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Education

N.J. students are still behind in learning. Will summer school be the ‘magic fix’?

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Second grade students enjoy breakfast that was supplied by the program with their teacher during the "Summer Ed-venture" program at Connecticut Farms Elementary School in Union on Friday, July 8, 2022. Julian Leshay | For NJ Advance M

By [Brianna Kudisch | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

It's a sunny July morning, but Connecticut Farms Elementary School in Union is filled with the sounds of kids shooting basketballs in the gym, students in a classroom learning about engineering bridges and a teacher using picture books for a lesson on social skills.

While most of the state's students are out of school for summer, the 35 third and fourth graders in the Union's "Summer Ed-venture" program are spending three weeks in the classroom trying to get a jump on the next school year.

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They are rotating through language arts, science, technology and math-focused classes, in addition to working on social and emotional learning skills.

Summer school classes like these have always been used to help students catch up on skills they didn't master during the school year. But in recent years they've become increasingly important to help kids who still haven't recovered from learning lost during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Last summer really wasn't the magic fix that some of us hoped it would be," said Scott Taylor, the Union Township schools superintendent. "This summer is not going to be the magic fix either, but it's probably going to be a whole lot better than last summer."



Fourth grade students have fun and play basketball in the gymnasium as part of the "Summer Ed-venture" program at Connecticut Farms Elementary School in Union on Friday, July 8, 2022. Julian Leshay | For NJ Advance M

After a massive influx of federal COVID-19 funds, many districts and nonprofits are addressing gaps in students' learning on their own, partly through a combination of summer school programs, high-dosage tutoring and other approaches.

This summer provides the opportunity for students to partially regain lost academic and social ground, although advocates caution summer school is just one piece of a years-long puzzle to address the gaps.

For some districts, the summer programs are more costly this year, amid a backdrop of inflation, teacher shortages and increased material costs. Some educators also say tackling disparities in students' social and emotional learning, or SEL, is just as important as addressing academic learning loss this summer.

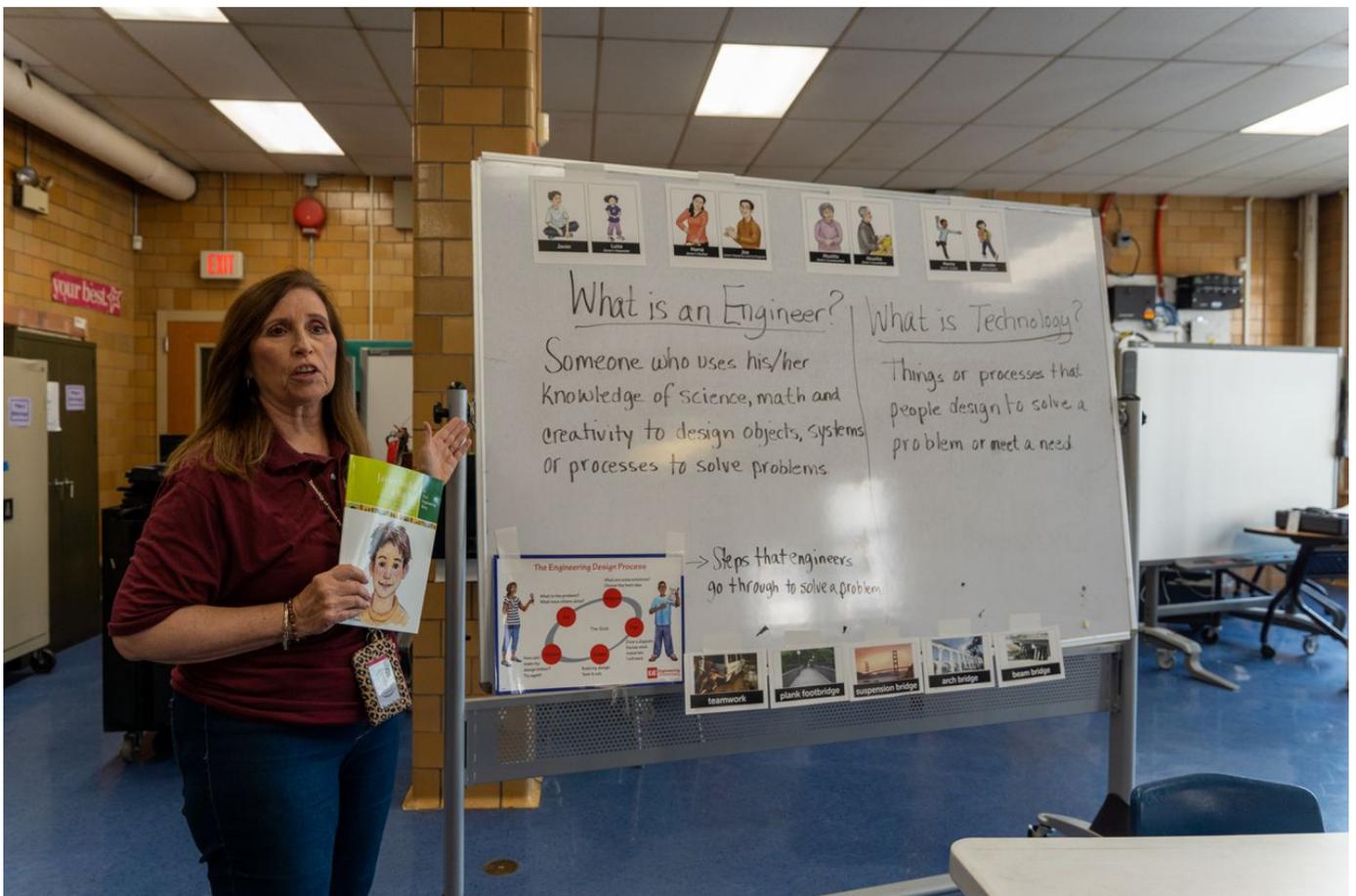
At the program in Union, SEL lessons are woven in throughout the half-day program. Students work in small groups, check in with how they're feeling and use reading materials that focus on empathy and relationships. This summer's theme of building bridges emphasizes connections, both physical and emotional, school officials said.

"Social emotional learning, especially after everything that's happened with COVID and everybody being isolated— that has really taken the forefront of what we feel the students need," said Christina Lam, the school's Title I coordinator, who organized the program.

It is unclear how many of the state's nearly 600 public school districts are offering summer school or special summer catch-up programs for students this year. A spokeswoman for the state Department of Education did not immediately respond to a question about the number of students enrolled in summer school statewide.

New Jersey received \$4.3 billion in federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, or ESSER, money from three major COVID-relief packages. Ninety percent of that went directly to school districts, and schools must use 20% of the most recent round of funding for learning loss initiatives, according to a state Department of Education spokesman.

The state's remaining ESSER funds have been used to fund learning loss grants and resources and mental health support staffing grants.



Fourth grade teacher, Mary Ellen Patricco, shows a white board with a lesson about civil engineering and bridge building at Connecticut Farms Elementary School in Union on Friday, July 8, 2022. Julian LeMay / For NJ Advance Media

In late May, the advocacy group JerseyCAN released new data showing COVID's impact on learning. The numbers said most New Jersey students remain behind. The data showed 58% of tested students were one to three years behind in reading, and 68% are one to three years behind in math.

"I think what we've seen in the data... is that the needs are tremendous. We think that summer programming is going to be helpful towards meeting those needs," said Janellen Duffy, a senior advisor at JerseyCAN.

"But we need to be realistic that it's going to take significant effort over time to address those needs and get students back on track," she added.

Helping students with social and emotional growth is also a critical area of focus for superintendents across the state this summer.

Taylor, the Union Township superintendent, said his district's 13 summer programs are similar to pre-COVID years. But teachers are tailoring their plans to help with learning loss and social-emotional gaps. Circle talks, when students gather on the carpet in a circle for in-depth daily talks, for example, let students engage in conversation and help build their interpersonal skills, he said.

The interpersonal skills of SEL are crucial to addressing academic loss because, without them, students often get discouraged and become less confident in their abilities, Taylor said. Students who can't relate to others often won't have a good sense of self-worth, further eroding their ability to regain academic ground.

"And that self-worth is gold when it comes to being able to overcome academic challenges," Taylor said.

In Gloucester County, the Logan Township school district is offering a two-week summer "boost" camp for recommended students who may not feel connected to school, officials said.

Teachers are completing activities with students— from cooking and gardening to playing guitar and board games— that incorporate aspects of academic learning, but largely focus on relationship-building.

The district is funding the program through a federal education [grant](#). They started the boost camp last summer, experimenting and seeing what worked, said superintendent Patricia Haney.

"We're taking a leap of faith, but we believe in this so much so that we're focused on building the relationships and building a sense of community," she said.



In the summer of 2021, the program served 2,000 students. Program officials are expecting 3,000 students this summer. Provided by Katherine Bassett

Some nonprofit groups are also offering summer programs, including the [NJ Summer Tutoring Corps](#). Launched last year with philanthropic backers, the program centers on creating personal tutoring groups—often with three students per tutor—in hour-long sessions a few times a week.

Data from last year's students showed encouraging results, said executive director Katherine Bassett. Rising kindergarteners through fifth graders were given a pre- and post-program test to compare growth in math, the only curriculum they were focusing on at the time.

Students improved anywhere from 13 to 69 percentage points, depending on the grade, she said.

Equally important to Bassett were the results showing social-emotional learning, or SEL, growth. SEL includes teaching students to build healthy relationships, become self-aware and other interpersonal skills. For the students in the program, 94% said they'd be more willing to ask for help when they needed it.

This summer, the tutoring program is again serving about 2,000 students and has expanded its curriculum. It will include 20 sites at Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCAs, enabling the program to "truly be statewide," Bassett said, with the most southern site in Atlantic County bordering Cape May County.

The program received \$1 million in the state budget, which Gov. Phil Murphy recently [signed](#) into law.

More than two years after the pandemic disrupted the education of more than a million New Jersey students, advocates say it is vitally important kids start catching up soon.

In many districts, students are no longer held back a grade when they fall behind, Bassett said. So, a student in fourth grade who is two grades behind in their academic work will typically still get promoted to the fifth grade, taking their learning loss with them unless they can catch up during the summer.

“And that’s what we need to stop— we need to put an end to that learning loss being unbridgeable,” she said.

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"Summer Ed-venture" program at Connecticut Farms Elementary School in Union

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