For students and teachers alike, summer is typically a time of rest and renewal. But after more than two years of living in a pandemic that triggered school closings, virtual learning, and staff shortages, this summer won’t offer much of a break.

A national survey conducted in January 2022 by AASA, The School Superintendents Association, reveals that there is an intense focus on academic recovery at schools across the country. More than three-quarters of the districts that responded said they would be using federal funds obtained last year on summer learning and enrichment programs in 2022.

The challenge for districts across the state is designing summer learning programs that appeal to students, teachers, and auxiliary staff as they struggle with absenteeism, employee shortages, pandemic fatigue, and mental health concerns.

Amid those obstacles, there’s consensus that strong summer school programs are essential to dealing with the learning loss related to the pandemic. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) estimated more than a year ago that students had lost roughly 3.2 months of instructional time due to the pandemic. This deficit was in addition to the standard summer slide — or the 2.5 months of learning loss that students typically experience every year during summer vacation.

Across the state, administrators are considering different strategies to address this learning loss by tapping into Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds authorized by Congress to mitigate the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, Texas received $1.3 billion in ESSER I funding, an additional $5.5 billion in ESSER II, and $12.4 billion in American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds (also referred to as ESSER III).

For the most part, districts have latitude in how to spend these funds, but federal guidelines require districts to spend at least 20% on addressing the impact of lost instructional time during the COVID-19 pandemic. The hope is that some of that catching up will happen this summer.

Summer program plans

In Laredo ISD, that means expanding summer learning opportunities beyond a traditional summer school program. It also includes addressing the needs of families in a district where 97% of students are economically disadvantaged. Some of the district’s ESSER funds, for example, have been used to help ensure basic access to laptops, tablets, and the internet.

This summer will mark the second year that LISD implements its Jump Start Program, which is open to all students — not just those needing academic interventions in summer school. Jump Start kicks off in late July, two weeks before the Aug. 11 start of school. The goal is to generate excitement and help students prepare for the new school year with a program that includes fine arts, physical education, and STEM programming, in addition to more traditional academics.

“One of the things that we required was that it is not just about academics,” LISD Superintendent Sylvia Rios said. “It had to renew that sense of fun, so we integrated swimming, we integrated fine arts into the program, so that when you’re coming back, you’re coming back as a full student.”

Jump Start is only one piece of Laredo’s approach to combatting learning loss, an effort that spans the entire year with expanded after-school programs and Saturday tutoring. Rios said keeping Jump Start open to all students in the district, rather than restricting it to those in need of academic remediation, has been essential.

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Staffing concerns

In Arlington ISD, summer programming is also focused on enrichment, but because of staffing issues, the district has decided to open its summer school slots to those students with the greatest needs.

“We’re trying to really focus in on small-group instruction and not just have a max capacity of 24 kids in a classroom because we couldn’t hire another teacher,” said Alison Larance, director of AISD’s Innovations and Operations Department. “We’re hiring teachers first and then looking at the kids. We group them by campus and look at the kids with the biggest gaps in ELAR [English Language Arts and Reading] and math to really focus in and invite those kids first.”

Like many districts, AISD is using ESSER III funds to boost the pay of summer school teachers in hopes of encouraging more to sign up. But the district is also looking at other ways to attract educators, including more flexibility and independence.

“Money is a motivator for some people but not for all,” Larance said. “We try to take a lot of the stress and planning and say, ‘Please come teach summer school. Here’s what we will provide you. You don’t have to do anything. You just have to show up and have fun.’”

They are also hoping that finalizing summer school locations and administrators will draw staff to these assignments as well. “[We say], ‘It’s going to be on your campus. You don’t have to change classes. You can stay here.’ So that’s an incentive sometimes,” she said. “It’s just location and knowing who your admin is going to be.”

A balancing act

Abilene ISD is also trying to support students this summer while ensuring it has enough teachers and staff to do so.

“We want to make sure that every kid has the opportunity to be enriched and fall in love with school, and we have plenty of talented people to do those things,” said Joseph Waldron, the district’s chief financial officer. “One of the big concerns is can we get the talented people to continue working over the summer because they likely need a break, too. It’s a giant balancing act, and I’m not sure how it’s going to go.”

A priority for Abilene is adding learning loss aides to its classrooms to help support teachers and expand capacity for small-group interventions. The district has also hired middle school teachers to help staff a bridge program to support students with the greatest needs.

A holistic approach

Yet it’s essential that districts look beyond just the academic needs of their students, according to Duncan Klussmann, a clinical assistant professor in education leadership and policy studies at the University of Houston.

“To address the learning loss, we first have to address the disruption in [students’] lives. If we’re totally focused on the academic side, we’re missing so much,” Klussmann said. “The academic side will come along if we take the opportunity to focus on the human side of what’s going on.”

He agreed that focusing on enrichment is key to helping students get back on track. Summer programs, said Klussmann, should “give students time to develop their socialization skills and be able to process what they’ve lived through over the last two years.”

Timelines and deadlines

As districts plan for summer school this year, there is also the understanding that it’s going to take years, not months, to make up for what was lost during the pandemic. A provision of the ESSER III funds requires that districts spend their full allotments by September 2024. Administrators are already worried about what happens after that money dries up.

“There will likely be things on the list that we would like to keep going but can’t because the money has run out,” said Waldron. “This year we like to say that cost is no object — whatever the kids need — but eventually cost will be an object. It is hard to think through that.”

Klussmann would like to see districts given more flexibility in the timeline for spending ESSER funds, especially as they figure out what works best in addressing learning loss.

“We need to acknowledge that that three-year time period when those funds are released is not going to be a long enough time to do the work we need with the kids,” he said. “If you have until year four or five to spend those dollars, then you can add additional dollars in as long as you can prove it’s effective.”

In LISD, Rios is preparing to address learning loss in her students — not just this summer, but for the next five years.

“I think it will take a lot of dedication, not just from our kids but from our parents and staff. I think it’s going to have to involve the whole community,” said Rios. “We can’t say now you’re going to be forever five years behind. We have to be able to provide what is necessary to catch up.”

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