

Incentivizing Students to Address Learning Loss

Districts all across the country are preparing to address potential learning loss this summer caused by COVID-19. Many districts are reporting having trouble finding students who are interested in summer learning due to fatigue brought on by the pandemic. This has led to a conversation on how districts can incentivize students to participate in summer school programming. Incentives can certainly motivate students; however, districts are urged to take caution in using ESSER funding for incentives. The ESSER regulations do not specifically address using these dollars for incentives; however, when using federal funds, the following three points must be addressed:

- **Reasonability Test**
All expenditures using federal funds must be reasonable. It helps to determine if the expenditure is reasonable by picturing yourself having to justify an expenditure to an auditor.
- **Nominal Test**
Expenditures for incentives should be nominal.
- **Educationally Related Test**
Incentives purchased with federal funds should be educationally related.

Federal funds may not be used to purchase gift cards, pay students, or provide students with a computer or Chromebook to keep. (They must be inventoried.) Rather than using federal funds to pay for incentives, districts are encouraged to look for alternative ideas. Listed below are recommendations for school districts to consider.

- **Develop Community Partnerships**
Many businesses in a community are heavily invested in the education system. Reach out to area businesses and explain your plan to incentivize students to attend summer school to address learning loss brought on by the pandemic. Businesses could be asked to donate gift cards (gas cards/stores frequented by teens) which could be used to incentivize student attendance in summer school.
- **Look to Your PTA**
PTAs often have flexible funding to address school-related needs. These funds could be used to purchase incentives as well. (Gym membership, treats, etc.)
- **Form a Partnership with Parents**
Districts are encouraged to reach out to parents to get their support in encouraging students to participate in summer learning. A letter from the school recommending participation may be the leverage parents need to get students to attend.

- **Teacher Brainstorming Session**

Have teachers brainstorm a list of incentives that could be used to entice students to participate in summer learning. Ideas could include providing free parking passes, late homework passes, free sporting event passes.

- **Have Counselors Meet with Students**

It may be helpful to have counselors meet with students who would benefit from attending summer school. Perhaps having an adult explain how summer learning could help them graduate Choice Ready could make a difference.

- **Negotiate with Technology Companies**

Almost all districts have spent and will continue to spend a significant amount of ESSER funding on purchasing equipment for students. It may be possible to negotiate a deal with companies that for every 20 to 50 Chromebooks or computers purchased, a complementary one will be provided, which could then be used as a prize in a drawing for those who attend summer school.

- **Meet Student Where they are at in the Summer**

We know that many students will be in daycare or signed up to participate in camps this summer. Schools can work with these various entities to bring summer learning to the student. Parents would not need to worry about transportation if school personnel met students where they will be at during the day rather than bringing students to the school.

Sponsoring summer school programming, afterschool programming and intensive tutoring are all evidence-based methods of addressing learning loss. Providing incentives can be an effective way to entice students to participate. Districts need to think outside of the box to find ways to incentivize students to be active participants in reducing the overall negative impact the COVID pandemic has had on education.