



# Investigating Improvements in MMSD's Elementary Summer Semester

Lauren Morris | January 2023

## WHAT IT TOOK

### The Design Team

#### 5 district leaders including:

- Director of Summer Learning
- Executive Director of Integrated Supports
- Middle School, Elementary School principal
- C&I teacher leader
- MSCR Supervisor

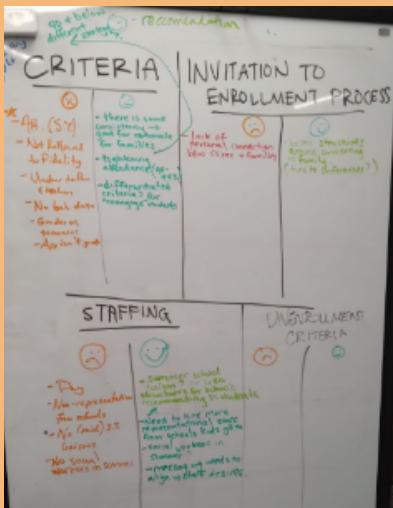
**19 hours during 5 sessions, over 6 weeks**

### From the Research & Innovation Team:

#### 3 Innovation Strategists

- To plan, facilitate meetings, gather and analyze data, guide the team through the process, and manage the project

**100 combined hours over 14 weeks**



## Our Challenge

During the fall of 2022, the Research and Innovation team was recruited by Madison Metropolitan School District leadership to help explore ways to improve the summer semester experience. Therefore, a design team was formed with representatives from Curriculum & Instruction, Assessment & Learning Supports, and MSCR, (all essential to planning, preparing and executing MMSD's Summer Semester) to re-envision and enhance the summer program.

Over the past few years, the MMSD 4K-12 summer semester experienced many challenges including high staffing needs that didn't align with enrollment needs, students dropping out at the start of programming or not consistently attending summer semester, and struggles to link the purpose of the MMSD elementary summer semester to targeted summer enrichment and the Arts Academy. Originally the purpose of the project was to investigate issues of enrollment, attendance and staffing issues under the assumption that programming content needed an overhaul because it was not enticing enough for students and families to stay engaged throughout the summer semester. But through an initial exploration into the current state of summer semester, the team set out with the goal of defining salient issues in order to help enhance its structure and programming, particularly for some of our most underserved populations (in this case low-income students and students of color), in order to drive equity in MMSD.

## What We Did

The MMSD Summer Semester program serves about 3,500 students 4K-12th as part of the district's "year-long strategy, by providing critical additional learning time to support students on their pathway to college, career and community readiness." (MMSD Summer Semester Mission Statement). This would be a huge undertaking since elementary, middle school and high school summer semester programming are varied based on different needs. Therefore, the team decided to break the work into more manageable chunks, focusing first on the elementary summer semester experience.

Research and Innovation Strategists, Lauren Morris, Lauren Lauter, and Eric Lequesne, planned and facilitated five innovation work sessions with a cross-functional design team of central office leaders, including the Director of Summer Learning, Executive Director of Assessment & Learning Supports, a C&I Teacher Leader, a MSCR Supervisor and a Middle School and Elementary School principal. During that time, the team worked to understand the current state of summer semester by pulling demographic data of students and

overlaying it with several variables (attendance, FRPL, grade). From there, data was analyzed for deeper understanding of summer school demographics, attendance and staffing trends. Researchers also analyzed survey data that the summer semester department had sent to families in August of 2022. Additionally, they conducted focus groups with staff and students who had participated in last year's programming to better understand the experiences of summer semester from multiple perspectives

"The kids were very behind due to COVID and needed some catch up. Also, need childcare for working."

*-MMSD parent when asked why they signed their child up for summer programming*

From the survey data and internal MMSD data the team learned:

**Summer semester is an equity strategy, yet there are inconsistent opportunities** *(this finding was the basis of some of the largest proposed changes)*

Students who qualified and enrolled in summer school were disproportionately low income and students of color. Students of color (87%) and students from low-income backgrounds (74%) were large proportions of Summer Semester attendance. This may be an indication of families working full time and therefore needing subsidized child care in the summer months, which again supports finding number one. This is an important issue to dig deeper into, in order to better understand the mechanisms around poverty, attendance and school achievement and how to mitigate them during the school year, which follow them into the summer.

On the flip side, students of color only comprised 50% of Arts Academy participants, a program that was implemented to engage students who may not have access (particularly students of color) to arts opportunities during the school year or summer semester. According to Summer Arts leadership and staff, last year the Arts Academy enrollment was not targeted towards summer school students. Most middle school students enrolled were not enrolled in summer school. Therefore, more work needs to be done in solidifying the Arts Academy as a true equity strategy, and summer semester student access is a logical starting point.

### **Child care is a critical consideration for families**

77% of parents listed childcare & work conflicts as a reason for enrolling their student in summer school along with academics and structured social opportunities. Staff reported that a large number of families who didn't receive MSCR services took their children out of summer school, due to child care needs. Additionally, enrollment and completion rate went down significantly as students got older, which supports childcare as a factor since one could assume that childcare is more urgent in the earlier grades than later ones.

**Families who had participated in the summer semester were overwhelmingly positive about their experience.**

Many respondents stated that their students enjoyed summer school and showed progress, and that the teachers were nice. Transportation and limited summer communication were the most notable concerns.

"A lot of people here and they cared about us. A lot more people than the year before I liked that. Learning was good, reading and I wanted to learn a lot of reading because I don't know how to read and I liked that we did this a lot. The teachers were so nice"

*-8th grade MMSD student*

"I feel like the teachers loved for us to be there and they actually wanted to teach us. We had some fun moments, and work moments but we turned our work moments into fun moments."

*-6th grade MMSD student*

## School year attendance correlates with summer semester attendance

According to attendance records, students with low attendance rates during the school year also had lower attendance rates during the summer semester. They also enrolled at much lower rates and had more absences in the summer. When looking at trends around holidays, by days of the week and over the course of the program, immediate summer semester scheduling, holidays, etc. didn't have much effect on attendance.

## Staffing concerns exist and play a key role in maintaining a quality summer program for our most vulnerable students.

Many staff advocated for a higher summer school pay rate. Summer Semester, like many educational spaces, was woefully understaffed in 2022. This past summer alone, approximately 700 students were unenrolled from summer semester last year due to staffing constraints. As confirmed in the focus group, principals and Staff who did work in the summer of 2022 pointed to one of the reasons for understaffing being the most recent pay rate. Current summer semester hourly wages are a fraction of staff regular pay rates, despite their skill level or experience. Additionally, MMSD is competing with other, local districts that are offering higher summer school pay and fewer days or weeks teaching (ie; Verona). This was especially stark after emergency Covid funding allowed for a brief spike in wages from 2021-22, which led many teachers to feel that summer school "wasn't worth it" in the subsequent offering.

Armed with all of this information, the team buckled down to create a more equitable summer program while addressing these two essential questions:

- *How might we create an engaging summer semester program which supports students academically and meets parents' childcare needs?*
- *How might we craft a summer semester program and structure that skilled MMSD teachers will want to work for?*

From there, the design team ideated possible solutions that not only centered equity but also found solutions that met families childcare needs and created an opportunity that staff would want to engage in. The team worked diligently to ideate a wide range of solutions, prioritizing and adjusting them based on the potential impact that they could have on some of MMSD's most underserved populations and eliminating those that could potentially cause harm. Some of the potential solutions included opening summer school to all students on a first come first served basis, changing invitation criteria to prioritize lifting students on the academic bubbles versus also prioritizing maintenance, changing the summer school schedule, including considering year round school, increasing pay, and incorporating a wider variety of staff including family liaisons, more social workers, or even pairing teachers with arts instructors. The focus was to begin to explore opportunities for the Summer Semester program to best support students, especially students of color and those from households identified as low-income, since they make up a majority of the participants.

*"...It was pretty insulting last year to go from 40 to 28.... I've been teaching for 21 years in this district and it feels like summer school's not easy...[Y]ou wanna attract, you know, like good, strong teachers, right?...So that these kids are having a valuable experience."*

*-Summer School Middle school Teacher*

*"None of the classroom teachers, very few of them came back the following summer because, and, and I can say almost entirely, it was that pay cut. "*

*-Summer school elementary teacher*

## **Outcome**

In meeting the project objectives, the team created recommendations for how to adjust MMSD elementary summer programming and presented it to the Board of Education in January 2023 (See Boarddocs Jan 09, 2023 - Instruction Work Group Item 5.2). Based on the project findings, they recommended updating the Summer Semester Mission to more explicitly state its position as an equity-driven extension of the school year, adjusting the Summer Semester Attendance Criteria back up to 90-94%, and adjusting recruitment strategies to attract more qualified, MMSD staff members, particularly ones who are most familiar with our most vulnerable populations, to work during the summer semester. With that in mind, the design team advocated for a substantial base pay rate increase to be more competitive and align with regular contract wages. This aligns with the suggestion of the staff focus group, who were concerned that teacher hourly wage is cut nearly forty percent during the summer. Ultimately, the Board approved the full pay increase that was recommended.

Most importantly, the summer semester team suggested better integration of MSCR and the Arts Academy into Summer Semester schedules at the elementary and middle school levels. These changes will allow the program to guarantee full day programming for all summer semester participants, as their registration to Summer Semester in the morning coincides with a spot in afternoon MSCR programming. This will also give low-income students and students of color, who make up three-quarters of the Summer Semester, more access to the Summer Arts Academy onsite, which they did not readily have before due to past systems and structures. Although the project focused on elementary school programming, there are overlaps with the needs of middle school summer semester. Ultimately, there is still a lot of work to be done to continue to improve the MMSD summer semester program for all students, especially the most underestimated populations, including getting student voice on programming (especially in the Arts Academy), improving metrics structures, and taking a look into the high school component.