

Lessons from the Field: DYCD OST Summer Programming

Tandra T. Turner
Christina A. Russell

June 2014

Policy Studies Associates, Inc.
1718 Connecticut Ave, N.W.
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20009
www.policystudies.com

Prepared for
Department of Youth and Community Development
New York, NY

The New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) required that all elementary and middle school out-of-school time (OST) programs deliver year-round programming to youth in its 2011 Request for Proposals (RFP). This new policy represented a departure from expectations for previously funded OST programs, for which summer programming was optional. This approach reflects a growing body of research within the OST field, including DYCD's own evaluations of its program initiatives, that has demonstrated the value of summer learning programs in keeping youth engaged in learning experiences and in minimizing summer learning loss.

In summer 2013, the inaugural summer of mandatory programming, OST programs faced two significant challenges in planning and implementing summer learning programs. First, school-based OST programs began planning without knowing until shortly before the start of programming whether the New York City Department of Education (DOE) would keep their school building open for the summer, or if they would need to relocate its summer programming to a new host school. Summer OST programs that were relocated needed to implement programming in a setting that was new to them and to the youth they served. Second, OST programs that had never operated during the summer needed to adjust their traditional approaches to activity planning and staffing to accommodate a full-day schedule of programming.

As a result, there were many lessons learned by program providers about the actions that OST programs can take to successfully plan for and implement summer programming. To document and share these lessons, as part of the evaluation of the OST initiative, DYCD asked the Policy Studies Associates (PSA) research team to explore the strategies used by summer OST programs in 2013 to successfully recruit participants and staff, and to plan for and implement programming that engages participants. The PSA team found that OST program directors who reported success in summer programming were deliberate and strategic in:

- Engaging school principals as advocates and coordinating with co-located programs
- Recruiting participants early, engaging school partners and parents in enrollment efforts, and appealing to participant interests to encourage retention
- Developing summer staff capacity during the school year, using younger staff to complement experienced staff, and using education specialists to support staff
- Using theme-based programming and partnerships to develop summer activities

This report presents the complete findings from the exploratory study of DYCD's summer OST programs. It summarizes approaches to program implementation and patterns of youth participation; emphasizes themes that identify practical, concrete actions that can enable OST programs to effectively plan for, implement, and enhance summer programming; and offers recommendations to inform planning and technical assistance to strengthen future summer programs.

Study Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore and document the practices that OST programs used to successfully implement summer programming, focusing on strategies used to address four areas identified by DYCD leaders as presenting challenges to OST programs: (1) recruitment of staff and students, (2) program design and partnerships, (3) engagement of middle-school participants, and (4) site relocation. The PSA team collected data using the following methods:

- **Online questionnaire of OST elementary- and middle-school program directors.** The questionnaire asked respondents to select the area in which their program experienced the most success during summer 2013 and to briefly describe what helped them achieve this success. The questionnaire was completed by 253 of 413 directors (61 percent) in February 2014. Six \$50 Amazon gift cards were raffled to directors who completed the questionnaire.
- **Telephone interviews with OST program directors.** Based on questionnaire responses, three to five programs reporting success in each of the four areas were selected for in-depth interviews. A total of 24 directors were interviewed, including directors of both school- and center-based programs, elementary- and middle-school programs, and school-year programs whose host schools closed for summer and had to be relocated to a new host site. In these interviews, PSA researchers delved into the decision-making process and the rationale directors used to plan for and implement summer programming.
- **Analysis of student-level participation data.** The PSA research team analyzed participation data captured in DYCD Online, the agency's management information system, for the 2012-13 school year, summer 2013, and the fall of 2014. Analyses explored patterns of participation in summer programming as well as program retention rates between the school year and summer.
- **A survey of host school principals.** This survey was administered online to principals of schools hosting OST programs in winter 2014, and provided information on principals' visions for summer OST programming (235 of 362 principals responded, for a 65 percent response rate).

Context of Summer OST Programming

The opportunity to support youth academically and developmentally during the summer is an increasing focus in policy, research, and practice. Research clearly demonstrates that summer learning loss can occur between the end of one school year and the beginning of the next, particularly for lower income youth (McCombs, Augustine, Schwartz, Bodilly, McInnis, Lichter, & Cross, 2001). Summer also presents concerns about safety, as some youth may not have structured and supervised opportunities to keep them engaged (National Summer Learning Association, 2012). But summer can also serve as a time to reinforce academic concepts, to

expose students to new experiences, and to develop positive adult-youth and youth peer relationships (National Summer Learning Association, 2012; Miller 2007).

Over the past several years, DYCD has strengthened its approach to continuously engaging youth in high-quality programming throughout the year. An evaluation of DYCD OST programs found that programs that operated during the summer had higher retention rates during the school year (Pearson, Russell, & Reisner, 2007). DYCD has come to regard summer as an opportunity to extend its programming, providing a continuous year-round OST experience that engages student participants and exposes them to high-quality academic and enrichment activities.

Therefore, in its 2011 RFP, DYCD set clear expectations for summer programming for all OST programs. DYCD required elementary-grades summer OST programs to operate for seven weeks, Monday through Friday, for 10 hours per day (8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.), for a total of 350 hours of summer programming. During this time, summer OST programs are expected to offer academic support and enrichment, with at least two hours per week of literacy, arts, or STEM activities, complemented by physical activity and healthy living activities, similar to expectations for school-year OST programming. Middle-grades summer OST programs are expected to offer a total of 108 hours of summer programming over the course of at least four weeks, with at least two hours each week of enrichment activities (literacy, arts, STEM, or a combination of these areas) and two hours of leadership development. OST programs were required to serve the same number of participants in the summer as were served throughout the school year, and to give all school-year participants the opportunity to continue attending OST programming during the summer, thus ensuring continuity of services.

Although operating during the summer was new to many OST programs, the program-quality expectations set out by DYCD were consistent with the school-year guidelines with which OST programs were familiar. Nonetheless, DYCD staff observed that the transition to maintaining a high level of programming over the time-intensive summer session was a challenge for many OST programs. In this report, the PSA research team describes examples of successful strategies that OST program directors used to address the common challenges of relocation, recruitment, staffing, and program design so that these examples can inform the experiences and approaches of future summer OST programs.

Summer OST Relocation

Although OST summer programs are intended to serve the same participants who enroll in school-year programming, in order to provide continuous supports and maximize the benefit of OST programming for individual students, some school-based OST programs faced logistical challenges in providing that continuity.

Every summer the New York City Department of Education (DOE) selects which school buildings will remain open for the summer and which will close, with the final decision often made late in the school year. In summer 2013, 42 percent of OST elementary-grades programs were relocated to a new site for the summer, as were 31 percent of middle-grades programs. Some relocated programs were assigned to sites in different neighborhoods, with inadequate facilities (e.g., no air conditioning or age-appropriate facilities), or to sites that were also hosting several other summer academic programs or summer camps operated by DOE, DYCD, or other organizations.

Although these factors proved challenging, many programs managed to successfully tackle these challenges, as described in this report.

Planning for Relocation

Planning early for summer programming is essential for all OST programs. Program directors interviewed for this study reported that they started to plan for summer between February and April. Early planning requires OST programs to continue delivering high-quality, school-year activities while managing the tasks needed to prepare for summer, including hiring and training staff; recruiting participants; communicating with school staff, parents, and other program directors; and developing curriculum.

Not surprisingly, OST program directors pointed to DOE's decision to close some school buildings for the summer and reassign summer programs to other school buildings as one of the biggest challenges to early planning. However, rather than adopting a wait-and-see approach, several OST program directors interviewed for this study were proactive in managing the possibility of relocation, leading to a smoother transition to summer programming. This section describes key approaches to early program planning: (1) engaging the principal as an advocate; and (2) coordinating with co-located programs.

Engage the Principal as an Advocate

OST program directors reported that engaging the principal as an advocate for the summer program was beneficial for planning and recruitment, even in the face of possible relocation to a new site. For example, one OST program director was proactive with the principal of her school-year site in preparing for the possibility of operating at a new site for the summer. She first investigated which schools were potential relocation sites, obtaining a list of five to six sites in the network of neighborhood schools. Once she had gathered that information, she met with the principal of her school-year site to develop a plan of action. The principal and the OST program director then arranged meetings with the principals of the potential schools in the network in order to discuss potential space and scheduling issues. As a result, the OST program director reported that she was able to solidify relationships with all the schools to which DOE could possibly assign her summer OST program. The school-year principal advocated for the summer OST program by validating the program's benefit, connecting the OST program director to other principals, and sitting in on those meetings. Once the summer OST program was officially reassigned to another site, the program director then met with the principal of the summer site to more specifically discuss program goals and recruitment, building on the groundwork that had already been laid.

Another OST program director recalled a challenge in DOE's plan to keep her elementary-grades OST program at its school-year site for the summer while reassigning the middle-grades program to a new site. In this instance, the principal advocated with the DOE for the middle-grades program to remain with its elementary program, helping to justify why reassignment of the middle-grades program was not the best solution for the summer OST program or for the school. On the principal survey, a few other principals also described their role as an advocate for their summer OST program. One principal reported that when she learned from DOE that her building would be closed for the summer, she requested that the summer OST program be reassigned to a site near the school, commenting, "We were cognizant of the need to have the program housed in a nearby school and, after much negotiation, that took place."

Coordinate with Co-located Programs

Summer OST programs coordinated with co-located summer programs to ensure that each program operated efficiently. This coordination typically required communicating first with the principal of the host school to learn if the school had the appropriate accommodations for the grade levels that the OST program served and to learn about the space and resources that the program could access. OST program directors then engaged co-located program staff in ongoing communication to coordinate how each program would operate in the available space. One program director said that coordination required knowing the space that each program would occupy, the timing of meals, and the timing of programs being in and away from the building. This OST program director stressed that “constant communication, scheduling, and check-ins/follow-ups are the key to a successful summer when being relocated.” Other program directors reiterated the importance of developing operation strategies with co-located programs to keep programs from “clashing with each other.” At another site, directors of co-located programs shared space and rooms for certain activities and for dismissal time.

Recruiting Participants

During the summer, youth and their families are presented with a number of options and potential conflicts that may influence their decision to continue OST participation. There are summer school requirements, special-interest summer programs, recreational activities, family vacations, and other preferences or obligations. In addition, relocation to a new site can cause parents to reevaluate whether they want to enroll their child in a summer OST program. Several OST program directors and DYCD staff noted these summer challenges and concerns and their adverse effects on program enrollment. This section of the report presents findings not only on the strategies and actions that OST program directors used to recruit and retain participants, but also on participants’ enrollment and attendance patterns in summer 2013.

Start Recruitment Early

To meet enrollment goals, OST program directors reported that they started to recruit participants in early spring and that they advised others to start as early as possible. As one OST program director observed, “Parents typically decide their child’s summer plans soon after spring break.” OST program directors reported that they gave first priority to youth enrolled in school-year OST programming, and then opened enrollment for other youth in the community. The actions that OST programs took to recruit and retain participants are described below, and suggest that developing strong relationships with school partners, youth, and parents was essential. While active recruitment for summer programming typically started in March and April, in reality, the groundwork for recruitment and continuous engagement of participants in summer programming started at the beginning of the school year.

Engage School Partners

OST program directors can leverage positive relationships with the school community to support summer recruitment efforts. OST programs directors reported working closely with school staff both at their school-year host sites and at schools hosting their relocated summer OST program in order to spread the word about summer programming and to recruit participants. They took advantage of school resources such as bulletin boards and school websites to advertise and distribute program materials. They presented at school meetings and other school events. In one program the parent coordinator was a valuable resource in reaching both school-year OST participants and those youth not involved in the program. Parent coordinators also have contributed by disseminating applications and advertising on behalf of the summer OST program. Moreover, when OST programs needed to move to a new site for the summer, parent coordinators kept parents informed and reassured about the program's stability.

Engage Parents

OST program directors noted that a key element to promoting summer programming at school events was to show evidence of program quality and the potential benefits of attending. These directors provided examples of students' work from school-year OST programming to explain to parents the program goals, demonstrate how program activities supported these goals, and present the new opportunities planned for the summer.

Frequent communication has also been an important element of parent buy-in to the summer OST program. One program director reported that he met with parents at least three times prior to the start of the summer OST program to discuss the application process, attendance policy procedures, and the potential for relocation. During these meetings, the OST program director provided parents with a list of the possible host schools and their location so that parents could plan ahead and be prepared for necessary changes to their drop-off and pick-up routines. Another OST program director agreed that disseminating as much information as possible about the location of the summer OST program was important in maintaining parent confidence. Communication with parents early in the recruitment process about expectations for summer participation also helped OST directors achieve high participation and retention. OST program directors described the need to firmly communicate to parents and youth that the summer program was not a drop-in or baby-sitting service.

Communicating Expectations: More Than a Hangout

A center-based OST program made efforts to let both youth and parents know upfront that the summer activities focused on community service and required ongoing engagement. To ensure that they understood the level of commitment, the OST program director required participants to write an essay explaining why they wanted to be in the summer program and what they hoped to gain from it. The OST program director also required parents to read and sign the essay before the child was accepted in the program. The director said that her rationale for having a signed essay as a part of the application process was to have both youth and parents look beyond the term "summer youth camp," which she believed gave the impression that her program was simply a place to hang out.

OST program directors also reported that recruitment efforts were most effective when they directly addressed parents' needs and concerns. When summer OST programs were relocated, program staff identified solutions that addressed parents' concerns. Directors reported that parents were often concerned about the summer program's move to another host site because it raised questions about transportation. For some OST programs, the new site was several miles away, in an unfamiliar neighborhood, or not easily accessible by subway. Identifying and providing viable solutions to the transportation issue encouraged program enrollment and participation. For example, one OST program director worked with parents and the parent coordinator to organize a carpool. At another OST program, program staff escorted participants to the summer site. The director explained, "We have working parents who need our summer services. Our parents thought it was too far for them to drop off their kids and then go to work. We compromised by meeting all the children at the [school-year site] and walking all the children to the new site. Our parents were very happy with this arrangement and we retained all of our students."

Another OST program director interviewed for this study significantly revised her summer OST program to respond to parent needs and interests for summer learning. At one of the parent meetings early in the school year, the OST program director learned that parents were interested in sending their children to a summer program that taught participants in both English and Spanish. These parents, whose children attended schools using a dual-language model, did not want their children to experience any learning loss during the summer. Therefore, the OST program director decided to offer a dual-language summer program. The program director reported that parents were enthused by this idea and that they assisted the staff in developing the dual-language model. Despite the program's relocation from the school-year site, the OST program director and staff reported that their deliberate approach to building relationships with parents and to building a program that accommodated their needs contributed to their success in recruitment.

Appeal to Participants

Summer OST programs used staffing strategies and incentives to appeal to youth and promote retention. One OST program director encouraged school-day staff and teachers to work in the summer program. This strategy promoted continuity for the OST program as their school-year staff had existing relationships with participants. The program director reported that youth were excited to spend more time with their favorite teachers over the summer. He observed, "If the students enjoy their teachers, they'll want to come to the program. It's important to hire teachers whom the [participants] will like."

Some summer OST programs also used incentives to boost attendance. At one OST program, the director met with youth and parents to figure out what would most likely encourage regular attendance, since attendance and quality are so closely intertwined: participants need to attend every day to reap the benefits of the program. This OST program director offered participants pizza and ice cream parties, field trips, and public recognition for good attendance. Additionally, all participants who attended at least 80 percent of the summer programming days were invited to attend a special field trip to Dave and Busters. The OST program director worked with the provider organization to determine what incentives could be offered at little to no cost, and to arrange the logistics and expenses of field trips.

Strategically Engage Middle-Grades Youth

Middle-grades summer OST programs modified their recruitment and engagement strategies in order to appeal to the unique needs of the participants served. For example, several OST program directors reported that their middle-grades programs had a later start time in the morning in order to accommodate youth who were reluctant to wake up early during the summer months. Similarly, some OST program directors reported that they partnered with other summer school programs in their building to provide more services to middle-grades participants in the afternoon. Another OST program engaged its school-year middle-grades participants to help recruit rising sixth-graders from a neighboring elementary school. These middle-grades participants informed rising sixth-graders about how the summer OST program could support their transition to middle school.

Patterns of Enrollment and Participation

Analysis of DYCD Online data offers a clear picture into the successes and challenges that summer OST programs experienced in their efforts to recruit and engage participants during the summer and to retain participants throughout the year. As explained below, the analysis also indicates that although relocation had a negative impact on enrollment, compared to programs that stayed in the same site for the summer, relocation had little effect on participation or retention.

A total of 298 elementary-grades and 129 middle-grades OST programs operated in summer 2013. Together, these programs enrolled 44,677 participants. Eighty-four percent of participants attended school-based summer programs, while 16 percent of participants attended center-based programs. Elementary-grades OST programs enrolled 81 percent of summer participants; 19 percent of summer participants were in middle-grades programs.

On average, elementary-grades OST programs enrolled 124 participants. Enrollment numbers for OST programs serving elementary grades varied widely—one program enrolled 26 participants while another enrolled 290 participants. Middle-grades OST programs tended to have smaller enrollments, enrolling on average 67 participants. Seven middle-grades OST programs enrolled fewer than 15 participants; the largest middle-grades OST program enrolled 166 participants. Median enrollment across all summer OST programs was 107 participants—121 students participants and 62 participants for elementary- and middle-grades programs, respectively.

DYCD expected summer OST programs to serve as many participants as they were funded to serve during the school year. Analysis of summer enrollment data shows that the majority of elementary-grades OST programs met or exceeded their enrollment targets, while middle-grades OST programs struggled to achieve high enrollment. Compared to school-based OST programs, center-based OST programs had higher percentages of programs meeting enrollment targets. The data also show that non-relocated summer OST programs had better success in meeting their enrollment target than did relocated OST summer programs. However, the large majority of all programs reached at least 75 percent of enrollment capacity, as shown in Exhibit 1:

- Sixty one percent of all elementary-grades OST programs and 21 percent of middle-grades OST programs met their summer enrollment target.
- Sixty-eight percent of center-based OST programs and 44 percent of school-based OST programs met their summer enrollment target.
- More than two-thirds of non-relocated elementary-grades programs (67 percent) met their summer enrollment targets, compared to 53 percent of relocated elementary-grades programs. For middle-grades OST programs, 26 percent of non-relocated sites and 10 percent of relocated sites met their enrollment target.

Exhibit 1
Summer 2013 enrollment, percent of DYCD-funded slots filled, by program size

Percent enrolled	0-24 %	25-49 %	50-74%	75% or higher	Percent meeting enrollment target
Elementary grades (N=290)	0	1	6	93	61
Relocated (N=122)	0	0	10	90	53
Non-relocated (N=168)	0	1	2	96	67
Middle grades (N=129)	8	20	20	53	21
Relocated (N=40)	18	30	18	35	10
Non-relocated (N=89)	3	15	22	62	26
All school-based (N=338)	3	7	12	78	44
Relocated (N=162)	4	7	12	77	43
Non-relocated (N=176)	1	7	11	80	46
All center-based (N=81)	1	1	3	76	68

Exhibit reads: Across all sites, 61 percent of elementary-grades OST programs met their summer enrollment target, and 93 percent of these enrolled participants for at least 75 percent of funded slots.

The evaluation team also categorized summer OST programs as small, medium, and large¹ to test for a relationship between number of funded slots and success in reaching enrollment targets. Small middle-grades OST programs experienced greater success in achieving high rates of enrollment than did larger middle-grades OST programs: 71 percent of middle-grades OST programs categorized as small were enrolled at no less than 75 percent capacity, compared to 46 percent of the OST programs categorized as medium, and none of the five large middle-grades OST programs. This trend by size was also evident for elementary-grades OST

¹ Categorizations of small, medium, and large programs are based on the number of program slots funded by DYCD. Small programs are in the bottom quartile of the range of funded slots, medium programs are in the 25 to 74 percent range of slots, and large programs are in the top quartile of the range.

programs, though to a lesser extreme: 100 percent of small programs successfully enrolled participants for 75 percent or more of the summer slots, compared with 94 percent for medium programs and 91 percent for large programs.

Overall, enrolled participants attended summer OST programs regularly. The attendance rate was calculated by the number of days recorded for each participant divided by the number of days the program was open. As seen in Exhibit 2, elementary-grades participants had a 70 percent attendance rate and attended, on average, 28 days in the summer. Participants in middle-grades OST programs had a 62 percent attendance rate and attended, on average, 17 days during the summer months. Participants at school-based and center-based OST programs attended at relatively the same rates (69 and 67 percent, respectively). Again, there was little difference between non-relocated programs and relocated programs. Participants in non-relocated programs attended at a rate of 68 percent, while participants in relocated programs had a 70 percent attendance rate for the summer.

Exhibit 2
Summer 2013 attendance rates, by location and grades served

	Attendance rate				
	All sites (N=44,677)	Elementary grades (N=36,063)	Middle grades (N=8,585)	School- based (N=37,565)	Center- based (N=7,083)
Mean attendance rate	70	70	62	69	67
Relocated					
Mean attendance rate	70	71	63	70	–
Not relocated					
Mean attendance rate	68	70	61	68	67

Exhibit reads: Across all OST program sites, participants attended 70 percent of the days their program was open. In elementary-grades OST programs, participants attended at a rate of 70 percent of possible days, and in middle-grades OST programs, participants attended 62 percent of possible days.

By requiring summer OST programming, DYCD aimed to provide a continuous OST program experience for participants and to increase retention from one school year to the next. The PSA research team analyzed participation data from the 2012-13 school year, the 2013 summer session, and fall 2014 to gain a better picture of participation patterns. Eighteen percent of 2012-13 school-year OST participants also enrolled in the 2013-14 school year OST program, but did not participate in OST programming during summer 2013. Of the 44,677 summer 2013 participants:

- Forty-one percent were enrolled in summer 2013 only
- Thirty-three percent were enrolled in all three OST program periods (2012-13, summer 2013, and fall 2014)
- Sixteen percent were enrolled in OST during the 2012-13 school year and in summer 2013, but did not continue enrollment in the fall of the 2013-14 school year
- Eleven percent were enrolled in OST during summer 2013 and in the fall of the 2013-14 school year, but had not enrolled in OST in the previous 2012-13 school year

Program relocation appears to have had little impact on participant retention across the 2012-13 school year and summer 2013. Approximately 31 percent of participants who enrolled in relocated summer OST programs participated in a DYCD OST program in the 2012-13 school year, continued their enrollment in the same program at its relocated site during summer 2013, and remained enrolled in the same program for the 2013-14 school year. Participants in OST programs that were not relocated in summer 2013 had continuous enrollment in the same program through all three sessions at similar rates—approximately 33 percent of summer enrollees in non-relocated programs were retained across all program periods.

Staffing

Staffing summer OST programs requires directors to use creative strategies to staff for a program day that is longer than the school-year program day. As one OST program director observed, hiring staff for the summer program was not the challenge; rather it was figuring out the appropriate youth-to-adult ratios as programs moved participants around the facility and supervised field trips. For programs open for the entire day (including all elementary programs), OST directors usually scheduled staff in two or more shifts to ensure adequate supervision of youth.

Develop Summer Staff Capacity during the School Year

For most OST programs, the “go-to” source for recruiting summer staff was the pool of staff that worked for the OST program during the school year. This starting point offered two advantages. First, hiring school-year OST program staff to work in the summer program provided continuity in the development of relationships between participants and OST staff. Summer programming offered an opportunity to enhance these positive relationships with trusting and caring adults. One respondent commented, “It is our goal at [the provider agency] to reduce staff turn-over. This model benefits our staff as well as our participants because [participants] trust the people who are responsible for them and their education.”

Second, hiring internally saved significant time for OST programs. With a busy schedule between the end of the school year and the beginning of summer, and the often tight timeline to make the transition, hiring internally reduced the time spent hiring and training new staff. One OST program director explained that school-year program staff were familiar with program specifics such as OST policies and program strategies to implement activities. However, it is important that programs also be judicious in identifying staff members with the capacity to deliver high-quality programming in the summer environment. One middle-grades OST program director, for example, noted that he selected the staff members who he believed could best lead engaging activities in the “fast and intense” summer setting.

Hiring Internally: Staff Professional Development

Hiring internally allows OST program directors to be strategic in professional development plans for staff. As one OST program director explained, the continuity of school-year staff into the summer OST program means that staff are prepared to plan and implement summer programming because they have already received training from several sources, including DYCD TA providers and the provider organization.

This director also emphasized selecting of staff trainings during the school year with an eye towards summer: “If you are able to bring over most of your school-year staff, think about what trainings they can attend during the school year to help prepare them to implement programming during the summer.” Intentionally using school-year professional development opportunities to prepare staff for summer can be helpful as the summer schedule allows little time to provide extensive training on content and lesson delivery.

Finally, in addition to hiring staff who have worked with the program during the school year, many OST programs recruited new program staff for the summer session. Many OST program directors reported hiring college-age adults, including university students and individuals who worked at similar youth programs during the school year. Director recommended hiring these new staff early. One observed, “The summer is more intense than the school-year, so it’s important to bring people on as early as possible and orient them to the program and its routines.” Another OST program director reported that her program hired summer staff in May; they were invited to work the remainder of the school year to become familiar with the OST program’s routines. Once the summer began, the newly hired staff were paired with school-year OST program staff for continued training and support.

Be Strategic in Use of Younger Staff

OST programs also hired staff members through DYCD’s Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). For some programs, these young staff were former participants or youth who had served the program as volunteers during the school year. An OST program director noted that having SYEP staff created a “big brother and big sister” feel within the program, as SYEP staff served as support and role models for younger participants. However, SYEP staff also presented challenges because they were only a few years older than participants and needed extra guidance and supervision when compared with more experienced staff. In addition, DYCD regulations limit the number of hours that SYEP staff can work.

These challenges were magnified for OST programs that depended on SYEP staff to meet the required youth-adult ratios during the summer. However, several OST program directors interviewed for this study offered insight into ways directors could integrate SYEP staff effectively into the program. OST program directors reported that SYEP staff, if their roles were

clearly defined, could offer a range of helpful support to OST programs and complement the work of regular staff throughout the summer.

Program directors shared advice for working with SYEP staff:

- ***Be strategic in assigning responsibilities to SYEP staff.*** An OST program director recalled how regular staff expressed concern during the school year that they often lacked time to prepare for and implement activities; using SYEP staff to help with administrative tasks such as taking attendance, providing support during transitional periods, preparing materials, and organizing rooms allowed the OST program's regular staff to focus more on activity design. This director paired younger SYEP staff with administrative program staff to support administrative tasks, and paired older SYEP staff with program activity leaders to support implementation of activities. At another program, SYEP staff supported group leaders by leading small activities within an activity, such as leading ice-breaker and team-building activities.
- ***Be thoughtful when pairing SYEP staff with regular program staff.*** OST programs also found it effective to pair SYEP staff with experienced older staff who could provide ongoing training by modelling effective practices to manage groups and deliver content. The leaders at one OST program based the pairing on how well they thought SYEP staff would work with program staff and particular groups of participants. One OST program director recommended surveying SYEP staff before the program starts to learn more about their personalities and previous work experience with youth in order to facilitate these pairings.
- ***Provide structure and support for SYEP staff.*** One director reported that her program was very deliberate in developing its SYEP staff. The assistant OST program director met with SYEP staff every morning to review logistics and provide short professional development sessions related to summer programming (e.g., building positive relationships with participants). Similarly, another OST program director made sure that SYEP staff had clear expectations and responsibilities throughout the summer: "If I find that SYEP staff aren't engaged in a task, like planning our end-of-year show, a lot of times it's because they don't know what to do. Supervisors have to be explicit about responsibilities."

Use Education Specialists to Support Staff

DYCD requires all OST programs to hire an education specialist. The role of the education specialist is to support and enhance the quality of OST programs by identifying or developing curricula, coaching staff, and overseeing implementation. The education specialist can also play a critical role in providing support to staff in the summer. Some OST programs relied on the education specialist to train staff in the delivery of the summer curriculum and to model best practices. This on-site training served an important role in summer OST programs since training on lesson content and delivery prior to the start of summer is limited due to time constraints. In addition, because SYEP staff typically begin working on the first day of the

summer program, the education specialist in one program worked specifically with SYEP staff to bring them up to speed to support programming.

In another summer OST program, the education specialist met with group leaders for one hour a week to teach them how to deliver the curriculum. Other programs did not have time set aside for professional development, but their education specialist monitored classrooms and provided feedback to staff. The director for a STEM-focused summer program explained, for example, that the education specialist monitored staff to ensure that they were delivering the lessons with an inquiry-based approach. When the education specialist observed group leaders in STEM activities asking participants closed-ended questions, the education specialist would join the activity discussion and model how to pose questions to participants that spurred thought and engagement.

Finally, education specialists supported OST program staff in lesson planning. Group leaders and other staff often needed help in either expanding their lesson plans for the longer summer days or aligning them to the OST program's summer themes, as explained below. OST program directors reported that the education specialists worked with staff to ensure the lesson plans were solid and met the needs of the program.

Developing Summer Activities

Summer OST programs offered a variety of summer activities. According to responses to the online questionnaire administered by the PSA team, summer OST programs offered arts and recreation; set aside time for independent reading, journal writing, and book clubs; and engaged participants in robotics and other STEM activities. OST program staff used academic curricula such as *KidzScience*, *LitWorld*, and *KidzMath* to facilitate their activities or designed their own lesson plans. They also used social-emotional curricula such as *Who Moved My Cheese* and other curricula developed by their provider organization. For the most part, these activities were similar to activities offered during the school year. However, OST program directors took advantage of the longer summer program hours to explore topics in greater depth and to keep participants more active. As one director described, summer was focused on “projects, projects, projects” that reinforced learning.

This section described approaches used by OST program directors to develop activities specifically for summer programming.

Use Theme-based Programming

Incorporating theme-based programming helped program directors take advantage of the longer summer hours. Program directors interviewed for this study approached theme-based programming slightly differently. Two programs had a summer-long theme to guide all activities (superheroes and New York City, respectively). Another OST program had a different theme each week that covered topics from architecture to environmental studies. A fourth OST program heavily focused its summer activities around STEM.

Theme-based programming helped OST programs to structure lesson plans. Instead of a variety of unconnected activities, programs were able to align most summer activities to their summer theme. The director who implemented a weekly theme observed that using themes encouraged all group leaders to teach to similar concepts. In this program, all lessons were aligned to the weekly themes and tailored to each age group. For example, during the architecture theme week, the kindergarten class had lessons that focused on geometric shapes while older youth learned about different types of buildings and dwellings.

Similarly, group leaders in the OST program with the New York City theme implemented lesson plans for each activity tailored for the borough each group represented. In arts and crafts, participants created famous landmarks of the boroughs. The Staten Island group, for example, created the Staten Island Ferry using paper mâché. The Manhattan group recreated the Manhattan skyline using cardboard. In performing arts, participants performed dances to New York City artists representing each borough. For example, the Bronx group danced to Run DMC and KRS-1, Manhattan performed to Alicia Keys, and Staten Island to Lady Gaga. In character leadership, participants researched famous people of the borough and their contributions to that borough.

Theme-based programming also helped OST program directors to plan field trips. The program that studied architecture as a theme took participants to Midtown to look at different skylines, and they traveled to Flushing Meadows Park near the New York Hall of Science to study the architecture of surrounding buildings and the museum. The program with the superheroes summer theme organized a field trip to the Paley Center for Media, which held a superhero exhibit. All these field trips reinforced the themes and learning objectives, were not resource-intensive, and provided participants with summer experiences outside of the school building and their communities.

OST program directors offered several suggestions for theme-based summer programs:

- ***Consider the pros and cons of weekly themes vs. summer themes.*** Directors recommended weighing the pros and cons of following a single theme throughout the summer versus changing themes each week. For example, directors of programs with a single theme reported that participants were able to investigate topics over time and in depth. The OST program director with weekly themes believed that weekly or biweekly themes prevented the program from becoming stale, as participants were eager to learn about new topics each week. However, this OST program director also noted weekly themes required more effort and planning.
- ***Choose themes that are culturally relevant and engaging.*** While the superhero theme was relatable to many youth and capitalized on their fascination with pop culture and comic book characters, the director of this program observed that not all participants were interested in the superhero theme. OST program directors may need to plan for variations or interpretations of themes within a singular theme to be relevant and engaging to all participants.
- ***Engage staff in developing the theme.*** For the most part, OST program directors developed the themes on their own; however, they noted that it was important to gather input from staff. As one program director reported, she wanted staff to be

excited about the themes and activities since “staff engagement drives student engagement.”

- ***Research and plan field trips aligned with the theme.*** OST program directors emphasized the importance of researching all aspects of possible field trips. The director of the program that used borough themes gave group leaders the responsibility for planning visits to each borough. When they arrived at the New York Aquarium as part of their field trip to Brooklyn, only a limited portion of the facility was open due to damages from Hurricane Sandy. That OST program director advised other directors to give due diligence to researching field trips. In addition, OST programs should remain flexible and understand that it may not be feasible for trips to occur in the same week as the topic of the theme.

Use Partners and Resources Strategically

Several OST programs used partners to provide engaging programming during the summer. Some partnerships were new and others continued partnerships from the school year through the summer. OST program directors identified organizations to partner with from a variety of sources, including referrals from their provider organization, recommendations from parents and school staff, DYCD resources, and internet research.

Several OST program directors who used a theme-based approach to summer searched for partners that could specifically enhance their theme-based activities. For example, one OST program with a STEM theme partnered with the Salvatori Center to teach participants about architecture and with the Cornell Cooperative Extension to implement a 4-H curriculum in gardening. OST programs also used partners to supplement other enrichment activities; one OST program reached out to Sylvia Center, an organization it had partnered with during the school year, to offer cooking classes. It also partnered with PowerPlay, which facilitated a health and recreation curriculum for female participants.

OST program directors also used partnerships to provide support to staff so that they could successfully deliver curriculum and implement summer activities. For example, a middle-grades OST program decided to use the *Environmental Detectives* curriculum for its summer theme and focus on environment and water. However, the OST program director knew that her staff would need to be trained on water and the environment to ensure that they could implement the curriculum. The director reached out to several organizations to find free or low-cost training. She partnered with the Appalachian Mountain Club’s retreat center, which provided a three-day weekend training on water and the environment.

Similarly, one middle-grades program wanted to focus on service learning for the summer. According to the program director, staff had experience with service learning, but they needed to learn how to teach it. OST program staff attended a generationOn training, which helped program staff learn to focus more on the experiences and skills that youth would develop in the service learning process and less on the service project itself.

OST program directors offered two key considerations for identifying partnerships and resources:

- ***Identify partners that maximize the program budget.*** OST programs looked for partnership options that were free or that could fit in their program budget. One center-based OST program leveraged the provider organization’s resources to “barter” with other community organizations. For example, some organizations could not afford to rent space in the community center. In these instances, the director asked if the organizations could provide services for participants in exchange for use of space in the community center.
- ***Look outside the network.*** One OST program director encouraged programs to look outside of their existing network to find partners. This director sought out a range of partners to support the summer program themes, and, in the process, learned about resources and organizations that were new to her and could be valuable program partners.

Design Activities to Prevent Summer Learning Loss

In responses to an online survey, OST host school principals reported literacy as the most important skill for OST programs to help youth develop over the summer (55 percent), followed by math skills (47 percent) and social-emotional skills (28 percent). Findings from the survey also indicated that while schools and summer OST programs frequently communicated about the goals of the summer program, they were less likely to work together to design activities to target these summer learning needs: 66 percent of principals reported that school staff discussed goals of the summer program with OST staff either a little or a lot, while 45 percent reported that school staff worked with OST staff to align summer activities with school, city, or learning standards.

Using Summer to Pilot School-Year Curriculum

The summer served as a good opportunity to pilot new curricula, thanks to the longer day and ability to do in-depth programming. The education specialist in one OST program used the summer to experiment with different STEM curricula. If the curriculum worked well with OST program staff and participants during the summer, then the program would continue to use it during the school year.

As the education specialist piloted the STEM activities during the summer, she assessed the curriculum based on OST staff members’ ability to understand the content and approach. According to the OST program director, the program had experimented with STEM curricula before but found some of them to be too complicated for staff. The education specialist also assessed whether the curriculum challenged participants appropriately, and the length of time it took to implement STEM activities. If the activity took longer than the allotted hours during the summer OST program, then the activity would not be useful for the school year as the program’s hours of operation are shorter.

Interviews with OST program directors supported these survey findings and revealed that the design of activities and selection of curricula to address summer learning loss relied heavily on the experience and knowledge of the program’s education specialist in particular. Education specialists worked closely with OST program directors to develop lesson plans and select curricula for the summer. Education specialists also played an important role in ensuring that summer activities were learning-focused and could help prevent summer learning loss.

The educational specialist in one OST program worked closely with the program director to develop STEM and literacy activities that were hands-on and exploratory, reinforced academic learning, and fun. Cognizant of the summer setting, this education specialist intentionally chose learning activities that were different from school-day lessons. The OST program director commented that her program did not have participants to do math worksheets as they typically did after school during the school year. Instead, participants played games during transitional periods that helped youth implicitly build math skills. These games taught participants about reasoning and process of elimination and other skills tied to math.

Design Activities to Appeal to Middle-Grades Youth

OST program directors who reported success in engaging middle-grades youth offered developmentally appropriate activities that appealed to the interests of these older participants. They offered a combination of academic, arts, and recreational activities, and addressed topics such as healthy relationships and financial literacy. OST program directors designed activities that developed participants' skills sets and offered real-world experiences. These activities empowered youth with a certain level of autonomy, immersed them in their community, reinforced academic skills in math and literacy, and promoted 21st century skill sets, such as communications, planning, and advocacy, to prepare participants for educational and life success.

Middle-grades summer OST programs encouraged participants' voice and choice in the selection, planning, and implementation of activities. OST program directors noted that with empowered decisions, participants also had increased responsibilities. For example, prior to the start of summer programming at one middle-grades site, a group of participants selected and planned the activities and field trips that interested them the most. The OST program director explained that participants worked within a budget given to them to research and estimate costs of the activities and field trips for participants and staff members. They also were responsible for calculating the time and distance it would take to get to the selected destinations. Another OST program director reported that middle-grades participants at his program had "the opportunity to change activities by writing a proposal. For [participants] to change from their current activities, [they] were required to write a proposal on why they felt they would benefit from the change. Also, in the proposal the participants had to highlight how they will contribute [to] their new activity. The proposal was evaluated on grammar, content, [and] structure."

Some OST programs established their own version of SYEP to engage middle-grades participants. In one program, OST middle-grades participants worked side-by-side with staff in the second half of the day as camp counselors-in-training and assisted in the kindergarten through fifth-grade classrooms. Similarly, one OST program that served only elementary-grades participants used former participants who were transitioning to middle school as volunteers in its summer program.

A common approach to engaging middle-grades participants was through service learning that revolved around issues that appealed to participants. One OST program director described how middle-grades participants in the program's healthy living class developed and facilitated workshops for elementary-grades participants on the benefits of yoga. This program director observed, "This empowered them and motivated them to connect to the work they were doing."

Engaging Middle-Grades Youth: Service Learning

A middle-grades OST program director reported that she intentionally chose a summer service learning project that aligned to both participants' interests and to school-day learning objectives, including reading graphs, learning how to read nutrition labels, and learning about plant growth. The OST program partnered with Bronx Health Outreach to design a food justice campaign. Bronx Health Outreach provided resources to the program that explained food justice issues, such as the lack of access to healthy foods in low-income urban areas and the link between these food deserts, unhealthy eating habits, and health consequences. The curriculum, implemented by OST program staff, helped participants to identify the needs in their community and guided participants in how to respond to these needs. They also used that time to develop a plan of action and to design public education campaigns. On Fridays, participants went into the community to implement their action plans. For example, they met bodega owners to advocate for healthier options, worked in community gardens, and helped community food organizations distribute food to those in need.

Recommendations for DYCD

The findings from this exploratory study are not representative of the experience of all OST programs in summer 2013. However, they offer a glimpse into the strategies that OST programs used to meet their goals and to overcome common challenges in programming. In general, the PSA research team's interviews with program directors suggest that OST programs were most successful when they were proactive and strategic in their planning, when they leveraged relationships with schools and other community organizations, and when they were resourceful in seeking out resources and partners. Emerging from this study are the following recommendations for DYCD as it continues to explore ways to strengthen and support OST summer programs in the future.

- ***Disseminate a summer planning guide.*** OST programs navigated summer planning and implementation with varying degrees of success. Having a central resource to guide programs in proactively anticipating and addressing common challenges, including the possibility of location, would be valuable to OST programs. This resource could include best practices on integrating SYEP staff, developing partnerships, and identifying field trip opportunities. It also could offer specific suggestions for relocated programs, on issues from obtaining the mandatory regulatory licenses for the new host site and addressing facility challenges to quickly developing a strong partnership with the new site.
- ***Identify summer-specific professional development opportunities.*** OST programs need to prepare their staff for the demands of summer. Because of the longer, more intensive program periods, OST program directors interviewed wanted staff to have more content knowledge and a keener understanding of the theory behind project-based learning, for example. DYCD and its partners should explore training topics that could be offered during the school year to support programs in planning and delivering sequenced, longer summer activities (e.g., project-based learning, STEM, and leadership activities for middle-grades youth).

- ***Clarify expectations around summer learning loss.*** If an important goal of OST summer programming is to prevent summer learning loss, programs may need additional guidance about the ways and extent to which they are expected to focus on this issue. For example, does DYCD expect explicit alignment with school learning standards, or are activities that implicitly promote learning sufficient? Principals identified literacy as the most important skill for youth to practice over the summer: should OST programs be required to include a stronger focus on literacy?
- ***Revisit enrollment targets.*** Overall, enrollment and participation numbers were low in summer 2013, especially for middle-grades programs. DYCD should continue to push summer programs towards high standards. However, DYCD may want to re-examine if the current enrollment and participation expectations are realistic given the context of summer.

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