

Why youth access to summer opportunities matters and how we can understand and increase it

Lessons from two years of research and collaboration with more than 500 students and 200 parents at 5 Boston area public middle schools

Report by Ramon Gonzalez, Director of Give a Summer

GIVE A SUMMER

BECAUSE EVERY KID DESERVES A GREAT SUMMER

This report was published in March 2016 by Give a Summer.

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Give a Summer is a nonprofit dedicated to expanding access to summer opportunities to all students. Give a Summer develops new ways to understand and increase youth access to summer opportunities, and works with partners and through public advocacy to bring its innovations to scale. View more of Give a Summer's plans and progress at giveasummer.org.

Executive Summary

As almost all of us recognize and some have [argued](#),¹ summer opportunities matter tremendously to children.

However, few communities have a sense of what their youth do over the summer, and almost no community knows what challenges its youth and families face accessing summer opportunities.² That limits our ability – as schools or summer programs, advocates or reformers, politicians or parents – to help those who are not able to access summer opportunities. Without that information, communities working to improve summer opportunities are left just trying to increase the number and quality of those opportunities: difficult, critical, but still insufficient work to ensure that all students have access to them. And advocates trying to expand summer opportunities are limited to pointing to the many great things that happen at summer programs without the ability to show all the barriers that prevent more students from participating in programs, allowing others to be complacent that enough has been done.

Give a Summer conducted novel and comprehensive³ multi-year student and parent surveys that give us a rich and complex picture of youth participation in and access to summer opportunities. The findings from Give a Summer's partnership with five Boston area public middle schools should galvanize summer advocates by highlighting how we fall well short of substantive access to summer opportunities for all students. Give a Summer's work goes further, showing how even the opportunity to become interested in summer programs in the first place varies considerably across schools and neighborhoods. Additionally, Give a Summer's work illustrates how better understanding youth access to summer opportunities can empower youth-serving organizations, and when done at scale, the communities in which they serve, with powerful insights so they can then more effectively help their students access summer opportunities.

¹ As an example, see [Summer Can Set Kids on the Right – or Wrong – Course](#), National Summer Learning Association, (last visited March 16, 2016),

http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.summerlearning.org/resource/collection/CB94AEC5-9C97-496F-B230-1BECDFC2DF8B/Research_Brief_02_-_Alexander.pdf. Archived at <https://perma.cc/8R8B-BUHL>.

² See Appendix 1.

³ As explained more in Appendix 2, the overall student response rate across Give a Summer's five partner schools was 85%, with a parent response rate of 40%.

Give a Summer's ten key takeaways

1. Given the wide variation in participation across grades and schools, communities need comprehensive surveying to identify and help the students most missing out over the summer.
2. Helping students attend a program pays multi-year dividends as Give a Summer's research found students who attended a program are twice as likely to attend a program the following summer.
3. One school's students enjoy summer programs the most and also have the highest participation rate, showing there is no inherent trade-off between greater participation and student satisfaction.
4. Students may enjoy their programs because they attend many different ones and participate in lots of activities. Collecting and sharing that information can help classmates find great programs.
5. Student interest varies considerably across schools and grades, suggesting that student interest can be shaped and enhanced by school and community support.
6. All schools had a substantial minority of students who were interested in attending a summer program but did not end up going to one.
7. Program expense was the greatest barrier to accessing programs, though other barriers were close behind, such that addressing program expense alone is insufficient to give meaningful access to summer opportunities.
8. Family vacation conflicts are a concern for students, though few students end up taking more than a week of vacation. Targeted support and information-sharing can help students find great summer opportunities that work around family plans.
9. Give a Summer identified groups of students that might especially benefit from individualized support. This support is only possible with comprehensive youth and parent surveys.

10. There is a lot more work to do to understand youth access to summer opportunities and to translate those insights into action, and it is work to do together.

Give a Summer calls for every community to annually and comprehensively ask what students did over the summer, what they want to do next summer, and what barriers they face to accessing great summer opportunities. Only by collecting, analyzing, and sharing this information can we understand where and why youth miss out over the summer and what steps should be taken to address these missed opportunities. Unequal outcomes for children over the summer are in part a reflection of broad inequality in this country. But they are also a product of strengths and missed opportunities in our local communities as well, patterns we can understand and address. As Give a Summer has previously [written](#),⁴ we have to care about and count every child's opportunities, and there can be no break from that.

⁴ Ramon Gonzalez, [Summertime for Republicans: Expanding Opportunities for Kids](#), Real Clear Education. (August 14, 2015), http://www.realcleareducation.com/articles/2015/08/14/summertime_for_republicans_expanding_opportunities_for_kids_1219.html. Archived at <https://perma.cc/958Y-5WCY>.

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Youth access to summer opportunities matters and we need to act to understand it

We often call June, July, and August summer break, but during those months far too many children miss out on the chance to pursue their passions, learn new things, and enjoy enriching programs, with friends old and new. They need and deserve more than good luck to access those opportunities: we need systematic work to understand and address barriers preventing youth, especially youth from lower income and minority communities, from accessing great summer opportunities.

What youth do – and do not get to do – over the summer matters. Over the summer, youth from lower income families on average [lose two months of reading ability](#),⁵ while their better-off peers actually make gains. These [effects accumulate over the years](#)⁶ and explain much of the achievement gap. And then there is the opportunity gap: by age 12, youth from lower income households have spent about [6,000 fewer hours](#)⁷ engaged in out of school learning environments and activities than their wealthier peers, with more than 1,000 of those hours occurring over the summer.

Lack of access to summer programs affects everything from [the nutrition and health of youth from lower income households](#)⁸ to the ability of parents to [juggle work and childcare](#)⁹ when school is out. For older students, a recent study in Chicago [found](#)¹⁰ that summer job programs lead to dramatic, sustained reductions in youth violence. Less studied, but perhaps no less significant, summer programs and job

⁵ Harris Cooper et al., [The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A Narrative and Meta-Analytic Review](#), *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 66 no. 3, p. 227. (1996), <http://rer.sagepub.com/content/66/3/227.abstract>.

⁶ Jennifer Sloan McCombs et. al, [Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning](#), Rand Corporation, p. 20 – 25. (2011), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1120.pdf. Archived at <https://perma.cc/XQE3-K8XS>.

⁷ [The 6,000 Hour Learning Gap](#), ExpandedED Schools. (October 30, 2013), <http://www.expandedschools.org/policy-documents/6000-hour-learning-gap#sthash.bk6S19Q8.ueXZ7pO0.dpbs>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/8VSP-YVZN>.

⁸ [Healthy Summers for Kids: Turning Risk Into Opportunity](#), National Summer Learning Association. (May 2012), http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.summerlearning.org/resource/resmgr/Healthy_Summers_INSLA_Healthy_Summer_s_for_Kid.pdf. Archived at <https://perma.cc/3F9W-HEVG>.

⁹ [School's Out for Summer – What's a Working Parent to Do?](#) Workplace Fairness. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://www.workplacefairness.org/reports/summer-work-06/working-parents.php>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/FMZ7-SLW7>.

¹⁰ Sara B. Heller, [Summer jobs reduce violence among disadvantaged youth](#), *Science*, vol. 346 issue 6214, p. 1219. (2014), <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/346/6214/1219>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/3NTR-5PSP>.

opportunities may give youth the experience, ability, and confidence to navigate new environments and organizations, giving them a leg up (or helping them catch up) when it comes to applying to and thriving in college¹¹ and in their first job.

While the range of these findings on summer's impact may be surprising, the general intuition – that what children get to do over what add up to years of summer growing up strongly affects their development – is obvious to any parent or child.

Some may worry that summer opportunities are imposing more structure on already over-scheduled students, interfering with spontaneous, authentic, and family-oriented summer experiences. It is worth taking that concern seriously – though it is also worth questioning whether those making that argument are leaving other, poorer families to the freedom of fewer opportunities while giving their own children the benefit of great summer programs. But more than that, these concerns miss how the great variety of summer programs and opportunities can give students the diverse, engaging activities they may be missing out on at school as well as complement other family-oriented summer plans.

More fundamentally, we need the concern and humility to ask students and parents directly what they want to do over the summer, what challenges they face, and, by sharing this information, help schools, in-school programs, summer programs, community groups, and cities make summer programs accessible to all students. Not all kids and parents may want their child to go to a summer program or other structured summer opportunity, but many others may also not have had the opportunity to become interested in programs, especially programs that they could attend. And we should be deeply shaken – as the findings from Give a Summer's work confirm¹² – that many children from lower income and minority neighborhoods wanted to go to a summer program but did not get to attend one.

¹¹ The lessons and work on college access suggest that technical equality – anyone can visit a college website or apply, sort of – are wholly insufficient to give all students meaningful access to college opportunities. See [Increasing College Opportunity for Low-Income Students: Promising Models and a Call to Action](#), The Executive Office of the President. (January 2014), https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/white_house_report_on_increasing_college_opportunity_for_low-income_students_1-16-2014_final.pdf. Archived at <https://perma.cc/46SG-U8T2>. Given the similar and perhaps even greater absence of support to help youth access to summer opportunities, inequities in access to college suggests far too many youth lack meaningful access to summer program opportunities as well.

¹² See Takeaway 6.

Unfortunately, at the national, state, or local level, there are very few answers to these questions. What answers do exist are mostly about how many students participated in programs or occasionally what percent of students did so, and even then, results often are just for one summer and do not measure year-to-year changes.¹³ While helpful to advocates and as an imperfect measuring stick for progress, the work does not allow advocates to make concrete arguments about inequities in their home communities. It leaves those committed to expanding access to summer opportunities unsure which of many plausible plans to pursue, for example: raising awareness about summer opportunities, easing transportation challenges, changing program schedules to align with parents' jobs or family vacation plans, or offering new types of programs. And of course, the basic answers about how many students in a city participated in summer programs do not much help youth-serving organizations take effective action now to help more of their students participate great programs. To do that, we need to take seriously not just youth outcomes over the summer, but also the decision-making processes and external constraints that shape them.

Give a Summer calls for systematic efforts so that every community can answer these questions, and it is working with partners to do so. Each year, we should ask all students in all grades (and their parents) if they went to a summer program over the summer and what they did there, are they interested in going to a program next summer and what types of activities would they like to participate in, and what challenges do they face in making great summer plans. We should analyze their responses, sharing the results publicly to increase public accountability for summer opportunities and to guide community-wide initiatives to increase access to summer opportunities. These results would also help summer programs, new and old, tailor their offerings to meet the interests and address the constraints families face. Additionally, these results should be shared with youth-serving organizations, such as schools, in-school programs, and [mentor](#)¹⁴ organizations, to give these

¹³ See Appendix 1 for a detailed review.

¹⁴ [Leverage and Enlist the Work of Mentors and Other Volunteers to Help Underserved Youth Take Advantage of Existing Summer Opportunities](#), Give a Summer. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://www.giveasummer.org/progress-enlisting-mentors/>.

organizations data-informed, specific steps they can take to increase their students' access to summer opportunities. Finally, this collective work would broaden the base of organizations and individuals aware of and committed to addressing barriers to youth opportunities over the summer.

These are exciting times for improving youth summer opportunities. States and cities are [increasing](#)¹⁵ [funding](#)¹⁶ for summer opportunities, and community organizations and summer programs are [raising](#)¹⁷ the quality of those opportunities. [Large](#),¹⁸ [multi-city](#)¹⁹ [investigations](#)²⁰ are identifying and sharing lessons from the best performing summer programs, national organizations are [highlighting](#)²¹ amazing summer programs across the country, while summer programs across [cities](#)²² are introducing common, detailed measures of program quality. On their own, however, these efforts are insufficient to reach the goal of ensuring all children have meaningful access to great summer opportunities. Only by learning, each and every year, how we fall short of that goal and why, can we reach it and keep persuading others that we need to.

¹⁵ [FACT SHEET: White House Announces New Summer Opportunity Project](#), The White House Office of the Press Secretary. (February 25, 2016), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/25/fact-sheet-white-house-announces-new-summer-opportunity-project-0>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/8XGX-ZSL8>.

¹⁶ [State of Summer Learning: 2015 State Policy Snapshot](#), National Summer Learning Association. (last visited March 16, 2016), http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.summerlearning.org/resource/resmgr/Policy/NSLA_2015_State_Policy_Snaps.pdf. Archived at <https://perma.cc/2HVM-UGNV>.

¹⁷ [Our Approach](#), Summer Matters. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://www.summermatters.net/our-approach/>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/P7NN-ASTB>.

¹⁸ Marie-Andrée et al., [An Analysis of the Effects of an Academic Summer Program for Middle School Students](#), MDRC. (March 2015), <http://www.mdrc.org/publication/analysis-effects-academic-summer-program-middle-school-students-0>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/HSE5-BV9S>.

¹⁹ Jennifer Sloan McCombs et al., [Ready for Fall? Near-Term Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Students' Learning Opportunities and Outcomes](#), RAND Corporation. (2014), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/summer-and-extended-learning-time/extended-learning-time/Documents/Ready-for-Fall.pdf>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/Z87W-WSRR>.

²⁰ Jennifer Sloan McCombs et al., [Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning](#), Rand Corporation. (2011), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1120.pdf. Archived at <https://perma.cc/XQE3-K8XS>.

²¹ [Excellence in Summer Learning Award Finalists and Winners](#), National Summer Learning Association. (last visited March 16, 2016), http://www.summerlearning.org/default.asp?page=excellence_finalists&DGPCrSrt=&DGPCrPg=1.

²² For example, with the Boston Summer Learning Community. [Local Research](#), Summer Insight by Boston After School & Beyond. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://summerinsight.bostonbeyond.org/local-research/>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/9YMR-9QJ4>.

10 key takeaways on youth access to summer program opportunities

Over the past two years, Give a Summer has [worked](#)²³ with six Boston area public middle schools and an in-school program to learn about their students' access to and participation in summer opportunities and to identify ways to increase student access to summer opportunities.

While the schools Give a Summer has worked with are spread across Boston and a neighboring town and have student populations that reflect the great [diversity](#)²⁴ of family backgrounds in Boston Public Schools, they are not a random sample of Boston area public middle schools. These schools were already working to support their students over the summer and excited about learning with Give a Summer about how to do that work better. Consequently, the findings below are not generalizations about what students across Boston do over the summer and what challenges they face. Rather, they are specific examples of what students at different schools have the opportunity to do and what they do not have the opportunity to do over the summer. Indeed, one of the key findings from Give a Summer's work is the significant variation in participation, interest, and barriers across the schools with which it has worked. Give a Summer is sharing its findings to illustrate how asking and analyzing what students get to do over the summer can give us illuminating and complex views into student opportunities and constraints. Those views, and the specific takeaways they yield, can empower schools and communities to take more passionate and effective action to make their promises of summer opportunity real to more students.

Below are 10 key takeaways from Give a Summer's work with five of its school partners this fall. These results come from over 500 student and 200 parent surveys – with a student response rate of 86% and a parent response rate of 40%

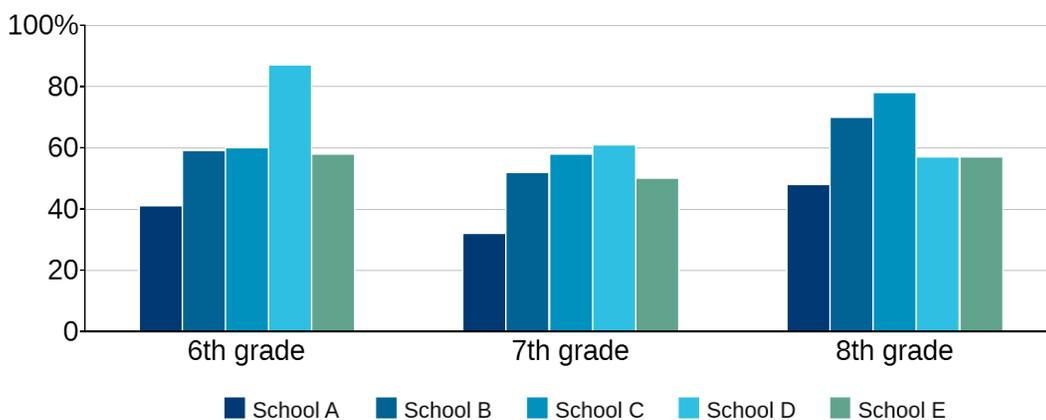
²³ See Give a Summer's reports of its work with its partners. [Helping Communities Better Understand Where and Why Kids Miss Out on Summer Programs](#), Give a Summer. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://www.giveasummer.org/progress-where-and-why-kids-miss-out/>.

²⁴ [Facts and Figures](#), Boston Public Schools. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/domain/238>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/S457-9EXZ>.

– as well as build on Give a Summer’s work with four of those schools the previous year.

1. Participation varies across grades and schools.

Participation rate in summer programs



All five schools Give a Summer worked with had relatively high participation rates in summer programs.²⁵ As is clear from the chart above, however, there was considerable variation in participation rates across grades and schools. School A, for example, had lower participation across the board, especially among its 7th graders, while School D, which requires new students to attend a summer program, has very high participation among its 6th graders. On the other hand, School B and C had the greatest participation from their 8th graders.

All five schools make a special effort to increase the summer opportunities available to their students, and School A, B, and C even share administrative support. Nonetheless, participation by their students in summer programs varies overall and across grades. Give a Summer’s hypothesis is that grade and school variation will be even greater across the Boston area as a whole given the self-selection among the schools Give a Summer is working with. This reinforces the importance of comprehensive surveying of student opportunities over the summer

²⁵ As comparison, the latest national study of summer participation rates found only 34% of Massachusetts families had at least one child attend a summer program. [Summer Learning Programs Help Massachusetts Kids Succeed](http://www.massafterschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/MA-Summer-Fact-Sheet.pdf), Afterschool Alliance. (2014), <http://www.massafterschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/MA-Summer-Fact-Sheet.pdf>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/S97S-WF4L>.

to enable schools and neighborhoods to identify and help the groups of students in different grades and neighborhoods missing out most over the summer.

2. Students who attended a summer program are twice as likely to attend a program the following summer.

The percent of students who attended a summer program in both 2014 and 2015 varies considerably from school to school. However, across the four schools Give a Summer²⁶ partnered with during both the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years, students who attended a program in summer 2014 were about twice as likely to attend a program in summer 2015 compared to their peers who had not attended a program in summer 2014. This suggests that re-attendance and new attendance rates are driven by a combination of 1) stickiness of past attendance or non-attendance into future summers and 2) school-specific variation in access to summer opportunities.

Former attendees are twice as likely to attend a summer program as those who did not attend a program the previous summer

	School A	School B	School C	School D
Percent of students who attended a program in 2015 if they...				
<i>also attended a program in summer 2014 (re-attendance):</i>	56%	77%	87%	47%
<i>did not attend a program in summer 2014 (new attendance):</i>	28%	44%	43%	22%
Re-attendance rate compared to new attendance rate	2.0x	1.8x	2.0x	2.1x

Note: Give a Summer did not work with School E in the 2014 – 2015 school year

These findings have several concrete implications for expanding access to summer opportunities. First, helping students attend a program one summer likely pays substantial dividends as the student becomes far more likely to attend a program in subsequent summers as well. Second, in spite of the general stickiness of attendance across summers, schools can work to raise re-attendance rates by identifying particular programs that lead to lower re-attendance. For example, at School D attendees of the required summer program for new students

²⁶ Give a Summer did not work with School E in the 2014-2015 school year.

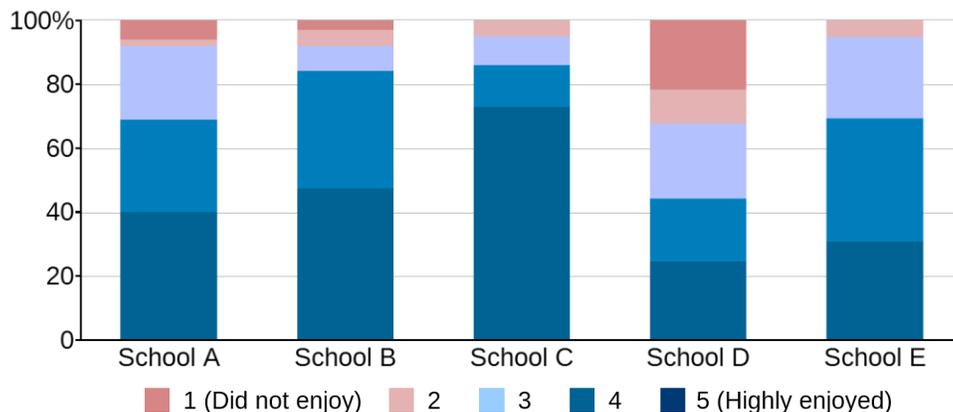
are far less likely to attend a summer program the subsequent summer than students attending other summer programs, so School D can focus support on helping students who attended the required summer program one summer access other great programs the following summer. Third, schools can also take action to raise new-attendance rates. One specific way to do that, as discussed at greater length in Takeaway 9, is to identify and help students who did not attend a program the previous summer but want to attend a program next summer.

3. School C’s students enjoy summer programs the most and also have the highest participation rate.

Across its partner schools, Give a Summer found that students enjoy their summer programs, with the majority rating their programs a 4 or 5 out of 5. As with other measures, program enjoyment varies substantially across schools and grades.²⁷

Student enjoyment level varies, but generally high

% of attendees, by enjoyment level



Notably, program enjoyment is greatest at School C, whose voluntary participation rate is the highest across the five schools.²⁸ This shows that there

²⁷ Parents reported slightly higher satisfaction with summer programs than their children. Excluding School D which did not survey parents, overall 69% of parents rated their child’s program a 5. However, the students whose parents responded also reported higher program satisfaction than their peers whose parents did not respond. Consequently, Give a Summer estimates that if all parents had returned surveys, 55% of them would have rated programs a 5.

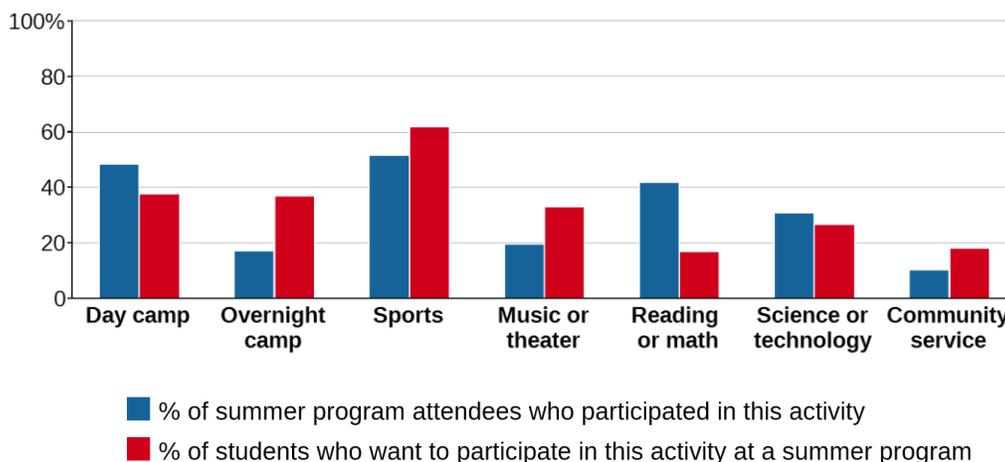
²⁸ School C’s overall participation rate of 65% is just below School D’s participation rate of 68%, though School D’s high participation is partly driven by required summer program participation for incoming students. By more than 5%, School C has the highest *voluntary* participation rate of any of the five schools.

need not be a trade-off between higher participation and program enjoyment (with students ‘pushed’ into attending programs disliking them more). Rather, it shows that high participation can go hand in hand with high program satisfaction as a result of a community that excites students about summer opportunities and helps them make the most of them.

4. Students attend many different programs and participate in lots of activities. Sharing that information can help classmates find great programs.

Students who attend summer programs take part in a wide range of activities that by and large match students’ diverse interests.

Students participate in and are interested in a wide range of activities



Indeed, the diversity of activities at summer programs was surprising to Give a Summer, and we suspect it might be also be good news to youth who are not interested in attending a summer program for fear of being stuck in a stereotypical summer school.

In line with the variety of activities students participate in at summer programs, students attended a remarkable array of programs, with a substantial number of students the only one from their school to attend that program.

Students attend many different programs, with a large percentage of students going to a program without any classmates

	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
Number of different programs attended by school's students	29	25	52	42	39
Percent of program attendees who did not have any classmates at their program	50%	26%	47%	28%	44%

Learning which programs their students have attended would help schools and other youth-serving organizations as they are unlikely aware of the full array. This information would be a great starting point for schools looking to recommend different programs to match their students' wide diversity of interests. Additionally, schools and other youth serving organizations could help connect students interested in a certain type of program or a specific program with students who attended that program the previous year. This could yield numerous benefits: it might help more students finds programs they are interested in, it might be a fulfilling way for students to help one another, and students on both ends of the exchange might end up going to a program with another friendly face to greet them on the first day there.

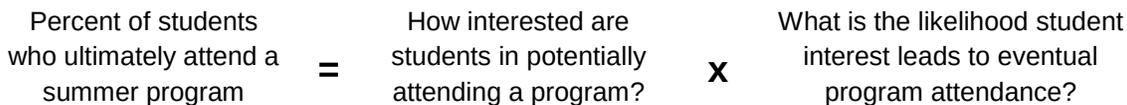
To help its school partners begin to do this, Give a Summer shared with each school detailed information on which programs their students attended, what activities students said they participated in there, and how much students enjoyed their programs.

5. Student interest varies across schools and grades, suggesting interest can be enhanced by school and community support.

It is helpful to unpack the drivers of student participation in summer programs to discover how schools as well as other youth-serving organizations, communities, and cities can most effectively help to increase access to summer

opportunities. Give a Summer suggests the following way of thinking about student participation in summer programs to clearly identify the different levers affecting student participation.

Drivers of student participation in summer programs

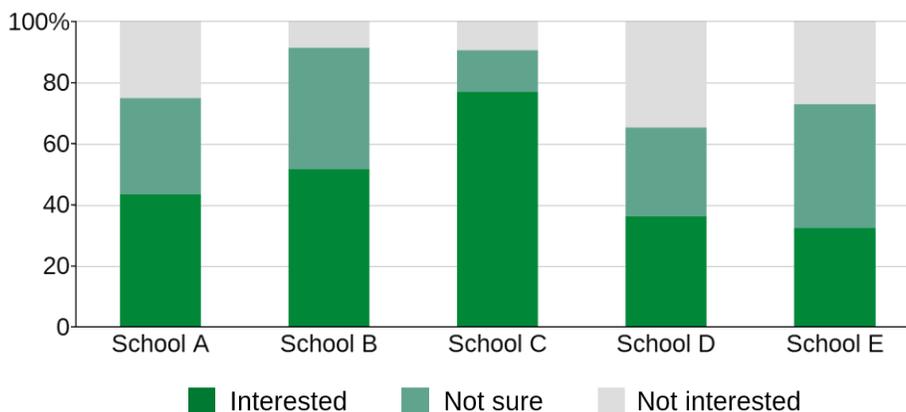


This diagram demonstrates that there are two main ways to increase student access to summer opportunities: 1) help more students become interested in summer programs and 2) without changing student interest, help more students translate their interest into attendance at programs.²⁹ It is useful to separate these levers as they require different types of support.

As this and following sections illustrate, schools vary considerably across these dimensions, suggesting 1) schools, neighborhoods, and cities can make improvements where they are currently lagging and 2) comprehensive local analysis is necessary as even the committed-to-summer, high-performing public schools that Give a Summer works with have different strengths and opportunities.

For example, student interest varies considerably across schools.

% of students, by interest level



²⁹ The diagram does not reflect that any post-summer survey of how many students attended a summer program will also pick up what a school's incoming students did over the summer. This is a lever schools can use to increase student summer opportunities: compared to other schools, School D had a much higher percentage of its incoming students attend a program.

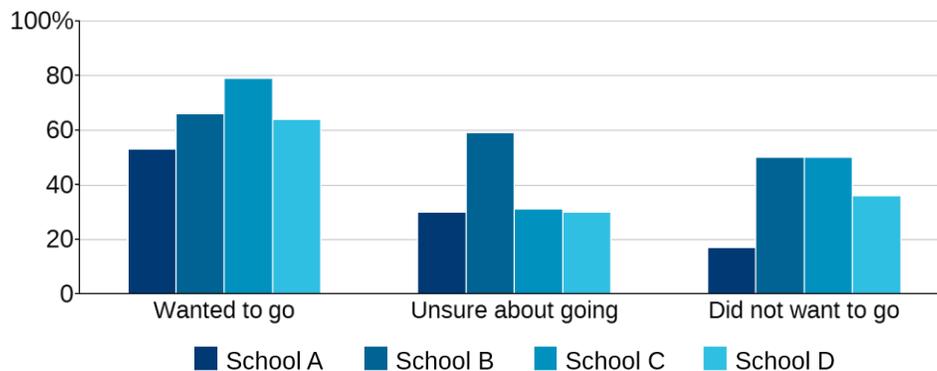
A level down, interest also varies somewhat across grades, and it does so in different ways at different schools, modestly increasing with older students at School A but falling sharply with 8th graders at School E.

These results show that student interest is not something set in stone but changes with age and can be influenced by schools and neighborhoods. We have to look out to see that not only do all students have access to summer opportunities but also that they are all given the chance to become excited about them in the first place.

6. All schools had a substantial minority of students who were interested in attending a summer program but did not end up going to one.

To measure how effectively schools convert student interest into attendance, Give a Summer analyzed students’ interest in spring 2015 compared to those same students’ subsequent participation in programs over that summer.³⁰

2015 summer attendance rates by spring 2015 interest



As is the case with student interest, schools vary considerably in how they translate student interest, uncertainty, or disinterest into subsequent program attendance. School A, for example, appears to be struggling to encourage less interested students to attend a program, while School B is consistently able to help

³⁰ School E is not included in this chart and the next one because Give a Summer did not work with its students until fall 2015.

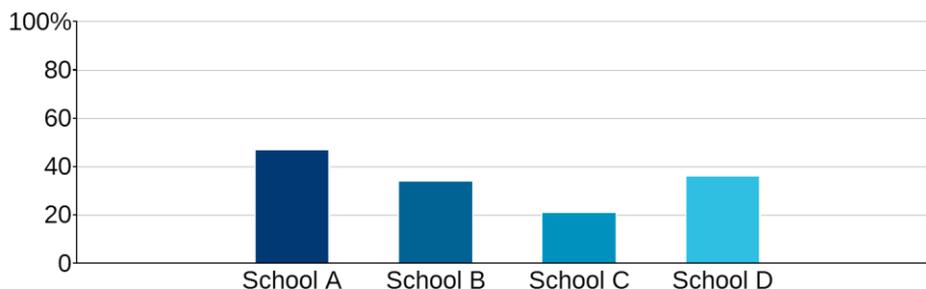
students attend programs, even if they were at first not very interested in attending one.

Notably, across most schools, students who were unsure about attending a program ended up attending no more often – and frequently less often – than students who were not interested in going to a program. Schools could take two specific steps to address the relatively low attendance of students who are unsure about summer programs: 1) help students currently unsure about attending develop interest in attending by sharing with them how enjoyable and rewarding summer experiences can be and/or 2) work with students unsure about attending a program to problem-solve barriers that make it hard for them to attend a program (Takeaway 9 expands upon the latter approach).

Even among interested students, a substantial minority of them did not get to attend a program.

Even students interested in attending programs struggle to access them

Summer 2015 non-attendance rate among students who had expressed interest in attending in spring 2015



If concern for family choices in education means anything, it means taking seriously when expressed student interest in educational opportunities goes unfulfilled. The chart above is a stark indication that there is work to be done to increase student access to summer opportunities.

7. Program expense was the greatest barrier, though other barriers were close behind, such that addressing program expense alone is insufficient.

Give a Summer asked students as well as their parents how much various barriers affected their ability to attend a great summer program. As detailed further Appendix 1, as far as Give a Summer is aware, no community is collecting and sharing this sort of information, which is critical to effectively addressing lack of access to summer opportunities.

The barrier scores reported below are not just the average scores reported by students and parents. The score below also take into account that some barriers are greater for students not attending or not interested in programs, suggesting that barrier may be pushing those students away from programs. Additionally, the barrier scores are also adjusted when barriers are greater for students who attend programs, suggesting that students who did not attend a program may end up confronting that barrier when they try to attend a program.³¹

Below is a table with the combined student and parent barrier scores by grade across five of Give a Summer’s school partners.

Which barriers matter? Results from more than 500 student and 200 parent surveys at five Boston area public middle schools

	Not interested	Unexcited by options	Programs full	Program cost	Family vacation	Transportation challenges	Program hours	Needed at home
Overall	0.7	0.9	0.7	1.0	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.6
6th grade	0.7	1.0	1.1	1.2	0.9	0.9	0.7	0.6
7th grade	0.8	1.0	0.8	1.1	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.7
8th grade	0.8	0.9	0.6	1.0	0.9	0.8	1.0	0.6

Roughly, a score of 2 means all students and parents consider that barrier a major challenge, while a score of 0 means none of them do.

These results reveal the importance but also the limitations of focusing primarily on addressing program expense: while program expense posed the greatest barrier to accessing programs, several other barriers were almost as

³¹ Appendix 3 further explains the rationale for these adjustments as well goes through Give a Summer’s specific calculations for its overall barrier score.

great a challenge for youth and families.³² Addressing those other barriers will require system-wide efforts as well, but they also might benefit from help to students and families provided directly by youth-serving organizations.

The table highlights that while some barriers are consistent challenges across grades, others have more grade-specific effects. This equally applies when looking at barriers across schools. Given that Give a Summer's schools had certain common traits – they were high-performing public middle schools in the same geographic region actively working to help their students access summer opportunities – the school-to-school variation strongly suggests significant neighborhood and town-to-town variation in barriers to summer opportunities.

To understand and address the diverse barriers affecting students we need to comprehensively ask them and their parents what barriers they face. Even to take broad, citywide action, the variety in barriers, like the variety in participation and interest, should make us worried whether any sample can accurately capture the underlying population. Additionally, many of these barriers may be more local in origin and best addressed by those neighborhoods or by youth-serving organizations in those communities. Only comprehensive surveying can yield rich neighborhood and organization specific insights, allowing them to best direct their energies as well as identify peers from whom to learn.

8. Family vacation conflicts are a concern for students, though few students end up taking more than a week of vacation.

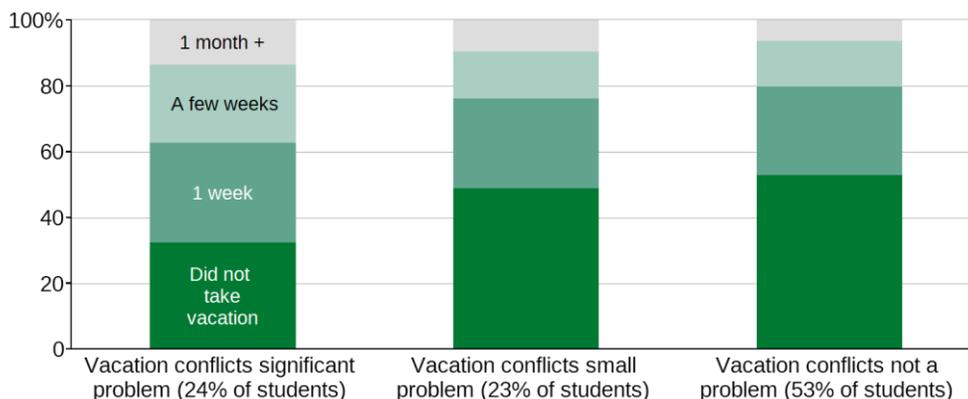
Vacation conflicts are one of the main barriers facing students and families trying to access summer program opportunities, and this was true in Give a Summer's work with schools during the 2014-2015 school year as well.³³ Below are students' responses about how many weeks of family vacation they took over

³² As can be seen in Give a Summer's specific reports for its partner schools, this conclusion equally applies when just looking at simple average barrier scores without Give a Summer's adjustments to these scores. [Helping Communities Better Understand Where and Why Kids Miss Out on Summer Programs](http://www.giveasummer.org/progress-where-and-why-kids-miss-out/), Give a Summer. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://www.giveasummer.org/progress-where-and-why-kids-miss-out/>.

³³ Reports from Give a Summer's work with partner schools from the 2014 – 2015 school year are available on Give a Summer's website. [Helping Communities Better Understand Where and Why Kids Miss Out on Summer Programs](http://www.giveasummer.org/progress-where-and-why-kids-miss-out/), Give a Summer. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://www.giveasummer.org/progress-where-and-why-kids-miss-out/>.

the summer, with student answers grouped by their rating of how challenging family vacation conflicts are to accessing great summer program opportunities.

Previous vacation length by current rating of vacation conflicts



Even among the students who do rate family vacation conflicts as a significant challenge, the majority of them took a week or less of family vacation last summer. That suggests that it is critical to inform students concerned about family vacation plans’ impact on summer program opportunities that many summer programs offer flexible, week-by-week schedules and even longer summer programs may not interfere with family plans at the beginning and end of the summer. Otherwise, those students – fearing that summer programs will not work around their family vacation plans – may not end up exploring and attending summer programs that they could have enjoyed.

Additionally, even for students less concerned about family vacation conflicts with summer programs, about 25% of them took a family vacation of a few weeks or more.³⁴ Consequently, even if students do not bring up family vacation conflicts, planning around family schedules may still be necessary for those students to attend great, longer summer programs.

³⁴ When comparing students’ concerns about family vacation conflicts last spring to their subsequent vacations over the summer, students who were most concerned about family vacation conflicts were 40% more likely to take a vacation than their peers. However, they were about equally likely to take a long vacation as their peers, supporting the conclusion that a moderate minority of students will take several weeks of family vacation but not rate vacation conflicts as a major challenge to attending a great summer program.

While these insights are most geared toward youth-serving organizations, they suggest that larger communities may want to raise broader awareness that summer program opportunities can work, and work well, around family plans during the summer.

9. Give a Summer has identified groups of students that might especially benefit from individualized support.

Give a Summer identified particular groups of students who might especially benefit from personalized support in making great summer plans, while recognizing the capacity constraints of its school partners and any youth-serving organization to work individually with students on their summer plans. Give a Summer recommended special attention to students who fell into one of two categories:

- 1) Students who want to attend a summer program this summer but did not attend one last summer.
- 2) Students who are not sure of their interest in attending a summer program but face only one or two major barriers.

As demonstrated in Takeaway 6, even students who want to attend a program still often do not get to end up attending one, and that challenge is even greater for new attendees as opposed to students who have attended in the past (see Takeaway 2). Aside from the possible efficacy of targeted support to these students, there is a compelling moral case to support these students based on a commitment to helping youth access the opportunities they have expressed a desire to enjoy.

Targeting the second category addresses one of the more surprising findings from Give a Summer's work: students who are unsure of their interest in attending a summer program end up attending summer programs no more frequently than students not interested in attending a summer program (see Takeaway 6).

To help its school partners provide targeted, effective support to these two groups of students, Give a Summer created personalized handouts for each school's classroom that listed the particular students Give a Summer recommended for individualized attention. The handouts listed the interests and constraints of those students, giving teachers not just a pointer as to which students to work with on summer plans but also a head start on what their students wanted to do and what challenges those students were facing. Below is an example from School E with anonymized, scrambled student data:

Particular students to support to help access summer programs and opportunities
School E – Classroom ABC

FIRSTNAME, LASTNAME

- **Reason to help FIRSTNAME make great summer plans:** student unsure about attending a program but has only 1 or 2 major barriers;
- **Information about FIRSTNAME's summer experience and interest:** FIRSTNAME did not attend a program over the summer, went on family vacation for several weeks, and is not sure about attending a program next summer.
- **Program interests:** Day camp; Sports; Reading or math
- **Student rating of barriers to attending a great summer program:** FIRSTNAME's major barriers are lack of general interest in summer programs; cost of summer programs.
- **Parent ratings of barriers to having their child attend a great summer program:** FIRSTNAME's parents' major barriers are cost of summer programs; program hours are not convenient for parents.

FIRSTNAME_2, LASTNAME_2

...

Additionally, Give a Summer highlighted to its school partners which students were most affected by different barriers. This information allows youth-serving organizations to more effectively support the opportunities and aspirations of their students. For example, if a school is aware of a program that offers free transportation or has a week-by-week schedule, that school could share that highly relevant information with the subset of students who are most concerned about getting to a program or programs conflicting with family vacation plans.

10. There is a lot more work to do to understand and increase youth access to summer opportunities, and it is work to do together.

There is a lot more work to do to increase youth access to great summer opportunities. At its partner schools, Give a Summer is looking forward next year to continue experimenting and exploring the most effective ways for schools to help youth access summer opportunities. One particular way to do that is to improve the classroom handouts to include student-specific program recommendations based on the activities students are interested in and the constraints they and their parents face. Additionally, Give a Summer hopes to deepen our understanding of how student interest, participation, and barriers change with age to develop the best recommendations for students across different grades.

Give a Summer calls for other schools and communities to take on this work. Give a Summer is particularly excited about partnering with elementary and high schools to expand its analysis to younger and older students.

While Give a Summer has so far largely worked with schools to take action on these insights, it believes that many different youth-serving organizations – in-school programs, summer programs, and community organizations – could be invaluable partners in helping support youth access engaging summer programs. Give a Summer is looking forward to partnering with these organizations to help them enrich their own work as well as the summer opportunities of the students they serve.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Apart from Give a Summer's work, what else do we know about youth access to summer opportunities?

While there is a large and growing amount of research on the effectiveness of summer programs,³⁵ we know very little about youth access to summer opportunities, especially where and why youth miss out. From extensive research, Give a Summer believes at both the national or local level there is no regular, in-depth analysis of youth access to summer opportunities. The result is that even the best communities working on expanding high quality summer opportunities are left where Massachusetts finds itself: “while Massachusetts has made considerable gains in augmenting [program] quality, we have struggled to expand access.”³⁶

What little we know about youth participation and access to summer opportunities is largely limited to occasional estimates of how many or what percent of students participated in a summer program. The Afterschool Alliance has conducted national phone surveys of parents that generate national and statewide estimates of household participation rates in programs and level of interest and support. Along with studies of inequality in family spending³⁷ on out-of-school enrichment and longitudinal studies of summer learning [loss](#)³⁸ and

³⁵ See footnotes 18, 19, and 20.

³⁶ Ben Forman et al., *The Gateway Cities Vision for Dynamic Community-Wide Learning Systems*, MassINC, p. 19 (November 2013), <http://massinc.org/research/the-gateway-cities-vision-for-dynamic-community-wide-learning-systems/>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/V36N-AEP3>.

³⁷ Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane, *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances. Executive Summary*, Russell Sage Foundation, p. 3-4. (2011), https://www.russellsage.org/sites/all/files/Whither%20Opportunity_Executive%20Summary.pdf. Archived at <https://perma.cc/9XWP-A9Z6>.

³⁸ *The Achievement Gap*, National Summer Learning Association. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://www.summerlearning.org/?page=TheAchievementGap>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/7TX2-Q9TY>.

missed [time](#)³⁹ in out of school opportunities, these are the powerful basis for arguments^{40, 41} for expanding summer opportunities.

However, what is missing is a picture of access to summer opportunities at the local level, the place where summer opportunities live and where changes to improve them will largely take place.

A handful of communities have mapped out what summer programs are working in their community. For example, the National Summer Learning Association has conducted one-time [community assessments](#)⁴² for nine cities and two states that scan and categorize summer program resources.

With major support from The Wallace Foundation, several years ago, five cities worked to build city-wide systems to support high-quality summer opportunities. Wallace called for collecting information on youth interest and participation in summer programs, as well as conducting focus groups and market research to understand how to best expand participation in programs.⁴³ As a result of The Wallace Foundation's work, several cities mapped and collected information from their summer programs. New York used that information to compare program locations to student demographics to identify underserved populations.⁴⁴ Some cities in the initiative worked to increase youth participation in

³⁹ [The 6,000 Hour Learning Gap](#), ExpandedED Schools. (October 30, 2013),

<http://www.expandedschools.org/policy-documents/6000-hour-learning-gap#sthash.bk6S19Q8.uexZ7pO0.dpbs>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/8VSP-YVZN>.

⁴⁰ For example, see Boston Afterschool & Beyond's discussion of the opportunity gap which highlights both inequalities in family spending and [The 6,000 Hour Learning Gap](#). What is the 'opportunity gap'? Boston After School & Beyond. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://bostonbeyond.org/what-is-the-opportunity-gap/>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/L7U6-ALNQ>.

⁴¹ For another example, see the Ohio Afterschool Network, a leading afterschool and summer program system builder, which shares [The Achievement Gap](#) and [The 6,000 Hour Learning Gap](#) as part of its materials on closing the opportunity gap. [Closing the Opportunity Gap Regional Meeting Materials](#), Ohio Afterschool Network. (last visited March 16, 2016), http://www.ohioafterschoolnetwork.org/resources_CtOG.php. Archived at <https://perma.cc/R6NB-P7HJ>.

⁴² [NSLA Publications: Summer Learning Community System Building](#), National Summer Learning Association. (last visited March 16, 2016), http://www.summerlearning.org/?page=association_pubs.

⁴³ [A Place to Grow and Learn: A Citywide Approach to Building and Sustaining Out-of-School Time Learning Opportunities](#), The Wallace Foundation. p. 6-10. (February 2008), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/key-research/Documents/Sustaining-Out-of-School-Time-Learning-Opportunities.pdf>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/DE93-3Q3M>.

⁴⁴ "New York City undertook a major project to compare the location of existing city-funded programs to neighborhoods with large numbers of children who needed [out-of-school programs]; after finding a big mismatch between the two, the city successfully expanded programming in underserved areas." [Bolstering Out-of-School Time for City Kids: A New 'Systems' Approach](#), The Wallace Foundation. p. 3 (October 2010), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/key-research/Documents/knowledge-in-brief-bolstering-OST-for-city-kids.pdf>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/HV96-B85Y>.

programs. They did so by creating electronic portals to enable easier searching of programs,⁴⁵ adopting more youth-friendly outreach methods, and increasing coordination across programs.⁴⁶

While helpful, these strategies discount pervasive, systemic barriers to summer opportunities, and by neglecting to understand and analyze these barriers, these strategies make it unlikely that coordinated efforts will solve them.⁴⁷ It is unclear what of this work continues after the end of the Wallace funding, and a final review of the progress made by the different cities does not describe any of them conducting regular analysis of students and families to understand and address barriers to accessing summer opportunities.⁴⁸

Nowadays, some communities are able to track how many students participated in the summer programs they help coordinate.⁴⁹ A few of them are sharing information on individual student participation in out-of-school programs with schools to help them better support their students. For example, in Cincinnati, a commitment to collective impact has resulted in partnerships between schools and out-of-school programs that have allowed both to understand what students may be doing and reach out to students who may need additional help.⁵⁰ In

⁴⁵ Chicago created an electronic portal to allow searching of out of school programs and opportunities. Chicago Out of School Time Project, City of Chicago. (last visited March 16, 2016), http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/fss/supp_info/chicago_out_of_schooltimeproject.html.

⁴⁶ Jennifer Sloan McCombs et al., Hours of Opportunity, Volume 3. Profiles of Five Cities Improving After-School Programs Through a Systems Approach, Rand Corporation. (2010), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/key-research/Documents/Hours-of-Opportunity-3-After-School-Programs-Systems.pdf>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/N37R-27P7>.

⁴⁷ As an exception, Providence, RI used data on participation to improve transportation connections to programs which were “key to driving student participation.” Jennifer Sloan McCombs et al., Hours of Opportunity, Volume 3. Profiles of Five Cities Improving After-School Programs Through a Systems Approach, Rand Corporation, p. 21. (2010), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/key-research/Documents/Hours-of-Opportunity-3-After-School-Programs-Systems.pdf>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/N37R-27P7>.

⁴⁸ The cities in the initiative seemed to prioritize and make progress on getting summer programs to use consistent data systems to track participation across programs. Using Information Technology to Boost City After-School Opportunities, The Wallace Foundation. (November 2010), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/key-research/Documents/knowledge-in-brief-using-information-technology-to-boost-city-after-school-opportunities.pdf>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/7QV4-PJGY>.

⁴⁹ For example, Boston has counted more than 11,000 summer program slots for youth. Boston Learns Together: Creating opportunity through partnership, Boston After School & Beyond. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://bostonbeyond.org/boston-learns-together/>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/6T2J-7Z3F>.

⁵⁰ Liz Nusken, How Ohio Communities Are Creating Smarter Afterschool Systems, Ohio Afterschool Network, p. 2, <http://www.ohioafterschoolnetwork.org/files/How%20Ohio%20Communities%20Are%20Creating%20Smarter%20Afterschool%20Systems.pdf>. Archived at <https://perma.cc/97DN-8WLW>.

addition, the growing community schools movements takes a holistic approach to supporting their students, and in fact, one of Give a Summer's partner schools incorporates a community school approach. While community schools may be analyzing the summer activities and challenges facing their students and are almost certainly acting to help their students, Give a Summer is unaware of any publicly available examples of that work or sharing of that information across schools to support community-wide action.

From extensive research and conversation with others working to provide expanding high quality summer opportunities for youth, Give a Summer believes that very few communities – and perhaps no communities – have a systemic, evolving understanding of youth access to summer opportunities. Give a Summer hopes that this report leads the communities that do to share their work more widely, and that for the vast majority of communities that have not yet developed this understanding to see why it is necessary, how it can be done, and the kind of difference it can make.

Appendix 2: Detail on Give a Summer's research process

Give a Summer worked with five partner schools this fall to help them understand and improve their students' access to summer opportunities. Give a Summer worked with four of the schools to survey students' parents as well. Give a Summer had worked with four of the schools (not School E) the previous spring as well. This allowed Give a Summer to compare spring 2015 and fall 2015 surveys for current 7th and 8th grade students (who were in 6th and 7th grade last spring).

With schools' input, Give a Summer created electronic surveys for their middle school students (grades 6-8) to take at school. While a few of the surveys had minor variations – one school requested that barriers be rated “does not matter,” “matters a little,” etc. while other schools had students rate barriers if they were “not a problem,” “a small deal”, etc. – the surveys were very consistent across schools and between last spring and this fall. The fall survey added

additional questions on student vacations to better understand the family vacation conflicts that students last spring reported were significant barriers. A sample electronic survey is available [here](#).⁵¹

Give a Summer created a 1-page paper survey for parents and translated the text into different languages according to school need. Give a Summer also created a letter to parents explaining why the school was working with Give a Summer on this survey. At one school, parents who returned a survey were entered into a raffle for a school sweatshirt. Give a Summer worked with some schools to learn from parents why they wanted their children to participate in summer programs – to make friends, get ahead in school, have fun – as well as how schools could best support parents. A sample parent survey is available [here](#)⁵² while a sample letter to parents is available [here](#).⁵³

Give a Summer updated its school partners on student response rates so that schools could make sure all students had a chance to fill out the survey. Below are the student and parent response rates across Give a Summer’s five partner schools.

Response rates to surveys at partner schools

	Student	Parent
School A	92%	54%
School B	98%	11%
School C	90%	44%
School D	87%	--
School E	60%	44%
Total	86%	40%

Give a Summer signed agreements with all of its school partners committing Give a Summer to conduct this work at no cost to the schools. The

⁵¹ Give a Summer sample student survey 2015 – 2016 school year, Give a Summer. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://goo.gl/forms/4yBJMuEOgh>.

⁵² Give a Summer sample parent survey, Give a Summer. (last visited March 16, 2016), https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B4WSw_hJfKpBOElhMWwxRUJORXM/view?usp=sharing.

⁵³ Give a Summer sample letter home from school to parents about parent survey, Give a Summer. (last visited March 16, 2016), https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B4WSw_hJfKpBQ09TNXhaM2cyOFU/view?usp=sharing.

schools gave Give a Summer permission to share sample, anonymized versions of the reports Give a Summer prepared for them – available on Give a Summer’s website⁵⁴ – as well as use the results in an aggregate, public report explaining Give a Summer’s work to better understand and increase access to summer opportunities. This is that report.

Appendix 3: Give a Summer’s method for analyzing barriers to summer opportunities

Give a Summer’s method for analyzing barriers to summer opportunities takes into account that 1) some barriers may be pushing students away from attending programs while 2) other barriers may become greater than expected for students who try to attend a program after not attending one last summer.

To identify which barriers to focus on, Give a Summer believes it is important to focus on more than a barrier’s average rating by students and parents. Sometimes, non-attendees rate a barrier as more of a significant impediment than attendees. That suggests that barrier may be a crucial, swing barrier preventing certain groups of students from accessing summer opportunities.

Interestingly, sometimes attendees rate a barrier as a greater challenge than non-attendees. For example, parents whose child attended a program last year or who want their child to attend a program next summer rated program expense as a greater barrier than parents whose child did not attend a program or are not as interested in their child attending a program. While potentially confusing at first look, Give a Summer believes this reflects how greater familiarity with summer opportunities – either from past attendance or from current interest – may affect students and parents’ assessment of the influence of different barriers. For example, if you are not interested in attending a summer program, you may be less aware of the cost of attendance, and therefore rate program expense as less

⁵⁴ Reports from Give a Summer’s work with partner schools from the 2014 – 2015 school year are available on Give a Summer’s website. [Helping Communities Better Understand Where and Why Kids Miss Out on Summer Programs](http://www.giveasummer.org/progress-where-and-why-kids-miss-out/), Give a Summer. (last visited March 16, 2016), <http://www.giveasummer.org/progress-where-and-why-kids-miss-out/>.

of a challenge to participation. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that program expense is not a challenge for non-attendees. Rather, Give a Summer believes the more accurate conclusion is that if non-attendees then take steps to attend a summer program, they will confront the same type of expense-related challenges as attendees.

Consequently, Give a Summer analyzes the average barrier scores from students and parents in two steps. First, Give a Summer calculates the difference in barrier scores between attendees and non-attendees and between students who are interested in attending a program and those who are not. Then, Give a Summer takes the absolute value of those differences. We take the absolute value – and not simple subtraction – because both positive and negative differences in barrier scores (between attendees and non-attendees or between interested students and not interested students) are significant. Greater barriers for non-attendees or not interested students suggest those barriers may prevent students from accessing programs, while greater barriers for attendees or interested students indicate that other students' ratings may be understating the challenges they would face accessing programs. Second, Give a Summer adds the absolute values of barrier differences to the average barrier score to arrive at a total barrier score.

Which barriers matter? Give a Summer's system for identifying barriers to focus on:

Factor:	Purpose of factor:
Barrier score	Reflect overall barriers
Plus	
<i>Absolute value of difference in barrier score for:</i> non-attendees minus attendees	Focus on barriers that may be affecting attendance
Plus	
<i>Absolute value of difference in barrier score for:</i> average of (non-interested students minus interested students AND not sure of interest minus interested students)	Focus on barriers that affect interest, a key element in increasing student participation. Look at barrier differences across different degrees of student interest.

Note: Student and parent final barrier scores were averaged, though given the higher response rates from students, student barriers were given twice the weight of parent barriers.

This method is the product of Give a Summer's two years of work analyzing more than 1,400 student and 200 parent surveys on barriers to summer opportunities. But it is also work that needs to be even better than this, informed by others' ideas as well as greater research on which barriers drive inequities in access.