

Executive Summary

The Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) district capitalized on Title 1 stimulus funds available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to establish the Summer Dreamers Academy (SDA) in summer 2010. The program is a free, five-week summer literacy camp for rising 6th through 8th grade students. The Summer Dreamers Academy is an important component of the district's Pathways to the Promise initiatives to make sure that all youth are eligible for the Pittsburgh Promise, a noncompetitive scholarship program available to all qualified Pittsburgh Public Schools graduates who attend an accredited degree program at a public or private institution throughout Pennsylvania.

In partnership with the Pittsburgh Public Schools Office of Strategic Initiatives that runs the program, The National Summer Learning Association is conducting a mixed methods evaluation to assess the quality and fidelity of implementation of the program and program outcomes for participants in the Summer Dreamers Academy across two summers. The evaluation is designed around eight questions based on the program logic model and design, calling on data sources including a review of program documents and materials, onsite observations and interviews, stakeholder surveys and focus groups, demographic data, participation and attendance data, behavioral referrals, and indicators of academic progress.

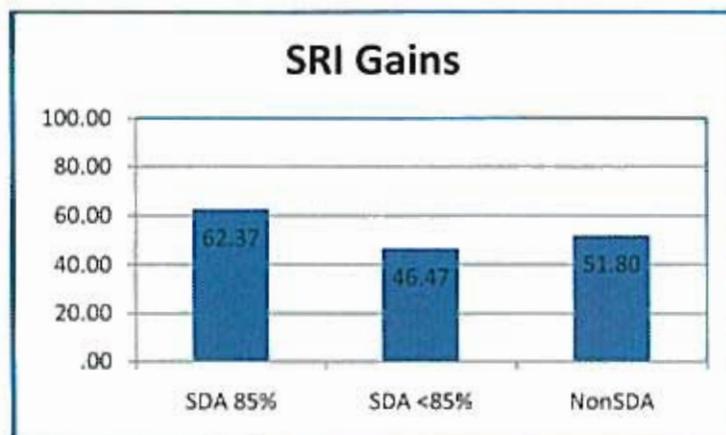
Key Findings

- **Approximately 25% of campers who responded to our survey explicitly stated that had they not attended Summer Dreamers, they would have done nothing, stayed at home, and/or been bored.** A significant number of campers indicated that they would be involved in activities known to cause setbacks to their social, physical, and academic development, including unhealthy eating, remaining physically inactive (*sleeping, watching TV, playing video games*), and getting into trouble¹.
- **The 2010 Summer Dreamers Academy was highly consistent in programming with the intended model across all sites,** particularly in the execution of the literacy curriculum. Should this level of fidelity stay consistent in future years, evaluators would expect that yearly efforts to increase program quality and camper literacy skill acquisition would result in increased positive student outcomes across sites.
- **For the first year of programming, the Summer Dreamers accomplished a moderately strong average daily attendance rate** for a program of its scale at 69%. Research suggests that the highest quality summer learning programs typically set their attendance goals at 85%.
- **Summer Dreamers met goals to enroll students most at risk for summer learning loss.** The program enrolled significantly more students from ethnic minority groups, from economically disadvantaged households, and who were Limited English Proficient compared to their peers that did not enroll. Students who enrolled in Summer Dreamers were reading at a significantly lower reading level (basic and below basic in Spring 2010) than their peers who did not enroll.

¹ This survey item was open ended. Campers responded without prompts to predefined categories. 766 campers responded to this survey item.

- While the camp was successful in recruiting youth most at risk for summer learning loss, **Summer Dreamers was not as successful in retaining them.** Students who never attended or attended less than 10 days were at higher risk for behavioral problems during the previous school year settings and had higher levels of absence than Summer Dreamers participants who attended regularly.
- **Students who attended at high rates during the program demonstrated strong reading gains over the summer, though not statistically significant².**

Average SRI Gains Reported by Intensity of SDA Attendance.



- **Campers who reported that they are confident in their ability to succeed in school and are motivated to succeed earned higher scores on the Fall 2010 SRI.**
- **Parents and guardians strongly believed that the Summer Dreamers program increased their child's confidence and motivation to persevere in the face of academic challenges.** Overall, parents reported positive changes in the attitudes and behaviors of their children toward learning after participating in the Summer Dreamers program.
- **Researchers have documented a strong link between students' motivational beliefs and their academic achievement.** Namely, students who feel confident in their ability to learn are more likely to engage in learning, use effective learning strategies, and earn high grades and test scores when compared to their less academically confident peers.
- **Campers, teachers and staff, and activities providers indicated that they were satisfied with their experience of the program.** Parents and guardians were the most satisfied.

"90% of my students will fare better when they return to school in the fall... Thumbs up." (teacher)

"I'm going to take the Pittsburgh Promise more serious." (camper)

"He/she has been so much more motivated. It is a wonderful program to keep her mind stimulated through the summer." (parent/guardian)

"My child learned the meaning of teamwork. She got the opportunity to experience new things, such as kayaking, geo-caching and fishing. She talks about the 'Pittsburgh Promise,' and how she's going to work hard in 6th grade. She liked meeting kids from other schools." (parent/guardian)

"Please provide the program next summer, best thing Pittsburgh Public Schools could have ever done. Kept all the children busy and learning. Again, thank you." (parent/guardian)

² Student academic outcomes based on level of program attendance are presented on pages 43-44 of the report.

Select Recommendations

1. Refine the vision for blended learning opportunities within the program by engaging all activities providers as professional stakeholders and decision makers in the program and by promoting collaboration between activities providers and teaching facilitators throughout program planning and delivery.
2. Students' beliefs about their academic potential are responsive to their experiences in a specific learning context. In a classroom setting, teachers can create experiences that help students recognize their potential and feel successful in their learning. Adding an explicit focus on increasing camper confidence may be an effective way for the district to increase campers' learning gains.
3. Refine and strategize around improving the college readiness component of the program logic model and additionally make an explicit connection to making sure that Pittsburgh youth are Promise-ready by 9th grade.
4. Focus on successful student retention strategies for future years. Specifically, the program should work closely with students who enrolled in the program but attended for fewer than 10 days during summer 2010, and who are at higher risk for behavioral incidents and absences during the school year, in order to assess their interests. Further work with their families to communicate the importance of sending their children to the SDA program.
5. Establish an official program behavioral policy in a printed manual and distribute to all stakeholders. The manual should outline all camp policies and procedures, including student dress code, and a clear chain of command for behavioral procedures.
6. For year 2 of the evaluation, the district and evaluation teams should further pursue a matched comparison group of nonparticipants in order to analyze achievement gains between like groups of participants and nonparticipants.