed that the district focused much more on social emotional well-being of students and staff. As one principal said, "We've had Title I summer programs before, but it was a different feel with summer parks and rec along with learning. It was better for the kids."

The barriers and challenges were minimal, including finding different ways to accomplish the summer maintenance that normally occurs in all school facilities. The security in place in schools made free access to facilities more challenging than in typical park playground programs. Everyone agreed those were small obstacles and the superintendent noted, "Moving forward we want it to get bigger and better. Kids have to tell parents that they want to be there. We'll remove the barriers. It has to be an environment that students want to be in. Summer should be fun."

Finding staff required a little more persuasion but those who participated gave positive feedback to the relaxed social and personal atmosphere. In addition to the usual recruitment activities, the recreation department put out a special call to former summer counselors to staff the expanded program.

The recreation department had a long history of working cooperatively with the school district in terms of rent-free facility use so relationships were already established. The program director grew up in the community and attended the park playground activities three decades ago.

The recreation director was especially concerned that students treat the host facility with respect, wanting to preserve the strong relationship while knowing that summer use might cause wear and tear on classrooms. The school district had faith that their facilities would be treated with respect. "It was a handshake deal. Having the history of strong relationships enabled a strong partnership."

# Roles for the State Education Agency

State education agencies have typically not had a substantial role in guiding, funding, or promoting summer and out-of-school programming with the exception of administering the 21st Century program. The passage of ARP raised the profile of summer and out-of-school learning by creating targeted set-asides within state allocations (a total of $2.4 billion) in addition to the *minimum* expenditures required for learning recovery at state and local levels (a total of $28.1 billion), which may include summer and out-of-school remedies. A recent national analysis of ARP/ESSER spending plans shows that summer programming was the most frequent learning recovery strategy identified by local education agencies.[1]

The unprecedented funding (and attention by the U.S. Department of Education) for summer programming raises new opportunities for state education agencies to play leadership and support roles. In our listening sessions with Michigan's school districts and community providers, we gathered ideas about ways the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) could be most helpful in increasing access and participation to summer programs and improving their quality. While the listening sessions were confined to Michigan, most suggestions likely apply in other states as well.

Seven categories of state education agency functions emerged from the listening sessions:

- ◄ Leadership and communication
- ◄ Promoting partnerships
- ◄ Enhancing program quality
- ◄ Professional development
- ◄ Regulatory review
- ◄ Data collection and reporting
- ◄ Financial sustainability

Each function is described below in more detail.

**Leadership and communication.** Everyone we interviewed believes it is important for MDE's leaders to communicate consistent messages about the importance and components of comprehensive afterschool/summer programs and why it can be beneficial for all students (see the Special Role of Summer and Out-of-School Programming in Youth Development section for the range of benefits).[2] It seems all too common that parents and even some educators hold limited or outdated perspectives about summer programs, believing that the focus should largely be remedial work or that summer programs are only for students with the greatest academic needs. Participants in one listening session offered the idea of statewide use of a common brand/logo for summer programming,

> *"Michigan, unlike some other states, has not prioritized summer learning."*

---

[1] FutureEd. (2022, June 7). *How local educators plan to spend billions in federal Covid aid.* https://www.future-ed.org/local-covid-relief-spending/

[2] Some interviewees were particularly concerned that the Michigan Legislature had not released federal funds that would allow local communities to plan for summer programming.

signaling that a program or activity is part of a larger initiative.[3]

Listening session participants believe that leadership messages from MDE would encourage reluctant parents to take advantage of available summer programs, especially parents who may never have had summer enrichment opportunities themselves and may not understand the value. Educators urged MDE to advocate explicitly for equal access

> *"The education system doesn't understand the importance of the out-of-school program."*

to summer programs and clarify that enrichment and fun should always be part of summer programs along with academics. Some educators fear that promoting summer programming largely for the purpose of "accelerated learning" may eclipse the other benefits (e.g., community exploration, recreation, peer engagement) that out-of-school programming uniquely offers. They believe that messages should speak to multiple outcomes and not emphasize only academics.

In advocating for summer programming for all students, agency leaders would need to ensure that different departments (e.g., Title I, 21st Century, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) are providing consistent messages, especially around appropriate uses of funding. Existing inconsistencies in departmental messages has resulted in reluctance to use grant funds for summer programming or, at the very least, created delays in program planning.

While our interviewees believe many different types of summer programs can be valuable for young people, they also were clear that a communication role MDE should undertake includes helping students, parents, and educators distinguish among programs and their benefits, within the umbrella of an inclusive message about the many possible values fulfilled by summer programs. For that purpose, they

> *"Right now, all programs are lumped together. We need some ways to distinguish qualities that different programs have."*

suggested establishing a taxonomy or system of classifying and describing summer program activities and services; such a tool would provide students and parents with accurate information about the goals, features, programmatic emphases, and intended benefits of different programs. Examples of potential taxonomy categories: tutoring in reading; academic review; science, technology, engineering, math (STEM) enrichment; arts exploration; credit recovery; sports/wellness; and so forth.

Additional MDE action steps to communicate the value of summer programming could include identifying state-provided incentives to encourage well-qualified staff to participate and spotlighting successful programs representing different models. Suggestions for creating staff incentives include providing retirement credit to certified teachers for the time spent teaching in the summer, augmenting hourly rates with a bonus, and supporting recertification credits and/or college credits for relevant professional development.

**Promoting partnerships.** Closely related to MDE's potential leadership role in communicating the importance of summer programs is promotion of partnerships to accomplish program goals. While this function was most often brought up in the context of encouraging partnerships between school districts and local community providers, the same concept also applies to creating statewide partnerships with provider networks (e.g., Boys & Girls Clubs, community parks and recreation), engaging institutions of higher education, and fostering relationships among community providers as well as with local businesses.

---

[3] The inspiration for this idea is the statewide Child Nutrition Program.

Several people we interviewed were interested in MDE taking a role in providing information to provider networks and institutions of higher education about why and how to partner with school districts to offer summer programming. MDE could show both the general and specific benefits of partnerships in the short- and long-term and publicize creative and unusual partnerships. We learned, for example, how one small district created a virtual partnership with the Van Andel Institute so that students could participate remotely in virtual science experiments guided by scientists to use materials and tools provided by the institute. Interviewees would like access to a statewide inventory of possible partners, including those community providers seeking school district partners.

State-provided publicity about the details of partnerships may encourage others to replicate similar arrangements. For example, while we heard from many about the barriers posed by lack of transportation, we also heard a solution devised by Lansing Parks and Recreation, which reframed its afterschool programming as child care. The redefinition made the summer program eligible for school district transportation.

> *"When I was explaining what we are trying to do, it was hard from some potential partners to comprehend."*

Encouraging and facilitating partnerships with higher education institutions could provide partial solutions to the staffing crunch that summer programs are experiencing. A school district interviewee is planning to invite next year's student teachers to participate in the upcoming summer program as paid staff assistants (see more in the Regulatory Review section below). Prospective student teachers get the benefit of becoming familiar with district staff and students before the fall term begins.

Finally, several individuals representing networks of providers mentioned the value of simply "being at the table" with MDE staff when decisions about planning summer programs are discussed to ensure the collaborative spirt of partnership prevails. Some offered caution about the tendency of the state agency to take a "top-down" or "heavy-handed" approach, which they felt could be tempered by participation from community partner representatives.

**Enhancing program quality.** For the most part, those we spoke with believe that MDE's best route to improving the overall quality of summer programs is to share information, best practices, varied models, and tools. Examples range from job descriptions for summer program coordinators to curricula that incorporate enrichment with academic work to templates for memoranda of agreement.

> *"No one should need to think they have to start from scratch."*

While some advocate for more stringent requirements related to quality, other voices were concerned about "overregulating" summer programs, arguing that quality expectations vary by program goals. However, MDE might consider the middle ground of both, highlighting a range of models (through case studies, convenings, awards) with explicit attention to the factors associated with quality and providing self-assessment tools. We know many community providers and 21st Century programs are familiar with Youth Quality Program Intervention assessment tools[4] although school districts new to summer programming may not yet be trained in the use of the assessments. MDE has an interest in offering such training. Similarly, through its partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers/National Summer Learning Association (NSLA), MDE has the opportunity to introduce summer programs to NSLA's community indicators framework for

---

[4] For materials related to Youth Quality Program Intervention: https://forumfyi.org/weikartcenter/ypqi/

building and strengthening summer programs.[5]

**Professional development.** Related to program quality, but of greater interest to those we interviewed, was a role for MDE in offering professional development for staff in summer programs. Community providers noted the scarcity of targeted professional development, especially in topic areas such as cultural competence, addressing effects of trauma, social emotional learning, and age-appropriate learning strategies and activities. As noted above, providing opportunities for earning credits (as well as working toward credentials such as the Michigan Youth Development Associate) at low or no cost would be especially appealing.

**Regulatory review.** In every discussion, we heard about the challenges that programs offering summer programs had faced in meeting various facility and personnel licensing requirements that cost them time and money and often act as barriers to partnerships and staff recruitment. Given how pervasive the concerns are, MDE should consider conducting a review of concerns and determine where policy changes might be warranted. In presenting the examples below, we recognize that in some cases local program staff (or state personnel) may have misunderstood or misinterpreted rules. We also recognize that individual circumstances pose unique challenges and that there are good reasons why rules have been promulgated. With those caveats, here are the concerns we heard:

‹ When using school facilities for summer/afterschool programs (including 21st Century programs), the application of childcare regulations results in double fingerprinting and the need to license classrooms. Is it possible to create a specific license for afterschool programming so that all the requirements of childcare licensing need not apply?

‹ Double fingerprinting of staff occurs because a school district requires one type of fingerprint check (Michigan) and childcare another (federal). A rural summer camp provider explained that staff can be fingerprinted at the county courthouse, but for childcare licensing the identity service is an hour trip away and open only 2 days per month.

‹ Parents cannot use childcare subsidies for summer programs defined as day camps. Is it possible to allow subsidy to be applied to licensed day camps as well as daycare programs?

‹ One solution programs have found to augment staffing is to hire high school students as assistants in summer programs.[6] However, those students do not count toward the permitted adult-student ratio in day camps (where the ratio is 1:10). Allowing students who are ages 16–18 and enrolled in career and technical education programs to count toward the adult-student ratio could allow day camps to accommodate more students (for example, use the 1:18 ratio that applies to afterschool programs).

‹ Several regulations that have been especially difficult for principals to understand and which are barriers to expanded programming: a) before-school programs require more stringent licensing than afterschool programs; b) classrooms in use during the day for students cannot be used after school for the same students without additional inspections; c) a school playground in use during the day must be closed to afterschool students at 3 p.m. because the coverage of woodchips is inadequate for daycare licensing. The extra

---

[5] National Summer Learning Association. (2016). *Community indicators of effective summer learning systems self-assessment*. https://www.summerlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/NSLA-Community-Indicators-Quick-Reference-Guide_June-2016-1.pdf
[6] Some students might be enrolled in career and technical education programs, working on the practicum portion toward earning a Child Development Associate or Michigan Youth Development Associate credential.

paperwork and cost associated with such examples discourages some schools from offering their facilities to potential partners.

These examples might be more easily resolved if MDE had more staff dedicated to working with districts and community providers on summer and afterschool programs. We heard from some providers that they had difficulty getting answers to their questions; they recognize that the infrastructure at MDE is currently inadequate to address the increasing demand to expand summer programs.

**Data collection and reporting.** Everyone we spoke with supported some type of consistent yet modest data collection that would yield a statewide picture of access and participation in summer offerings. MDE's role would entail providing clear expectations for reporting, offering training and technical assistance, and perhaps modest financial support to aid small community-based providers. In the spirit of providing tools to improve the quality of programs, there is strong interest in receiving information about assessment tools appropriate for summer programs.

**Financial sustainability.** As would be expected, everyone turns to MDE as a source of funding for summer programs, underlining the critical importance of funding predictability and timeliness to facilitate planning for summer. Some are held back by the uncertainty of future funding even when short-term support is available. With an eye toward sustainability, everyone is interested in definitive information about blending and braiding funding to continue summer programs,[7] noting that concerns about supplanting persist even with new funding flexibilities.

> *"Encourage braiding and blending of funding AND help people do it."*

Several spoke to fairness in competition for funding, urging MDE to consider these factors when distributing funds: equitable geographic distribution, recognition of extra costs associated with transportation in rural areas, and care in setting eligibility criteria to encourage partnerships. Interviewees also hope that MDE will work with other funders of afterschool/summer programming to encourage similar equitability considerations.

A few had specific suggestions for MDE to facilitate local planning: align grant funding and reporting periods to better meet the needs of summer programs; and permit carryover of grant funds given the challenge of accurately predicting summer enrollments, and therefore estimating budgets.

# Summary and Recommendations

The series of listening sessions provided a window into the many approaches that Michigan's community-based organizations, provider networks, and school districts have employed to serve children and youth during the summer. The benefits of their collective work are described variously as supporting safety and health, building life skills, supporting academic learning, expanding horizons, and developing positive peer and mentor relationships. Summer program providers face many challenges—most frequently citing recruiting qualified staff, providing transportation, and locating facilities—and have been able to address some of the challenges through partnerships. In fact, partnerships of all types characterize summer programs.

---

[7] Michigan After-School Partnership. (2022). *Summer learning toolkit*. https://www.miafterschool.org/summer-learning

While we were most interested in partnerships between school districts and community-based providers, we found many variations on the partnership theme. Those include short-term, single purpose examples (e.g., a visit to a museum), community-based organizations working together (e.g., a week at camp offered by another program), and vendor relationships. All successful partnerships—whether episodic or long-term—have certain characteristics in common: alignment of values, clear and ongoing communication, flexible attitudes, mutual trust, and a shared interest in responding to the needs of young people.

Throughout our discussions, we heard many good suggestions for ways to elevate the importance of summer learning as well as ideas for expanding, supporting, and improving the quality of existing programs. The following recommendations rise to the top as most immediate:

1. **Communicate leadership messages**

   The field of summer learning could benefit from communications to the broader public, parents, and educators by Michigan's education and community leaders to expand ideas about the potential of summer (and afterschool) programs to benefit children and youth. Important messages include:

   ◄ summer/afterschool programming can benefit all children;

   ◄ summer/afterschool programs are complementary to school day programs in providing learning opportunities; and

   ◄ summer/afterschool programs offer unique opportunities that go beyond what schools can typically provide, including settings in which children and youth can develop strong relationships with peers and mentors.

2. **Support school districts to be strong partners**

   School districts could benefit from peer exchanges, guided by MDE, to learn more strategies about how best to partner with community-based organizations to provide comprehensive out-of-school programs. We suggest beginning with 8–10 school districts to form the nucleus of a group interested in summer programming. During a gathering of school district leaders connected to/interested in summer programs, the focus could be on varied models of partnerships (e.g., Woodhaven-Brownstone, Lansing). In such forums, school districts can receive answers to the particular questions associated with blending/braiding funding and recruiting and incentivizing school staff to participate as well as receive encouragement to reach out to community partners.

3. **Pilot data reporting about school district summer programming**

   An important activity of a group of peer districts would be learning more about the feasibility of collecting and reporting data about school district summer programming including their activities, partnerships, enrollments and participation, staffing, and outcomes. The intent would be to complement the information being collected from community-based providers by the Michigan After-School Partnership and eventually provide a fuller picture of summer programming throughout the state to understand more about access, participation, and quality.

4. **Publicize partnership solutions**

   This report includes ideas for how partnerships can help to address common challenges faced

by providers. The examples can be shared more widely through messages from MDE to school districts, newsletter/email blasts/blogs from statewide organizations to their network members, and meeting/conference presentations. The goal would be to create buzz around partnerships, reach those who have not thought about the potential of working together, and elicit more good examples.

5. **Engage teacher preparation institutions**

We heard about some promising attempts to engage incoming student teachers in summer programs to augment staff, which seems like an idea that could be developed to mutual advantage—perhaps permitting some teacher certification candidates to conduct supervised practicum activities on a schedule that enables them to complete their studies in reduced time. Is there a forum in which MDE can explore options with teacher preparation institutions?

6. **Review regulatory/licensing requirements**

In the prior section, we listed examples of barriers caused by competing regulations/licensing requirements from different agencies. Addressing even a few of these barriers that are preventing expansion of programs and use of facilities—or creating extra cost burdens—could demonstrate state government's commitment to out-of-school programming.

7. **Recognize staff**

The success of programs—and their benefits for young people—rest on the staff who interact with students. The positive working conditions that are essential for staff retention include recognition and reward (ideally monetary, but there are other creative options). Possibilities include personal acknowledgement from leaders (e.g., certificate from MDE), credits for service (for those in the state retirement system), financial bonuses, negotiated benefits or discounts at businesses, and/or eligibility for donated rewards.