

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

Summer School Planning: Tips and Tools to Accelerate Learning

Summer school is more important than ever. It is a critical time many administrators have identified to accelerate student learning, closing both academic and social/emotional gaps caused by instructional time lost. But there's one big problem—our teachers are burned out from the unprecedented realities of pandemic teaching. With teaching and staff shortages, educators are stretched thinner than ever before, and very few, if any, are able to emotionally, mentally, or physically entertain the idea of teaching summer school! In addition to staff shortages, we're facing the grim reality that offering the same instructional strategies and resources is likely to yield the same results, which isn't sufficient to cover the kind of instructional loss the pandemic has induced.

So we're faced with a challenging summer school mission: We must reinvent teaching and learning this summer with immersive experiences that are richer, more engaging, more authentic, and more rigorous. And we must recruit and equip staff to deliver those experiences while improving morale, not furthering burnout. It's a challenging task, to be sure, but also an exhilarating one. In the words of the X Men's Professor Charles Xavier, "The process is slow, normally taking thousands and thousands of years. But every few hundred millennia, evolution leaps forward." Perhaps now is the time for education to finally leap forward in ways that make learning more meaningful, memorable, and fun!

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Tips for Recruiting Summer School Teachers

Our first challenge is finding able teachers who have the wherewithal left to teach summer school. Schools can now access more federal funding than ever before, and I can't think of a better use for those funds than to help recruit, reward, and retain teachers. After all, educators are the single most influential ingredient in determining a student's success. Here are 4 ideas to help recruit top talent for your 2022 summer school session.

- **Increase pay.** This is an obvious one, and usually an impossible one; however, with the federal funding available, we can offer teachers financial incentives to take on this extra work. Money doesn't solve everything but it goes a long way. We are seeing many schools increasing typical hourly rates anywhere from 20%-100%. Most commonly, we're seeing rates of pay between \$35/hour and \$60/hour.
- **Use incoming new teachers for summer school.** If you're hiring new teachers, fresh out of college, for the fall semester, consider bringing them in early and having them teach a summer school class. They won't be bringing the same kind of emotional baggage from this school year that their veteran peers will be. Plus, it will give them some practical experience to work out the kinks before the fall.
- **Cap class size at 10 students.** The thing teachers really want, even more than more money, is to be able to do the job they love well. Consider reducing class sizes for summer so that teachers can be more successful in building relationships, differentiating instruction, and helping each student reach their full potential.
- **Allow teaching of passion projects.** Give teachers the flexibility to innovate on their typical curriculum. If they have a subject area or a project they are passionate about, that will no doubt keep students motivated. So ask teachers what they want to teach. Chances are, they'll be able to tie what they're passionate about teaching to the identified academic and/or social emotional goals that have been identified, and everybody wins.

Plan for Reinventing Teaching and Learning

While you recruit your teaching staff, here's a 5-step plan to pull off this inimitable summer school mission.



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1. Establish Your Summer School Guiding Principles

Ask yourself what a successful summer school program will look like. Your answer will provide a consistent vision for teachers and staff so you can ensure alignment across the team. It also helps everyone stay focused on what is most important when the inevitable day-to-day distractions emerge. Given the profound disruption to both academic as well as social/emotional development, consider outlining guiding principles for each of these areas. Craft the vision that makes the most sense for you and your school or district, but these might be a good place to start.

Summer School 2022 Guiding Principles	
Academic	Social/Emotional
Students experience more challenging and more engaging school experiences.	Students engage with the broader community and demonstrate an increased sense of belonging.
All students receive grade-level content (with appropriate scaffolds).	All students have equitable access to the programming.
Instruction addresses identified learning gaps, but also serves as a springboard for 2022-23 and beyond.	Students develop identities as competent, successful learners.

2. Identify Learning Gaps and Goals

If you want to accelerate learning this summer, you'll need to be focused. Teachers will need to understand exactly what skills and standards students need to learn. They'll also need to use their time wisely, focusing on the areas that are most critical for mastering on-grade-level work going forward.

- **Collect clear and actionable data.** Use state tests, diagnostic assessments, and formative assessments. These tools can offer a wealth of information, but you also want to check in with the source closest to the students — the teachers. Have teachers take this quick survey ([K-5](#) or [6-12](#)) to reflect on any instructional gaps or unfinished learning they observed. Teachers know what content got short shrift and where students might be falling behind, so take advantage of that knowledge.
- **Focus on power standards.** Not all standards are created equal, so taking some time to determine your power standards will help teachers know what content matters most. When determining which standards are most critical, consider these categories:
 - **Building Block:** How much future learning builds off this standard?
 - **Multidisciplinary:** How applicable is this standard across content areas?
 - **Level of Thinking:** How much cognitive demand is required, from simple recall to application to creation?

These [standards-scoring sheets](#) score all content standards (Grades K–8) according to these criteria, highlighting the highest scoring standards as power standards. But the best part is, this tool is completely editable, so feel free to change the scores if you have a different interpretation. Or change out one of the categories, perhaps using level of learning loss. Use this tool to identify your power standards and ensure summer school instruction yields the greatest long-term benefit.

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT: Summer School Planning

3. Explore and Select Authentic Learning Experiences

If there's one piece of advice I have to offer for reinventing teaching and learning, it's this. Instead of thinking: "I have to teach _____. How can I make _____ interesting?" Flip that script to: "What would my students find interesting? How can I connect _____ [what I need to teach] _____ to that?" If you start with an authentic experience that will genuinely engage the students, you can almost always find a connection to the content you need to teach.

So encourage teachers to explore ideas for authentic learning experiences. You want experiences with following characteristics:

- Sustained Inquiry
- Engagement
- Collaboration
- Student Choice/Ownership
- Cross-curricular
- Authentic Audience
- Iterative Thinking
- Real-world Application

If you find teachers are struggling to see the difference between a simple, culminating project and a project-based learning unit, you might try the [Project vs. Project-Based Learning Sorting Activity](#) with them. In these 6 scenarios, teachers determine whether each is an example of a PBL unit or just a project.

This simple activity takes about 5 minutes, can be done in a staff meeting, and will help teachers see PBL as a continuum. Projects can always be enhanced to offer more authentic learning characteristics and thus deeper learning experiences.

If you're looking for project-based learning ideas, Blue Apple has [dozens of easy-to-scan ideas](#) to kick off the exploration. And if you want to share a couple specific project ideas, take a look at these two powerful Blue Apple projects.



[In this project](#), students learn to debate respectfully as they research all sides of relevant issues and take a position on a topic of their choice. Then, they share their position with an inspirational podcast!

- This [Project Overview](#) provides a lesson by lesson summary of this project.
- Here is a [book list](#) of rich, diverse literature on the topic of advocacy.
- Here are sample [content standard connections](#) for this project.
- To see this project in action, check out the [project video](#).



[In this project](#), students make friends with a resident of a retirement home, listen to their story, and craft a biography that they share with their new senior friend and their friend's family.

- This [Project Overview](#) provides a lesson-by-lesson summary of this project.
- Here is a [book list](#) of rich, diverse literature on the topic of aging.
- Here are sample [content standard connections](#) for this project.
- To see this project in action, check out the [project video](#).

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4. Align Learning Goals

Once the project experiences are selected, then you can match your content standard instruction with the various parts of your PBL experience. For example, if students are doing the project Take a Stand where they debate an issue and make a podcast to share their views, consider all the math that can be done with the timestamps of a podcast. You could also explore the argument standards you could cover as they shape their opinions; or the science content you could address around sound; or the civics issues you could delve into. The list is endless. Most any content can connect to an authentic learning experience. You just have to get creative!

For examples of standards connected to more PBL units, check out www.blueappleteacher.org/standards.

5. Training and Resources

Summer school teachers don't have the time or bandwidth to create robust PBL units and match them to core content curriculum. Instead, look for solutions that minimize teacher planning time in the spring and maximize teacher support and student engagement in the summer.

[VAI's Project-Based Summer School](#) program includes the training and resources to support teachers without requiring them to spend weeks planning and preparing. It includes Blue Apple projects that provide lesson-by-lesson resources, with enough structure to be turnkey, but enough flexibility to adapt as needed and take advantage of those impromptu teachable moments.

Teachers don't need days and days of PD, but they also shouldn't be dropped into a classroom empty-handed. The [VAI Project-Based Summer School](#) program is designed to give teachers just the right amount of training to feel confident and competent in delivering robust PBL instruction this summer, without taking too much of their precious recuperation time.

Planning for Summer School 2022 is certainly one of our more challenging feats, but it can also be one of the most rewarding. If you are ready to reimagine teaching and learning this summer, we hope this plan is useful, and wish you tremendous success this summer!

[Click here](#) if you would like to see a FREE 30-minute webinar of this content:
Summer School Planning: Tips and Tools to Accelerate Learning

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