Summer without Fun(ding)

In both 2021 and 2022, the Oregon Legislature allocated one-time funding to support summer learning opportunities for Oregon’s children and youth. In 2022, $50 million was allocated for community-based organizations (CBOs) to provide summer learning opportunities, administered through the Oregon Community Summer Grants (OCSG) Initiative. Grant funds enabled community-based organizations to offer 6,133 individual summer program opportunities, reaching into every county and serving nearly 240,000 youth. These programs gave youth access to enrichment activities and new experiences, helped them build skills in career development and social emotional learning, reduced food insecurity, and supported academic learning. Grant funds also made summer programs more accessible to families by removing barriers like transportation, cost, and language. Read more about the impact from these grants.

In 2023, Senate Bill 531 proposed to continue this summer funding over the next biennium. Despite broad support, the legislature did not advance the bill and failed to provide any funding support for community-based summer learning programs in 2023.

Consequences from this lack of funding rippled through Oregon’s CBOs, youth, and families. To better understand the impact, a brief survey was distributed to community-based summer learning providers. 151 organizations responded, including 136 organizations that had previously received an OCSG grant award. (Note: This brief is an update to a previous survey of OCSG recipients, which can be found here)

The organizations that responded to this survey represent communities in every county of the state. They overwhelmingly serve priority populations, and 80% provide food to youth and/or families during the summer, although only 33% use the Summer Food Service Program. Survey results and quotes from the organizations are summarized below.

Demand for summer learning opportunities increased, but summer programs served fewer youth, and at higher prices.

Although nearly three-quarters of responding summer providers (72%) reported an increase in demand from families for summer programming this year, half of responding organizations served fewer youth in summer 2023 than they did in 2022, and the median number of youth served per organizations dropped from 190 in 2022 to 150 in 2023. Similarly, 47% of respondents offered fewer scholarships in 2023 than they did in 2022, and 44% employed fewer staff.

We struggled and are underfunded but did our best to shield families and partners. We had to make a significant increase in program fees which negatively impacted families and many families made the choice to decrease participation.”

“We had increased interest/demand but fewer resources to offset tuition for families. We had to dip into our reserves to help meet scholarship needs.”
Inconsistent funding endangers relationships between CBOs and the communities they serve.

Two-thirds of responding summer programs reported that the absence of OCSG funds negatively impacted their relationships with youth and families in their community.

“Because of our having to alter our programming and limit the number of camps offered this summer, we did suffer some blow back from our families. Some of these families have been with us for many years and were very saddened that they were unable to participate.”

“Families are reluctant to build relationships with individuals and organizations after so many years of inconsistent programming. They can’t rely on anything and don’t want to emotionally engage.”

Summer learning programs need higher capacity, lower fees, and transportation options

Survey respondents said that lower program fees, free and safe transportation options, and increased capacity to serve youth would make summer learning programs more accessible for families. Additional funding was the most frequently cited resource required to meet these needs, alongside additional staffing and partnership development.

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