

Kids need summer school more than ever, but N.J. educators worry about burnout

By [Josh Axelrod | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

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Sarah Shek, a first year teacher, goes over lessons in her kindergarten class at Sycamore Drive Elementary School in Hazlet. Friday, September 11, 2020. Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media

Beleaguered students already undoubtedly have their minds on vacation down the Shore, sleepaway camp and the intoxicating jingle of the ice cream

truck which signifies the sweet arrival of summer break.

But, after an arduous slog through oftentimes ineffective remote instruction, two words may soon shatter classroom daydreams: summer school.

"We need all the time we can get before we hit the fall to recover the learning losses from this past year," Highland Park Schools Superintendent Scott Taylor told NJ Advance Media.

Without those critical ten weeks of crunch time, recovery could stretch into next year, which Gov. Phil Murphy has already promised should [see a full return to school buildings](#).

"We don't want the next school year to be all about recovering learning loss," Taylor said. "We want to be able to rebuild our school communities next year."

So the question for administrators is how to use those weeks to their advantage, a dilemma underscored by state data which shows roughly 1 in 3 New Jersey students [will need "strong support" academically](#) after a strenuous year of school shutdowns and remote instruction.

In previous years, districts have typically offered some sort of summer learning program, sometimes for remediation, but also to earn advanced credits or participate in enrichment activities and sports camps.

In Highland Park, the summer program has been a small academic-only remediation program for students with strong need and an extended school year program for students with special needs. This year, Taylor expects to double or even triple enrollment and revitalize the program to meet new pandemic-era needs.

While districts are still hammering out their summer plans, Taylor outlined a

rough shape for Highland Park Schools. Students will likely participate in small group intensive instruction for half-days with plenty of mental health and social-emotional learning baked into the program.

"We're going to try to make it fun, engaging — we're going to get the kids outdoors as much as we can," Taylor said.

Across the state, in Gloucester County's Delsea Regional School District, the approach will differ dramatically.

"It's so important to fill the learning holes, I don't want that to get lost in, 'let's make it fun for the kids...'" Superintendent Piera Gravenor, told NJ Advance Media. "We have to entice them, because they're not required to come, but we have to kind of trick the kids into learning."

Whereas, Highland Park's program will probably feature intramural sports, yoga and meditation, Delsea Regional, a two-school district that only serves grades 7-12, will stick mostly to the books.

The program will likely be classroom-based to recoup losses in literacy and math, though still featuring a much-needed focus on social-emotional learning as well as team-building.

"I have to walk this really narrow line of making it academic but not turning the kids off," Gravenor said. "I don't want it to be just a continuation of the school year — I have to make it so the kids are enjoying it and want to come back each day, because a disaffected kid already in the school year is hard enough to entice to come back in the summer."

To bolster their summer offerings, districts will benefit from federal and state funds. President Joe Biden's stimulus plan [currently earmarks nearly \\$130 billion](#) for K-12 schools with specific mention of "summer learning, extended

day or extended school year programs.”

And the New Jersey Department of Education has designated federal funds from the last COVID relief bill to “Learning Acceleration Grants” which can be used for “summer learning academies, school year learning acceleration academies, and one-on-one tutoring” a department spokesperson told NJ Advance Media.

Gravenor will begin meeting weekly with her Instructional Taskforce and Student Achievement Committee to hash out her district’s summer plans, and discuss, among other topics, how to staff the program.

She worries that teachers may be exhausted from a taxing school year and won’t volunteer to forfeit their vacation for the extra pay. A recent [nationwide survey](#) showed only about one-third of teachers in favor of summer school and about one-fifth supporting a shorter summer break.

Over in Newark, John Abeigon, president of the teachers union, said staffing shouldn’t be a problem in his district. Once Newark students go back to some in-person schooling on April 12, teachers will see safety measures in place and have classroom management under control.

“It’s not mandatory that they teach [summer school]. So, if they don’t want to teach during the summer, if they themselves need time to recuperate, spend time with their own school-aged children, that’s fine,” Abeigon told NJ Advance Media. But that shouldn’t prevent the district from finding a sufficient number of teachers to volunteer once they put out a call, he said.

Beyond staff participation, there’s also concern among educators about burnout from students.

“I know students are just, to use their terms, they’re just over all of this,”

Gravenor said. "They might just want a break from school!"

The parent of two kindergarteners in Jersey City Public Schools, Jackie Cox Battles feels strongly that summer school isn't the answer. After a challenging year of remote instruction, her kids are struggling with the hours on end in front of a screen and lack of socialization.

Instead of cutting summer vacation short, Battles wants to see districts conduct a deep review of students' needs at the beginning of the next school year and adjust the curriculum accordingly.

"Though I understand why one would think summer school is a good idea, we're not talking about 12 weeks of school missed," Battles told NJ Advance Media. "These boys, and so many others, have missed an entire year of in person learning. A few weeks of summer school is not going to change that.

"Our focus is to build them back up as little people this summer with activities that promote self-confidence and fun. We want them to make friends, socialize and be kids as the pandemic as robbed them of those experiences," she added.

While Hillsborough parent Jacqui Seelig wants her third grader to still spend time at the local pool and day camp, she does plan to enroll her in summer school, once the option becomes available.

She'd like to see Hillsborough Schools offer a program that allows her daughter either a couple days of instruction a week or mornings in the classroom, so she can brush up on her math skills.

"I feel that she needs to make up some work [and] catch up a little bit from what she's lost over the last year," Seelig told NJ Advance Media.

With parents concerned, students exhausted and teachers exasperated,

administrators certainly have their work cut out for them. They'll spend the rest of an already-hectic spring devising programs and drawing their blueprints for learning recovery.

"Right now, it's brand-new – although we've done summer programs for many, many years, this year is going to be a brand-new approach to it, and we're all trying to build that as we go," Gravenor said.

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