2026 ANNUAL REPORT

The State of Summer Learning & Enrichment

How summer stopped being a break and became a season of development — camps, summer schools, and pre-college programs; the surge in STEM and specialized experiences; and how families evaluate the opportunities that shape a child's year.

K12 Academics — helping families Find Your Community! since 2004

U.S. & global summer learning · Published 2026 · For providers · schools · universities · families

30M
Youth in structured summer programs

15k+
Day & overnight camps in the U.S.

~1 mo
Learning typically lost each summer

+14%
Sports-camp enrollment growth '23–'25

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summer became the season families invest in

The long break has been reimagined — from idle time into a competitive market of camps, academic programs, and pre-college experiences, driven by learning loss, STEM demand, and parents who treat summer as part of a child's development.

01 **Summer is developmental, not idle.** ~30M youth join structured programs — tens of millions more go unserved.

02 **The slide is real.** Students lose ~1 month of learning each summer — more in math — and programs reverse it.

03 **Specialization is the growth engine.** STEM, sports (+14%), and adventure camps outpace traditional formats.

04 **Pre-college is the crown jewel.** University summer programs are now an admissions & recruitment pipeline.

05 **Families evaluate like buyers.** Safety, reputation, and value lead — and the search starts online.

06 **Discovery is digital.** SEO, reviews, and online applications decide which programs families ever find.

! Biggest challenges

- Access & affordability — gaps fall hardest on lower-income families.
- Staffing & safety compressed into a three-month revenue window.
- Fragmented discovery — great programs families never find.
- Proving outcomes as parents demand measurable value.

★ Biggest opportunities

- STEM, AI, and career-exploration programming with clear demand.
- Pre-college pipelines linking universities to future applicants.
- Digital visibility and reviews as the new front door.
- Scholarships and hybrid models widening access.

SECTION 1 — THE SUMMER LEARNING ECOSYSTEM

Three segments, one season

Summer learning divides into three major segments — camps, summer schools, and pre-college programs — each maturing from childcare and remediation into intentional, skill-building experiences.

SEGMENT 1

Summer Camps

Day, overnight & specialty camps — built around skills, not just recreation.

- Day
- Overnight
- Sports
- Arts
- Adventure
- Tech

SEGMENT 2

Summer Schools

Credit recovery, enrichment, advanced coursework & test prep.

- Credit recovery
- Enrichment
- Advanced
- Test prep
- Online

SEGMENT 3

Pre-College ★★★★★

University-based experiences for high schoolers — tied to college admissions.

- Residential
- Research
- Career
- Admissions

Emerging camp categories FASTEST-RISING

- AI camps
- Robotics
- Entrepreneurship
- Game development
- Environmental
- Leadership
- Cybersecurity

SECTION 2 — WHY FAMILIES CHOOSE SUMMER PROGRAMS

Safety first — then value, fit, and outcomes

Parents and students want different things from the same program. The parent's decision hierarchy is remarkably consistent; students chase growth, friendship, and independence.

Why the summer slide matters

Share of school-year gains lost over one summer



Students in quality summer programs return with gains equal to about an extra month of school.

The parent decision hierarchy

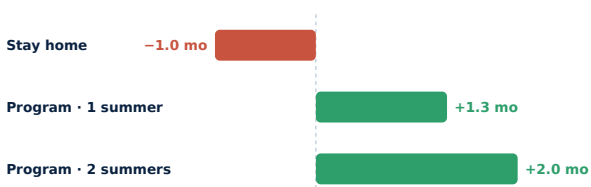
How families rank what matters

1. **Safety** & supervision
2. **Reputation** & reviews
3. **Educational value**
4. **Cost** & financial aid
5. **Staff quality** & ratios

Students seek **new skills, friendships, independence & career exploration**.

Does summer learning work?

Months of learning change over one summer



The evidence

Randomized & meta-analytic findings

+20–25% of a school year gained by **high-attenders after two summers** (RAND/Wallace).

+0.10 SD **math boost** across 37 studies (Annenberg meta-analysis).

5 wks the dosage that works — **≥5 weeks, ≥3 hrs/day** academics.

SEL high-attenders show stronger **social-emotional skills**.

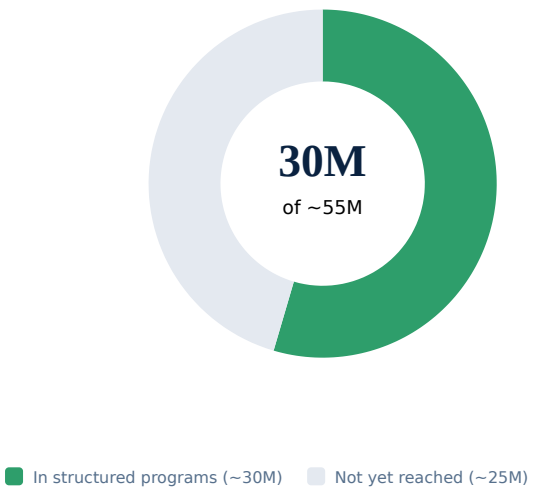
SECTION 3 — SUMMER PROGRAM ENROLLMENT TRENDS

Participation is high — and the ceiling is far higher

About 30 million young people take part in structured summer opportunities each year. With ~55 million school-age children nationwide, unmet demand is enormous — concentrated among families who can least absorb the slide.

Structured participation vs. potential

U.S. youth in summer programs vs. school-age population



Who's enrolling, and how

Age, format & geography

Elem. — **Elementary** families drive day-camp & enrichment demand; the slide hits hardest here.

MS/HS — **Middle & high school** shift to skill-building, residential & pre-college.

Travel — demand rises for **residential & travel** programs as students seek independence.

Sun Belt — population-growing regions in the **South & West** show the strongest demand.

The equity gap in summer loss

Reading lost over one summer



Who's left behind

Why access matters

Up to 3 mo — of **reading** lost over summer by low-income students (vs ~1 mo average).

2/3 — of the **income achievement gap** traces to summer learning loss.

Half — of the **reading gap** is tied to unequal summer access.

Access — the gap falls hardest on families who can **least absorb the slide**.

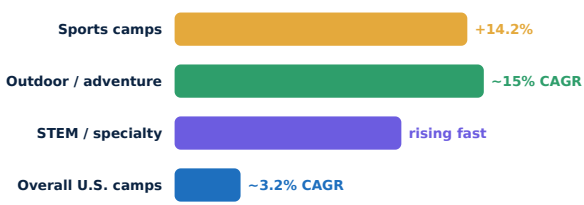
SECTION 4 — STEM & INNOVATION IN SUMMER LEARNING

The fastest-growing corner of the season

STEM is summer's headline category. Driven by workforce demand and college positioning, families choose AI, robotics, coding, and engineering — hands-on experiences that double as career exploration.

Where the growth is

Selected segment growth (enrollment / market)



The STEM summer stack

Hot fields & why they're growing

AI · Robotics · Coding · Engineering · Space science · Biotech · Cybersecurity

Jobs — **workforce demand** pulls families toward technical skills early.

College — STEM programs double as **college positioning** & résumé projects.

Hands-on — **project-based learning** & career exploration drive enrollment.

SECTION 5 — THE UNIVERSITY ROLE IN SUMMER LEARNING

Pre-college is a recruitment pipeline in disguise

University-hosted programs give high schoolers campus life, college classrooms, and faculty-led research — and give institutions early brand awareness and a warm applicant pipeline. It's where summer learning meets the college search.

Two sides of the same program

Why universities and students both win

~3% acceptance at the most selective research programs (e.g. RSI) — **rivaling the Ivies**.

Pipeline universities gain **early recruitment, brand awareness** & an enrollment funnel.

Readiness students gain **college readiness, academic exposure & campus familiarity**.

Access fully funded options (MITES, RSI) widen access; others run **need-based aid**.

What university programs offer

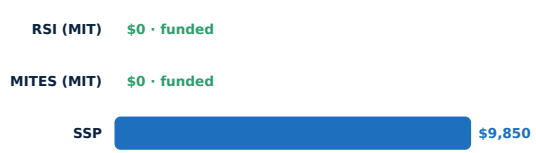
The pre-college menu

- Residential life
- College classrooms
- Faculty research
- Engineering
- Medicine
- Business
- Law
- Computer science
- Admissions workshops
- Essay & test prep

This is exactly where the K12 Academics **Colleges & Universities directory** connects families.

Access & cost of top pre-college programs

Program cost (need-based aid widely available)



The pre-college access story

Selectivity & funding

~3% acceptance at the most selective research programs (RSI) — **rivaling the Ivies**.

$0 **RSI & MITES are fully funded** — top programs can be free.

<$75k SSP is **free under $75k** income; need-based aid is common.

Project a real **research project** beats the program's name.

From the school down the street to a summer abroad

Two more segments round out the ecosystem: private and independent schools running their own summer programming, and a growing world of international experiences — each mapping to a K12 Academics directory.

Private & independent school programs

Connects the K-12 directory

- Academic enrichment
- Athletics
- Arts
- Community outreach
- Day programs

Schools run summer programming as both a **service to families and an enrollment touchpoint** — a first look for prospective students.

International summer learning

Connects the international directory

- Language immersion
- Cultural programs
- Global leadership
- Study-abroad prep
- International camps

Global experiences are among the **fastest-growing enrichment categories**, blending language, culture & college-readiness.

SECTION 8 — THE BUSINESS OF SUMMER LEARNING

A three-month business that lives or dies on visibility

Behind every program is an operation — staffing, facilities, safety, and an enrollment cycle compressed into a short, high-stakes season. Increasingly, the programs that fill are the ones families can find and trust online.

The operating reality

Operations, finance & marketing

3 mo — a full year's **enrollment, staffing & revenue** compressed into one season.

Safety — **supervision, ratios & accreditation** — the license to operate and top parent concern.

Aid — **scholarships & sliding-scale pricing** are becoming table stakes for access.

Found — enrollment hinges on **SEO, reviews & online applications**.

How families find programs today

The digital front door

- Search / SEO
- Directories
- Parent reviews
- Social media
- Online applications
- Digital ads

A great program that isn't **findable** effectively doesn't exist to a searching parent — the entire premise of a directory like K12 Academics.

SECTION 9 — THE FUTURE OF SUMMER LEARNING

By 2030: personalized, hybrid, and career-connected

The season keeps evolving toward experiences tuned to the individual child — blending in-person and online, connecting early to careers, and reaching across borders.

↑ What's rising

AI-personalized programs that adapt to each learner.

Hybrid experiences blending campus, community & online.

Career-focused learning linking summer to real industries.

Global experiences & mix-and-match pathways.

! What to watch

The access gap — keeping quality programs affordable.

Staffing & safety at scale in a short season.

Screen balance — demand for unplugged, nature-based time.

Proving outcomes as families expect measurable value.

AI
Personalized
Tuned to each learner.

◗
Hybrid
Campus + online.

→
Career-focused
Links to industry.

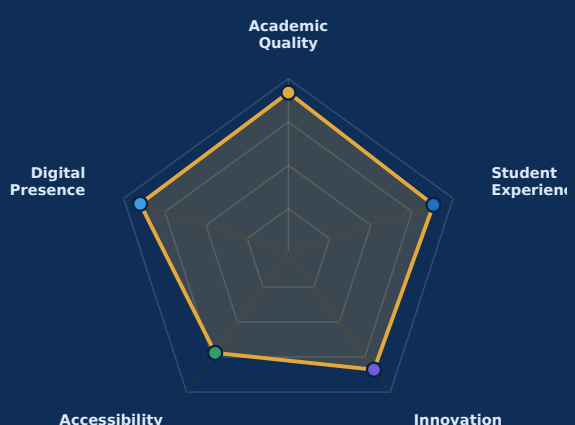
◍
Global
Cultural, immersive.

⚙
Pathways
Stackable summers.

SECTION 10 — THE K12 ACADEMICS SUMMER LEARNING INDEX™

A five-pillar framework for evaluating any program

To help families compare opportunities and help providers benchmark themselves, K12 Academics proposes the Summer Learning Index™ — five weighted pillars scoring what actually matters. The radar shows an illustrative exemplary-program profile.



Academic Quality — 25%
Curriculum · faculty · learning outcomes

Student Experience — 20%
Activities · engagement · community

Innovation — 20%
STEM · technology · unique offerings

Accessibility — 15%
Scholarships · location · program options

Digital Presence — 20%
Information quality · online accessibility

Methodology & sources

How this report was assembled, what the terms mean, and where the numbers come from.

Method & definitions

This report synthesizes the most recent publicly available data from industry associations, market researchers, and education studies, current as of 2026. "Structured summer opportunities" include day camps, overnight camps, enrichment programs, and summer school. "Summer learning loss" is the share of school-year gains not retained over the break.

Limitations

Summer-program data is fragmented and self-reported; market-size estimates vary by scope. Growth figures reflect specific studies and windows. The Summer Learning Index™ is a proposed K12 Academics framework, not an audited ranking.

Primary sources

- American Camp Association (ACA) & National Summer Learning Association
- Gallup — 2024 summer participation survey (with NSLA/ACA)
- IBISWorld & market-research firms — camp industry sizing
- Wallace Foundation & Annenberg Institute (Brown) — program impact
- Education Recovery Scorecard (2025); NWEA — achievement
- University pre-college programs (Harvard, MIT, Stanford, et al.)

Contact K12 Academics

Questions about this report, the Summer Learning Index™, or listing your program? We'd love to hear from you.

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