

North Carolina Youth Camp Association

## Parent Perceptions Study Final Report

Submitted by

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purposes of this parent study were to: (1) assess parent perspectives on the developmental benefits of camp experiences for youth who attend NCYCA camps, (2) better understand parental attitudes toward year-round school to provide information to guide camp marketing, advocacy, and overall promotion of the camp experience, and (3) broadly contribute to current research within the camp literature in relevant, practical ways.

A convenience sample of 3,054 parents completed an online survey following their child's camp experience during the summer of 2015. (See the full report for parent demographic information). The response rate (~24%) is considered good and generalizable to NCYCA member camps. Data were analyzed using standard statistical practices and procedures in the social sciences.

The primary motivations that parents identified for sending their children to camp were the camp's reputation and programmatic focus. Although these results are not surprising, they highlight the importance that parents place on a positive, reputable camp "brand" and that parents' decisions about camp are influenced by the needs and interests of their children.

The development outcomes that parents associated with their child's participation in an NCYCA camp are numerous, and suggest that NCYCA camps are providing youth with holistic growth and development opportunities across a number of skill areas. These results are consistent with other studies of the parental perceptions of camp experiences (Henderson, Whitaker, Bialeschki, Scanlin, & Thurber, 2007; Michalski, Mishna, Worthington, & Cummings, 2003), and the amount of change (growth from the before camp to the after camp measure) is particularly consistent with results found by Baughman, Garst, & Fuhrman, 2009. Additionally, growth in social and emotional outcomes reported by parents in this study is comparable to social and emotional impacts of school participation for youth in K thru 8<sup>th</sup> grade (Payton, Weissberg, Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger, & Pachan, 2008).

It is also notable that parents reported increases in developmental outcomes like resilience, cooperation, communication, critical thinking, and decision-making- skills closely mapped to "21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills" that employers have identified as important for future workforce success (Casner-Lotto, Barrington, & Wright, 2006). NCYCA camp experiences appear to be particularly effective at building these skills in young people.

An overwhelming majority of parents (91%) associated camp involvement with school success, and this association was reflected in how camp prepares youth for life transitions, how camp reinforces life lessons learned at home, and how camp prepares youth for independent living. Again, these findings are very consistent with the camp literature about the ways in which camp experiences are impactful for youth.

A primary purposes of this study was to better understand parents' attitudes towards year-round school. More than three quarters of the parents in this study (88%) indicated that they do not support year-round school. Parent perspectives that did not support year-round school focused on skill development that occurs in camps during the summer, the constraints that year-round school places on youth and families, the developmental importance of unstructured summertime for youth, and a belief that year-round school is not an effective model for promoting education outcomes. Parent perspectives that favored year-round school focused on school as a stable environment, the benefits of year-round school for working families, and a belief that year-round school is more effective for teaching and learning.

These opposing views of year-round school are representative of the dialogue that is taking place around the country about the weaknesses and merits of the year-round school approach. In this study parents were so opposed to year-round school that 68% of parents identified themselves as either moderately or extremely concerned if year-round school impacted their child opportunity to attend camp. Furthermore, when asked about whether or not their voting decision (for or against a representative who supported an extended school calendar), 57.8% of parents indicated that they would be unlikely or extremely unlikely to vote for a representative who was in favor of year-round school.

This study also examined whether or not prior camp experienced influenced how a parent would vote (for or against a representative), and the results indicate that parents who had previously attended camp in the past were less likely to vote for a representative who supported year round school. The results also indicated that parents who had attended camp in the past were significantly more concerned about summer learning being negatively impacted by year round school then those who had never attended camp. The confluence of these analyses indicate that camp organizations must better demonstrate their value to those parents who had not previously attended camp if a goal of camp organizations is to inhibit the implementation of year round school. This effort may result in parents (who had not attended camp in the past) being both more concerned about the negative influence of the year round school on summer learning and parents being less likely to vote for those representatives with a "pro year-round school viewpoint."

The study findings provide strong support for the developmental benefits of NCYCA camp experiences for youth. This study also offers a foundation for future engagement with parents regarding their perceptions of the NCYCA camp experience and other issues important to parents. As previously noted, the response rate of ~24% is better than the response rate often associated with web-based survey. This response rate is largely attributed to the commitment and support of NCYCA camp directors who distributed the survey link to their parents and the parents who valued the camp experience enough to share their perspectives.

## INTRODUCTION

Identifying the youth, family, and community benefits of organized camp experiences are important to a range of camp stakeholders, and successfully articulating evidence-based outcomes can be critical for gaining stakeholder support for internal and external funding and resources (Allen, Stevens, Hurtes, & Harwell, 1998; Gass, 2005). Over the past 10-12 years a host of studies have identified the youth developmental outcomes of the camp experience (see Henderson, Bialeschki, & James, 2007 and Garst, Browne, & Bialeschki, 2011 for a summary of this research). These studies included large national (American Camp Association, 2005) and state-level camp outcomes studies (Garst & Bruce, 2003) as well numerous smaller-scale studies that have examined specific camp populations, particular camp components, or various theoretical perspectives. In addition to providing evidence of the value of the camp experience, these studies situate camp as an important context for positive youth development (Thurber, Schuler, Scanlin, & Henderson, 2007).

Although much has been learned about the developmental outcomes of the camp experience, there is a continuing need among camp organizations as well as individual camps to identify both the short and long term impacts of camp experiences. There is also an interest in better understanding the cumulative benefits of camp involvement over time, highlighted by Roark's (2008) anecdotal finding that the number of summers that campers attended camp increased their overall outcomes.

Documenting short and long-term impacts of camp experiences is important to administrators, funders, and corporate partners. Even among parents, expectations for the provision of quality youth experiences continues to grow. As Bialeschki and Sibthorp (2011) noted, "In this age of accountability, documenting best practices and ensuring that goals have been achieved is critical" (p.14). Furthermore, obtaining and maintaining support for the camp experiences requires ongoing communication about the evidence of the benefits of camp. It is within this context that the North Carolina Youth Camp Association (NCYCA) expressed an interest in working with the authors to explore a camp research project focusing on parent perceptions during the summer of 2015.

The NCYCA is a membership organization of North Carolina (N.C.) summer camps and adventure programs formed in 2009 to expand public understanding of N.C. summer camps and to represent their interests with local, state, and federal policymakers. It is a 501 (c) (6) non-profit organization, governed by an elected Board of Directors. The NCYCA mission is to strengthen and expand the educational, environmental and recreational opportunities provided by all organized camps in N.C. by encouraging cooperation among camps, sponsoring camp-specific research, communicating camp industry information, and building relationships with various private, non-profit, public, and governmental interests and agencies (NC Youth Camp Association, 2015). Today, approximately 50 camps have joined the association (personal communication, 2014).

## PURPOSE

In the Summer of 2015 the North Carolina Youth Camping Association (NCYCA), in partnership with a research team from the Out-of-School Time Lab of Clemson University, conducted a study with the parents of campers to better understand parent perspectives on the developmental benefits of camp experiences for youth who attend NCYCA camps, parent perceptions of year-round school, and the potential influence of both camp involvement, and year-round school on both academic achievement.

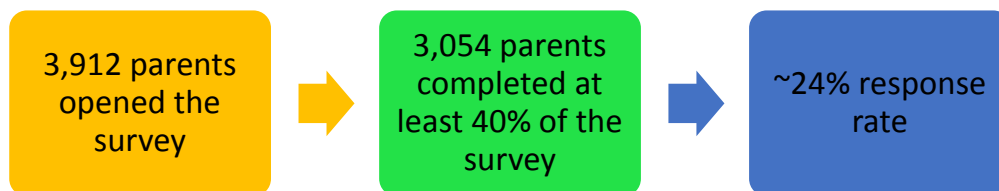
## METHOD

### Sampling Procedures

A total of nineteen NCYCA camps participated in the study. Directors or administrators in these camps administered the survey via emails obtained when parents registered their child for camp. Parents received an email with the embedded survey link embedded upon completion of their child's camp experience, and one reminder email also containing the survey link later in the summer. Parents were surveyed using a 121-item Qualtrics survey containing in the formats of yes/no, Likert (1-5, and 1-7), pre/post retrospective, and short answer. Incentives to participate in the survey were provided in the form of entry in a randomly selected drawing to receive one of three \$100 gift-cards. The combination of these strategies resulted in 3,912 parents who opened the survey for an overall 23.88% response rate. [This response rate is comparable with the average web survey response rate found by Shih and Fan (2009) through a meta-analysis of paper and web survey response rates.] See Table A for parent response rates by camp.

### Data Screening, Preparation, and Analysis

Data were first examined to determine the percentage of respondents who completed at least 40% of the survey (49 questions). This screening strategy reduced the total sample from 3,912 to 3,054 responses.



Data were analyzed using standard statistical practices and procedures in the social sciences. Quantitative data were analyzed with IBM SPSS 22 software using descriptive and inferential statistics. Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis procedures (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) with the NVivo 11 software.

Table A. Parents Response Rates by Camp (N = 3,054)

Camp Name	Total # of Respondents	Response Rate
Camp Chosatonga	29	13.06%
Camp Seafarer	146	16.39%
Camp High Rocks	70	14.50%
Camp Illahee	513	54.75%
Camp Merrie-Woode	130	20.22%
Camp Merri-Mac	274	33.50%
Camp Timberlake	100	26.53%
Green River Preserve	123	24.95%
Camp Judea	125	18.52%
Falling Creek Camp	167	18.49%
Keystone Camp	62	9.89%
Eagle's Nest Camp	44	8.24%
Camp Greystone	428	23.11%
Camp Ton-A-Wandah	25	18.12%
Camp Kahdalea	24	11.11%
Camp Sea Gull	168	18.88%
Camp Kanata	158	12.98%
Camp Highlander	125	12.90%
Camp Gwynn Valley	343	24.52%
<b>Overall</b>	<b>3,054</b>	<b>23.88%</b>

### Sample Descriptives

#### Parents

Parents provided demographic information. Respondents were generally female (85.5%), married never divorced (90.3%), highly educated (Bachelor’s Degree, 45%; Master’s Degree 33.3%), and white (94.3%). Almost 75% of the sample reported attending camp at least once as a child, and more than half reported attending a residential style camp. The majority of parental respondents reported their primary reason for selecting a particular camp being based on the camps reputation (50.1%), the focus or mission of the camp (18.7%), or the fact that the parent had attended the camp themselves when they were a child (14.8%).

#### Youth Campers

Parents were asked to provide demographic information for their children who attended one of the NCYCA camps. For the majority of children this was their first year of camp (27%), with those attending for their second (18%), or third year (13.8%) being the next largest groups. Children were on average 11.41 years old (SD = 2.41 years) and had primarily just completed 7<sup>th</sup> (15.2%), 6<sup>th</sup> (13.9%), or 8<sup>th</sup> (13.5%) grade.



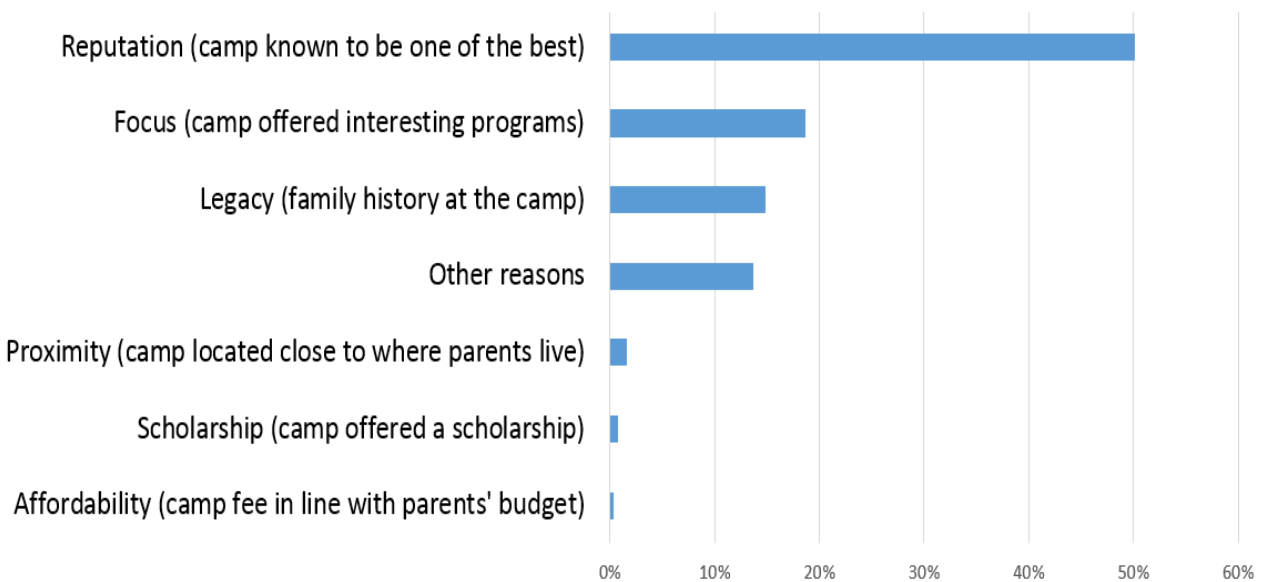
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Reasons Parents Sent Their Child to Camp

Parents were asked to identify why they decided to send their child to camp.

The most commonly selected reasons included: the camp's reputation (50.1%), followed by the focus of the camp being consistent with their child's interests (18.7%), a family history (legacy) of attending the camp (14.8%), and other reasons (13.7%). The reasons selected least often included: the proximity of the camp to parents' residence (1.6%), access to camp scholarships (<1%), and the affordability of the camp fees (<1%).

Figure 1. Reasons parents sent their child to camp (n=3,054)



## Youth Outcomes Associated with Camp Involvement

Parents were asked questions about growth and development they observed in their children as a result of camp participation.

The outcomes scale used a retrospective post-test format (Davis, 2003) with questions set up so that parents were asked to compare their children now (after camp) with how their children were prior to camp. Retrospective posttest designs are commonly used to assess program impacts in part because concerns associated with “response shift bias” are avoided (Howard & Dailey, 1979). Response shift bias is best described as a change in a participant’s personal metric for answering questions from pre-test to post-test due to a new appreciation or understanding of a concept being learned (Klatt & Taylor-Powell, 2005).

A comprehensive list of possible youth outcomes was compiled based on the camp literature related to the developmental outcomes of camp experiences (see Henderson, Bialeschki, & James, 2007 and Garst, Browne, & Bialeschki, 2011 for a summary of this research). Parent responses were analyzed using paired samples T-tests. Results presented in Table B indicate **significant positive growth** from the before camp measure (pre-test) to the after camp measure (post-test) in all 10 outcome areas. These outcomes included: Independence, Exploration, Resilience, Cooperation, Attitude, Communication, Social Competency, Critical Thinking, Decision Making, and Health.

Table B. Paired sample T-Tests of before and after camp scores (N = 2,259) (Scale of 1-5 where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree)

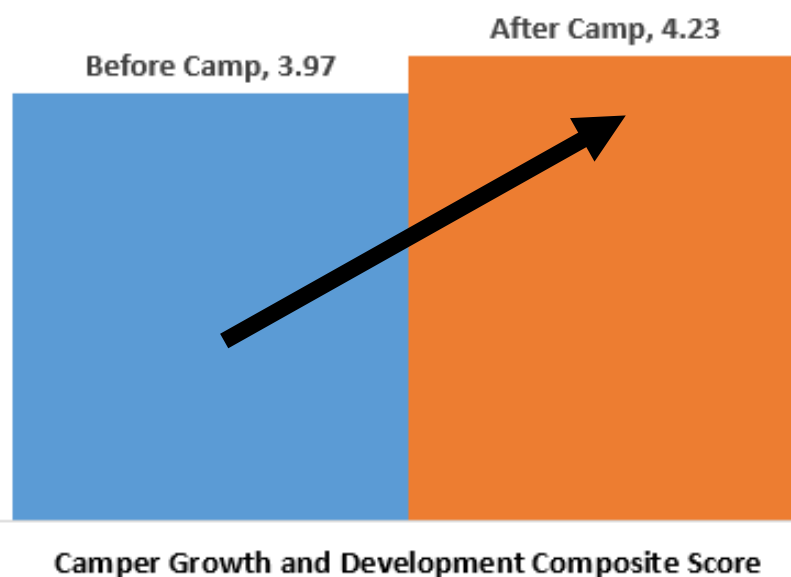
Variable	Mean (SD) Before Camp Measure	Mean (SD) After Camp Measure	Change
Independence	3.85 (.66)	4.18 (.56)	+.33*
Exploration	3.67 (.65)	4.02 (.56)	+.35*
Resilience	3.71 (.68)	4.04 (.60)	+.33*
Cooperation	4.03 (.61)	4.29 (.60)	+.26*
Attitude	4.22 (.58)	4.44 (.53)	+.22*
Communication	4.19 (.66)	4.41 (.58)	+.22*
Social Competency	4.16 (.52)	4.37 (.49)	+.21*
Critical Thinking	4.13 (.60)	4.33 (.56)	+.20*
Decision Making	3.87 (.62)	4.10 (.61)	+.22*
Health	3.85 (.62)	4.11 (.56)	+.26*
<b>Overall Composite</b>	3.97 (.46)	4.23 (.42)	+.26*
Note: * indicates significant at .001 or below			

**Key Finding:** Parents reported that camp helped their child grow and develop in the areas of resilience, cooperation, communication, critical thinking, and decision-making — skills closely mapped to “21st Century Skills” that employers have identified as important for future workforce success.

The development outcomes that parents associated with their child’s participation in an NCYCA camp are numerous, and suggest that NCYCA camps are providing youth with holistic growth and development opportunities across a number of skill areas. These results are consistent with other studies of parental perceptions of camp experiences (Henderson, Whitaker, Bialeschki, Scanlin, & Thurber, 2007; Michalski, Mishna, Worthington, & Cummings, 2003), and the amount of change (growth from the before camp to the after camp measure) is particularly consistent with results found by Baughman, Garst, & Fuhrman, 2009. Growth in social and emotional outcomes reported by parents in this study is comparable to social and emotional impacts of school participation for youth in K-8<sup>th</sup> grade (Payton, Weissberg, Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger, & Pachan, 2008).

It is notable that parents reported increases in developmental outcomes like resilience, cooperation, communication, critical thinking, and decision-making- skills closely mapped to “21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills” that employers have identified as important for future workforce success (Casner-Lotto, Barrington, & Wright, 2006). NCYCA camp experiences appear to be particularly effective at building these skills in young people.

Figure 3: Overall camper growth and development (N = 2,259)

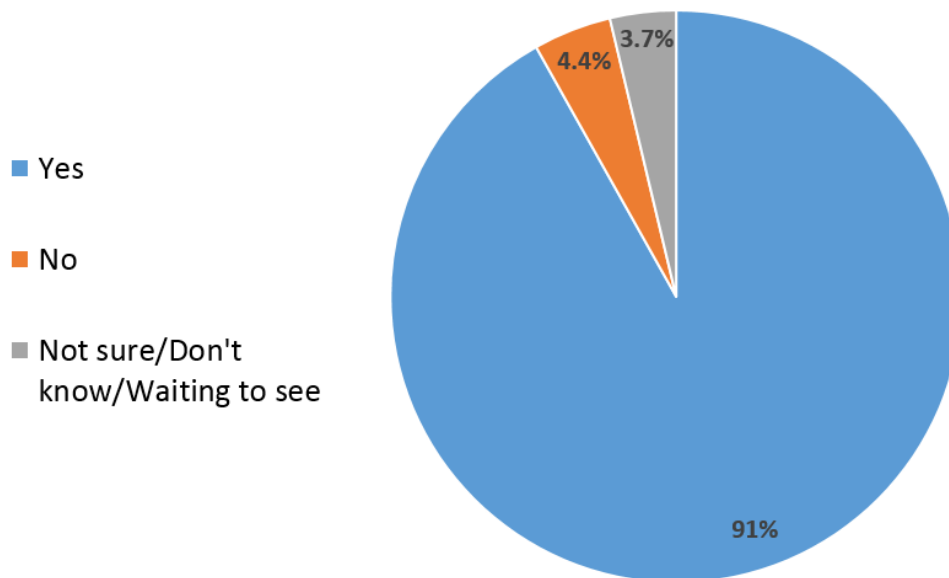


## Parental Perceptions of Camp Involvement and School Success

### Parents were asked, “Does attending overnight camp help your child succeed in a school environment?”

The majority of parents (91%) indicated “yes,” followed by 4.4% who indicated “no,” and 3.7% who indicated that they weren’t sure, didn’t know, or were waiting to see.

Figure 4. Does attending overnight camp help your child succeed in a school environment? (n=3,054)



### Constructed Themes and Representative Quotes from Parent Responses about the Relationship between Camp Involvement and School Success

#### 1. Camp helps youth navigate important life transitions.

*“I believe that camp has helped her with the transition from elementary school to middle school. She is very confident and not afraid to speak up. She is sensitive to those around her. She is trying new things and being placed in an environment where she can succeed at these things.”*

*“...learning to meet new people and work together is going to be great as she transitions to middle school. I think the responsibility of getting herself to each different activity through her day at camp [helped] with that new routine at school as well.”*

## 2. Camp reinforces life lessons youth learn at home.

*"I think [camp] taught him many things about life in general and just helped drive home all the things we try to teach him in the home..."*

*"When the children are expected to do chores and be responsible, and the person ensuring this happens is NOT the parent or teacher, they are far more responsive. They look up to their counselors and can relate to them as people who were recently kid and have successfully taken on greater responsibility. It makes the fact that they will soon not only be more responsible for themselves but also for others more immediately real."*

## 3. Camp prepares youth for independent living.

*"I expect overnight camp helps them transition to functioning independently. The differences are very clear among the college students I teach. Kids need to learn some independent living skills and how to adapt to different social environments before going to college."*

*"...[at camp] being able to independently make decisions (what to eat, wear, what activities to participate in) and deal with the consequences of those decisions (positive or negative) is an important part of growing up and is vital for school success. Dealing with disappointment...and being able to move on helps children become more resilient. Having children deal with disappointment and realizing it is not the end of the world will better prepare them for the harsher realities...in later school years, and in the working world as adults."*

***Key Finding:*** *An overwhelming majority of parents (91%) associated camp involvement with school success, and this association was reflected in how camp prepares youth for life transitions, how camp reinforces life lessons learned at home, how camp prepares youth for independent living, and how camp provides opportunities for hands-on learning.*

## 4. Camp builds youths' self-confidence.

*"...my children are more confident individuals. They have more life experiences under their belt, they've been exposed to more people and situations. They are more flexible and able to adapt to changes. [Camp] also helps them to connect socially with others...how to go into a situation without knowing anyone and still feel comfortable and more self-assured."*

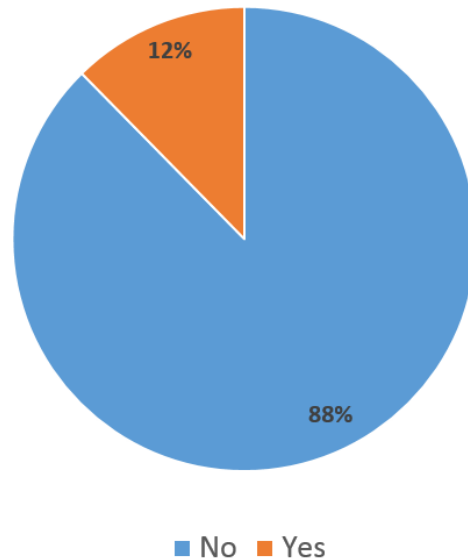


## Parent Perceptions of Year-Round School

Parents were asked “Are you in favor of year-round school? Why or why not?”

Content analysis of the parent responses found that 88% of parents were not in favor of year-round school while 12% were proponents of year-round school.

Figure 6: Parent perception of year-round school (n=3,054)



### Constructed Themes and Representative Quotes from Parent Responses about Year-Round School

#### **Themes Reflecting Parents Who Do Not Support Year-Round School**

1. Youth gain a range of skills from camp experiences that many parents view as more important than academics.

*“There are things gained from camp experiences and time with family that I believe are as important, if not more important sometimes, than academics. Camp has taught my children independence, self-confidence and allows them to expand themselves as individuals and explore interests in ways that are less likely any other time or place. My camp experiences are some of the most memorable and life-changing from my childhood including many leadership opportunities that I was able to explore which set me up for success in my career. It also enabled me to expand my ideas on where I would go to college without fear of being far from my family.”*

*"...camp is incredibly important in terms of fostering independence. I want my kids to go away to college and stay there -- in that, they succeed in living own their own. Going to camp gives them a month to see what independence feels like, and the confidence that comes from knowing that they can resolve issues on their own. It not only gives them the wherewithal to take care of themselves but also the commensurate confidence that comes along with it."*

2. Year-round school constrains many other youth and family experiences and opportunities.

*"Unfortunately kids that go to camp and have active families are the one's hurt by this. The families that do very little or don't require their kids to work are the benefit of year around schooling. It seems like this does a disservice for the public school system as it will incentivize supportive parents that contribute to the public school system to put their kids in private schools. Year round schooling also has an impact on summer jobs for kids and as they become teenagers their ability to get in the work force and get real world experience."*

3. Opportunities for unstructured time in the summer are important for a child's development.

*"I worry about how high pressure life is for kids today and think the unstructured time of summer is important from a developmental perspective. Kids today don't know how to be "bored" and downtime would help them learn from that & what it means to disconnect and recharge batteries by inward reflection."*

*"Camp influenced the way I value nature, sports, healthy living and relationships and I see it doing the same for my children. For girls in particular, camp drives confidence during adolescence that I could never have found anywhere else. The loss of camp would be a devastating blow to today's children and the loss of that experience would be felt broadly across society. We need to protect the opportunity for children to experience childhood and the carefree moments that are supposed to be part of it. That could never happen if they were forced to go to school year round with only short breaks."*

4. Year-round school is an ineffective model for promoting educational outcomes

*"...year-round school / classroom instruction ends up [being] far less impactful in learning. We have observed that the extension of the school year that has already taken place (by 1 or 2 weeks) during the time that our children have attended school does nothing more than spread out the calendar---more teacher work days, more 1/2 days, various days off, lots of learning interruption."*

*"As an educator, I have done some research into the idea of year round schooling. One of my main concerns about it is from the perspective of the teachers. They do not have an*



*opportunity to travel to other places or do intensive study programs that might benefit their teaching.”*

***Key Finding:*** *The 88% of parents who oppose year-round school cited life skill gains associated with camp experiences, constraints on other summertime family opportunities, and the importance of unstructured time for a child’s development as key reasons.*

### **Themes Reflecting Parents Who Support Year-Round School**

1. Youth with unsupportive parents or unhealthy home environments benefit from the stability provided by year-round school.

*“Some children are in stressful situations that make year round school option more stable for them emotionally than being home with a stressed out parent, or ignored or exposed to a dangerous environment...”*

*“I’m a teacher, and I’m very concerned about the “summer slide” after prolonged summer vacations. I’m also concerned about the social aspects of summer vacations, including food insecurity and supervision safety. Too many children are at risk during the summer breaks; year-round school would make it more possible to fill some of the academic and social gaps that children in need experience.”*

2. Families in which both parents work can find it difficult to identify and pay for summer activities for their children.

*“Our family has two working parents, and filling 12 weeks of summer with activities for our children is a challenge. I’m torn, because I think the time out of the classroom immersed in nature is incredibly valuable, but I’m not convinced that those experiences are only available with a 3 month summer break.”*

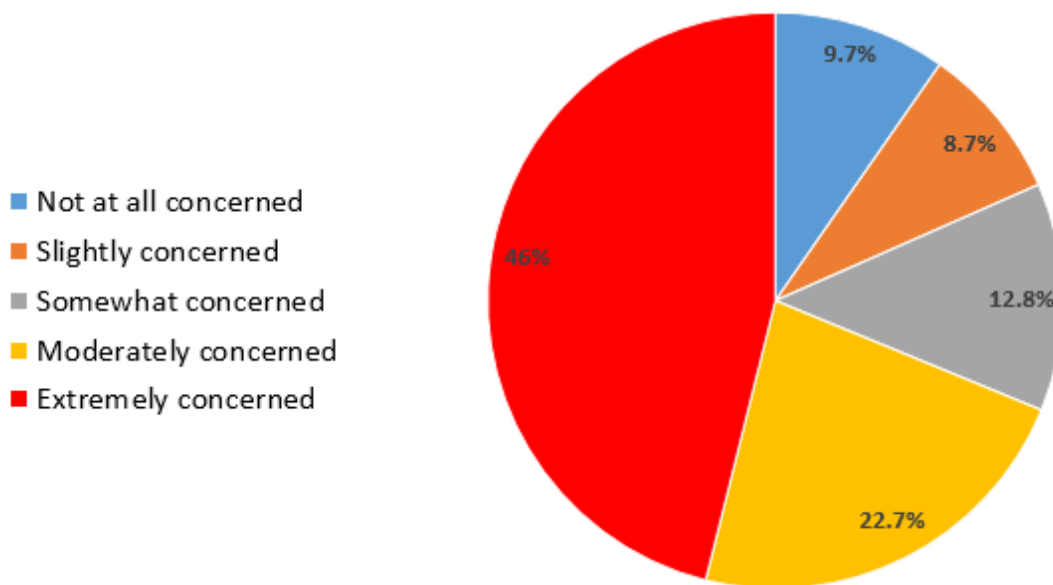
3. Year-round school supports more effective teaching and learning

*“In addition, providing breaks in the school year at regular intervals rather than in an elliptical orbit around summer would prevent “burn out” behavior and experiences for both children and teachers. Currently, most school policies and programming operate to the comfort and interest of the adults (i.e. voters) rather than for the students (i.e. customers).”*

Parents were also asked to “Rate your level of concern if a year-round school calendar was implemented and it impacted the opportunities you would have to send your child to camp.”

A majority of parents indicated extreme concern (46%), 22.7% indicated moderate concern, 12.8% indicated they were somewhat concerned, 8.7% indicated slight concern, and 9.7% were not at all concerned.

Figure 7: Level of concern if a year-round school calendar was implemented and it impacted the opportunities you would have to send your child to camp (n=3,054)

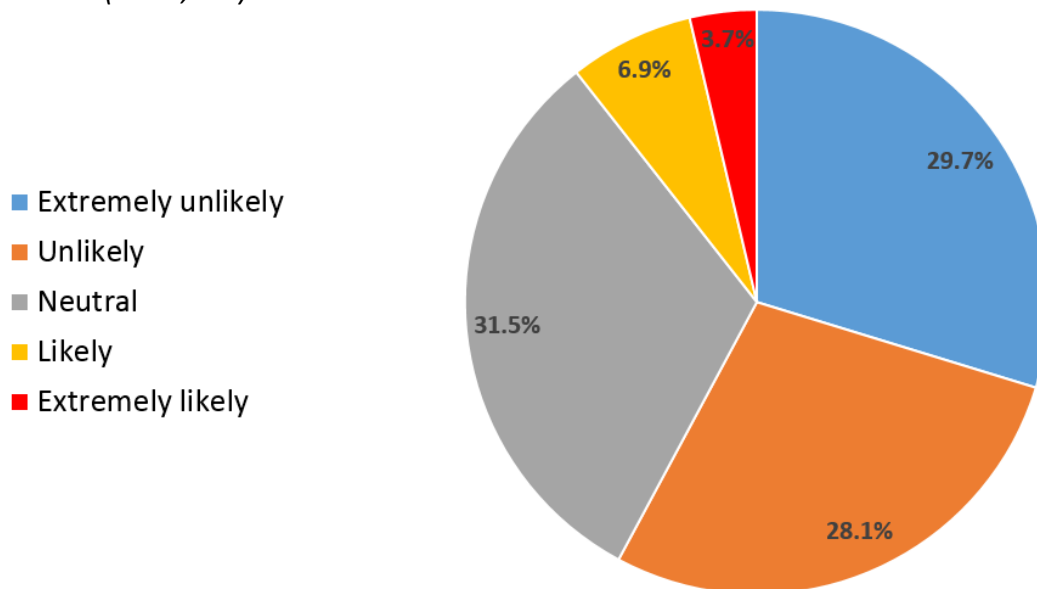


**Key Finding:** ~69% of parents indicated moderate to extreme concern about the impact of year round school on their child’s opportunity to attend camp.

Another question asked of parents was “Would you be more or less likely to vote for your representative if he/she supported an extended school calendar?”

Responses to this question were more evenly distributed across the response choices when compared to other school calendar question. A majority (29.7%) indicated they would be extremely unlikely, 28.1% indicated unlikely, 31.5% indicated they were neutral on the issue, 6.9% indicated they were likely, and 3.7% indicated they were likely to vote for their representative if he/she supported an extended school calendar.

Figure 8: Likelihood of voting for a representative if he/she supported an extended school calendar (N = 3,054)



An additional analysis was then conducted by grouping parents based on prior camp experience (i.e., parents who spent at least one week at a resident camp as a child) and those without prior camp experience (i.e., parents who never attended camp as a child). To understand the prior influence of camp experience on a parent's likelihood of voting we conducted a linear regression. The results indicate that parents who had previously attended camp in the past were less likely to vote for a representative who supported year round school.

Parents were also asked to rate their level of concern relating to summer learning experiences and the impact year round school may have on them. A linear regression indicated that parents who had attended camp in the past were significantly more concerned about summer learning being negatively impacted by year round school than those who had never attended camp.

***Key Finding:*** ~58% of parents indicated they would be *unlikely to extremely unlikely* to vote for a representative if he/she supported an extended school calendar.

## **STUDY LIMITATIONS**

The study design introduced a few limitations. First, the study findings are applicable to a targeted sample of NCYCA member camps. Although this study represents one of the few known state or national-level studies involving a large sample of parents investigating camp-related youth outcomes, as a convenience sample there are limitations to how these results may represent parent perspectives outside of NCYCA camps. Second, with only ~24% of parents responding, some parental perspectives may not be represented in the data. Third, the self-reported nature of the data has a number of inherent weaknesses, including: honesty/image management, lack of introspective ability, lack of understanding, and possible response bias (Austin, Gibson, Deary, McGregor, & Dent, 1998; Fan et al., 2006); however, due to the anonymous nature of the survey, some of these possible influences may have been mitigated.

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