

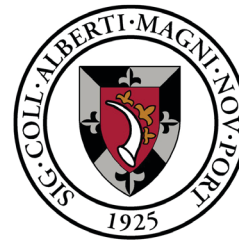


Evaluation of the State of Connecticut Summer Enrichment Grants

JANUARY 31, 2022

**Center for Connecticut
Education Research Collaboration**

Partner Institutions





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Dr. Casey D. Cobb
Dr. Dorothea Anagnostopoulos
Kiah Devona
Kenya Overton

University of Connecticut, Neag School of Education

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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📌 The Connecticut State Department of Education launched its Summer Enrichment Initiative in Spring 2021, to provide Connecticut students opportunities for socialization and fun as the state eased its pandemic restrictions. The Connecticut COVID-19 Education Research Collaborative commissioned an evaluation study of the Summer Enrichment Initiative in July 2021 as camps were underway. (iStock Photo)

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) launched its Summer Enrichment Initiative in Spring 2021, to provide Connecticut students opportunities for socialization and fun as the state eased its COVID pandemic restrictions and prepared for the return to in-person school in Fall 2021. Summer Enrichment represents one of the six priorities that anchor the CSDE’s Accelerate CT Framework for Accelerating Educational Opportunity and Access (CSDE, n.d). The Framework seeks to promote educational “renewal, reduce opportunity gaps, accelerate learning, and advance equity” (CSDE, n.d., p. 4) in the state’s response to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Summer Enrichment Initiative distributed over \$8.6 million to summer youth programs across Connecticut in Summer 2021. The CSDE awarded Expansion Grants of between \$2,500 and \$25,000 to 210 programs to expand existing enrichment opportunities and increase access for students who might otherwise not have access to summer programs. It also awarded Innovation Grants ranging from \$50,000 to \$250,000 to 25

Recommendation 1

Start funding cycles earlier

Recommendation 2

Support and implement a mix of camp activities

Recommendation 3

Foster camp-school partnerships to improve student engagement

Recommendation 4

Strengthen partnerships between CSDE and camp providers to recruit and train staff



The evaluation used a concurrent mixed-methods design. Student and site supervisor surveys were administered during August and September 2021. In total, 1,231 students in Grades 3 through 12, and 215 site supervisors completed the surveys.

programs to provide students innovative summer programming.¹

The Connecticut COVID-19 Education Research Collaborative (CCERC)² commissioned an evaluation study of the Summer Enrichment Initiative in July 2021 as camps were underway. The evaluation examined the following:

- a. the degree to which camps increased students' access to summer programming
- b. how camps used Summer Enrichment funds and the types of programming they offered
- c. students' enjoyment of camp activities and experiences
- d. how the camps readied students to return to school after a year of pandemic-related disruptions

The evaluation also considered the challenges the camps faced and the successes they experienced.

Evaluation Design


The evaluation used a concurrent mixed-methods design. Survey instruments and interview and observation protocols were designed during July and August 2021. Student and site supervisor surveys were administered during August and September 2021. In total, 1,231 students in Grades 3 through 12, and 215 site supervisors completed the student and supervisor surveys, respectively. Quantitative data from the two surveys were analyzed descriptively; bivariate analyses were used where relevant and appropriate. Open-ended responses from the surveys were analyzed thematically.

Between July 29, 2021, and August 26, 2021, members of the evaluation team conducted site visits at 10 of the 25 camps that received Innovation Grants. Site visitors conducted focus group interviews with students and staff and observed activities at each camp. In total, focus group interviews included 62 students and 42 staff members. Site visitor fieldnotes were analyzed qualitatively to extend survey results and provide insight into:

- a. students' camp experiences and engagement in camp activities
- b. how the camps supported students' social emotional well-being and readied them for returning to school
- c. staff perceptions of program successes and challenges

Major Findings The Initiative Expanded Access to Summer Programming

Findings from the site supervisor survey suggest that the Summer Enrichment Initiative met its goal of expanding access to summer programming for Connecticut students. According to the 121 site supervisors who operated camps in both Summer 2020 and Summer 2021, these 121 camps served 17,087 students in 2020; in 2021, they served nearly double the students — 32,336. In total, Summer 2021 camps served over 108,000 Connecticut students. One reason for the

 *The evaluation study examined the following: the degree to which camps increased students' access to summer programming; how camps used Summer Enrichment funds and the types of programming they offered; students' enjoyment of camp activities and experiences; and how the camps readied students to return to school after a year of pandemic-related disruptions.*

increase in student participation is likely the scholarships and fee waivers that the Summer Enrichment funds made available. According to the site supervisor survey, nearly 39% of camps offered scholarships or fee waivers to 100% of their students. On average, 56% of students received a scholarship or a fee waiver to attend summer camp.

Students Enjoyed Their Camp Experiences

The Summer Enrichment Initiative aimed to provide students with opportunities for fun and socialization in light of disruptions created by the COVID pandemic. Both survey and interview data indicate that students overwhelmingly enjoyed their camp experiences.

Just over 94% of students reported that they had “some” (21.9%) or “a lot” of fun (72.3%). Additionally, roughly 85% gave their camp an “A” (59.4%) or a “B” (25.3%). These positive experiences were corroborated by students interviewed at a sample of Innovation Grant camps. Many highlighted the fun they had at camp. As one elementary student said, “There is nothing that could be more fun than this!” Observations substantiated these findings; most students actively participated in camp activities and appeared engaged in the activities and with other students and staff.

Camp Staff Were Key Contributors to Student Engagement

Staff played a central role in students' enjoyment of and engagement in the summer programming. As Table ES1 reports, three-fourths of students (75.0%) who completed the student survey reported that they liked their camp “Counselors, Teachers, and Adults” “a lot.” Students' perceptions of camp staff (counselors/teachers/adults) also positively correlated with how much fun they had at camp ($r = .432$) and how highly they rated their camp ($r = .367$), the strongest relationships between students' views of their camps and camp features or activities we found. At the Innovation camps we visited, students consistently described strong connections with camp staff.

Students characterized staff as “friendly” and “warm” and appreciated the caring environments that staff created at the camps. For example, high school students at one camp described how staff provided them “a safe space” where they could have “discussions about things that bother us.” Other students described how camp staff helped students form positive relationships with each other. In addition to engaging students in camp activities, camp staff contributed to students' positive camp experiences by attending to students' social emotional well-being.

Students Most Enjoyed Free Time, Field Trips and Outdoor Activities

The camps supported by Summer

¹ [Access a listing of grants.](#)

² <https://ct.gov/ccerc>

Table ES1. Student Ratings of Camp Activities/Characteristics.

Q9: How much did you like these parts of the summer program?	A lot!	Somewhat	Not very much	(Not part of camp)
Free time	81.7%	14.6%	3.8%	4.6%
Field trips	75.6%	18.1%	6.3%	36.8%
Counselors, teachers, and adults	75.0%	21.8%	3.2%	1.2%
Outdoor activities	70.6%	24.6%	4.9%	3.9%
Sports	63.9%	23.9%	12.2%	8.2%
Food, drink, and snacks	62.5%	27.8%	9.7%	3.6%
Arts & Crafts	52.3%	32.7%	15.0%	6.9%
Computer or Technology activities	48.9%	34.1%	17.0%	36.4%
Acting, Music, or Dance activities	42.1%	31.9%	26.0%	28.8%
Learning activities (math, reading, or science)	35.5%	34.1%	30.5%	30.3%

Enrichment funds centered on a variety of focal themes. Some camps had a STEM-focus, while others focused on arts, life skills, college and career readiness, sports, and purposeful play, among other foci. Across these foci, the camps also engaged students in a variety of activities. As Table ES1 shows, students most enjoyed Free Time (81.7%), Field Trips (75.6%) and Outdoor Activities (70.6%). Students had more mixed responses to other types of activities, generally liking Sports, Arts & Crafts, and Food/Drink/Snacks. Student responses to Learning Activities (e.g., math, reading) were most mixed, with roughly equal percentages of students liking them “a lot,” “some” and “not very much.”

Students’ Readiness for Returning to School was Mixed

The Summer Enrichment Initiative was designed to increase students’ socializa-

tion and re-engagement with their peers, with an eye toward readying them for the return to school. Thus we explored the degree to which the Initiative fostered students’ excitement about and readiness to return to in-person school in Fall 2021. Survey and interview data provide mixed results. Most site supervisors felt their camps were mostly “very effective” (48.8%) or “extremely effective” (26.5%) in building students’ preparation for and enthusiasm to return to school. The vast majority (84.7%) attributed this to “staff relationships with students,” while 57.2% felt that Learning Activities prepared students to return to school. Students were more ambivalent. While 47.5% of students were excited to return to school, 21.6% were neutral and 30.8% felt negative about returning to school. Additionally, while 57.7% of students said that their camp “definitely” or “probably” had gotten them excited to go back to school, 42.3% said that

their camp had “probably” or “definitely not” done so. Students at the site visit Innovation camps expressed a similar ambivalence. This ambivalence related to students’ perception of school as often being “boring.” As a high school student at one camp said, “If anything [the camp] made me less excited about [returning to school]. This is an environment that I would like to learn in and I know that my school is just not that.”

Condensed Start-Up Time Posed Challenges

Among the most prominent challenges identified on the site supervisor survey and staff interviews related to navigating the short timeline between when grants were awarded and when camp started. Camps would have preferred to receive funds earlier to support program planning, student recruitment, and hiring and training staff.

Recommendations

Start Earlier

Site supervisors were grateful for the Summer Enrichment funds but expressed a desire for future funding cycles to start earlier, perhaps at the beginning of the calendar year. This would allow camps sufficient time to plan, arrange for appropriate staffing, recruit students (especially high school students), and otherwise maximize the use of funds. It could also provide time for camp staff/directors from different types of summer programs to offer insights and be involved in the grant planning process.

Support and Implement a Mix of Camp Activities

The Summer Enrichment Initiative-funded camps provided students a wide array of focal themes, e.g., STEM, purposeful play, sports, et cetera, from which to choose. Our findings suggest that offering a mix of activities within these themes might increase student enjoyment. Initiative administrators and camp providers might, in particular, consider how they can integrate some unstructured time, outdoor activities, and field trips into camp programs.

Foster Camp-School Partnerships to Improve Student Engagement

The majority of students involved in this evaluation enjoyed their camp experiences. Their experiences did not, however, necessarily foster their enthusiasm for returning to school. The CSDE could facilitate partnerships between camps and schools with the goal of integrating high-engagement enrichment activities into the school day and the curriculum. Many of the camps that received Innovation Grants partnered with a range of community and educational agencies, including schools. These partnerships could serve as key resources to improve and extend students' engagement and learning throughout the school year.

Strengthen Partnerships between CSDE and Camp Providers to Recruit and Train Staff

Supervisors and students viewed camp staff positively. Students' relationships with camp staff played a central role in students' camp experiences. At the same time, many supervisors indicated they had difficulty fully staffing their programs and also expressed the need for more targeted training for staff on how to support students' social emotional learning and well-being. The CSDE could solicit insight from camp providers on how they recruited and trained staff to provide guidelines and information for future summer initiatives. CSDE could also partner with camp providers to help identify and provide this training.



Students make Oobleck at a summer camp held at UConn in 2021. (UConn Photo)



Students create volcano at a summer camp held at UConn in 2021. (UConn Photo)



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CCERC Administrative Team

Ajit Gopalakrishnan

Chief Performance Officer, CSDE

Dr. Morgaen Donaldson

Professor of Educational Leadership, UConn

Dr. Eric Loken, University of Connecticut

Dr. D. Betsy McCoach, University of Connecticut

Dr. Kayon Morgan, University of Hartford

Dr. Kari Sassu, Southern Connecticut State University

Dr. Michael Strambler, Yale School of Medicine

Dr. Tricia Stewart, Western Connecticut State University

Dr. Wesley Younts, University of Hartford

Dr. Samuel Kamin, University of Connecticut

Dr. Alexandra Lamb, University of Connecticut