



**2023 Connecticut State
Department of Education Summer
Enrichment Program Evaluation
Executive Summary**

JULY 2025

**Center for Connecticut
Education Research Collaboration**

Partner Institutions





2023 Connecticut State Department of Education Summer Enrichment Program Evaluation Executive Summary

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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.



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