



# Summer Programs Can Support the Whole Child: Academic and Social-Emotional Outcomes from Four Denver-area Charter Schools

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Learning happens best when students are socially and emotionally well.<sup>1</sup> In 2021, six Denver-area charter schools received funding from the Response, Innovation, and Student Equity (RISE) Education Fund to address the academic and social-emotional impacts of COVID-19 by implementing summer programs. These schools offered Colorado's highest-need students—across elementary and secondary grade levels—the opportunity to participate in innovative summer programs that included academic, social-emotional, and experiential components. This brief summarizes data collected by four of the six schools in 2022, in their second year of delivering summer programs.

Results show that summer programs positively impacted students. Learners who participated saw increased academic performance and experienced benefits such as increased confidence and strengthened relationships with peers and teachers. However, we observed only limited growth in social-emotional skills and behavioral outcomes.

There are opportunities to continue to support students in growing academically and social-emotionally. To learn more, check out our [summer program toolkit](#) and [video](#) which highlights the value of centering summer programs in social emotional learning.

## To support students in Colorado,

### School leaders can...

Develop and implement summer programs that include academic, social-emotional, and experiential components.

Prioritize social-emotional learning year-round.

Foster a culture and common language so that all staff are supporting social-emotional wellness.

Connect with other schools to learn how they are using social-emotional learning to support academic and person-centered outcomes.

### Funders can...

Support summer programs that center social-emotional wellness and allow schools to respond to the needs of their community.

Support peer-to-peer learning models so school leaders can learn from each other as they implement new initiatives.

### Policymakers can...

Support statewide adoption of standards for social-emotional learning.

Provide guidance and technical assistance for schools to support social-emotional wellness.

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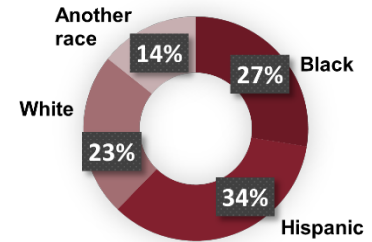


## Summer Programs Served Diverse Learners

Summer programs were well-attended and served students with varying needs. Programs across the four schools ranged from 2-5 weeks. Only two schools had mandatory attendance policies; however, over one-fourth of all participants (n=60) attended 100% of sessions. Almost 80% of participants (n=176) attended at least half of all sessions.

Previous studies suggest that summer programs are most beneficial when they target families most in need.<sup>2</sup> All four schools intentionally recruited students who were likely to benefit from additional support. This included students who had low attendance, were low on credits, scored lowest on academic assessments, demonstrated behavioral issues, or were in key transition years. Results show that summer program participants came from racially diverse backgrounds and programs served low-income families. For example, in one elementary school, 94% of summer program participants received free or reduced-price lunch.

Summer Learners in Elementary and Secondary Grades (N=221)



## Academic Gains

Program participants saw increases in measures of academic achievement in the fall following summer programming. In one elementary school, the number of summer participants (n=68) testing at grade level increased from 11 (16%) in spring 2022 to 23 (34%) in fall 2022. In one secondary school, summer participants (n=43) saw an increase in the average percentage of credits earned: on average, participants earned 60% of credits they attempted in spring 2022 (standard deviation [SD]: 8.5%), compared to 72% in fall 2022 (SD: 8.4%). Academic data were unavailable for the other two schools.

These findings are promising given the relatively short timeframe of summer programs. Previous studies have shown positive impacts on reading and math achievement among summer program participants in the 1 to 2 years following the program.<sup>3</sup> While academic gains may seem incremental, the benefits to learning may follow students into future years and may be compounded if students attend summer programs over several years.

## Limited Impacts on Social-Emotional Skills and Behavior Outcomes

Social-emotional skill attainment improved slightly among participants at one secondary school. Program participants at one school (n=37) experienced modest growth on three of the six Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies,<sup>4</sup> including having a growth mindset and sense of belonging, between the start and end of the program. Other areas remained unchanged, such as self-management and self-efficacy. At the other secondary school, the number of behavioral incidents requiring intervention among summer program participants (n=43), increased slightly, from one in spring 2022 to four incidents in fall 2022.

Among elementary participants, no changes were observed in frequency or risk of social-emotional and behavioral problems. For example, in one elementary school, the same percentage of summer program participants (n=47) were identified as at risk for social-emotional and behavioral problems in spring 2022 (32%) compared to fall 2022 (32%).

These findings support known challenges to building students' SEL skills and improving behavioral outcomes. Many students are still reacclimating to school and social dynamics post-COVID-19; one summer may not be sufficient to observe significant change. In upper grade levels, previous studies suggest that SEL uptake can be particularly challenging, given the difficulty in integrating and reinforcing SEL lessons in core academic



subjects like math and science<sup>5</sup> (both secondary summer programs offered credit-earning opportunities in core subjects as central components of their programs). While SEL instruction may be easier to integrate in elementary levels, it is sometimes harder to measure impacts on younger students due to challenges in self-reporting at young ages when students have more limited self-awareness.<sup>6</sup>

## Experiential Learning Supported Student Growth

Program participants valued field trips and real-world projects that connected academic learning to experiences in their community. On a survey distributed on the last day of the program, 45% of elementary (n=59) and 41% of secondary (n=17) participants mentioned field trips and excursions as their favorite components. Secondary students who participated in an end-of-summer focus group at one school (n=7) described how opportunities to be active in their communities led to self-growth and sense of achievement, such as learning how to ride a bike and increasing their confidence to respond to bullying.

***“The summer program helped me to strive better and be comfortable pushing myself.” -Secondary student***

***“Learning about wolves on our trip has boosted my confidence in myself and learning how to stand up to bullies.” -Secondary student***

Previous research suggests that “learning by doing” is essential to youth development, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Experiential instruction, such as incorporating project-based learning, field trips, and hands-on activities that are aligned to academic instruction, can accelerate learning.

## Participants Valued Connection in Summer Program

Program participants reported stronger relationships to peers and teachers. For example, participants in the two elementary schools experienced growth on “how well they felt they currently got along with friends” between the first and last day of the program, moving from an average rating of 3.1 (SD 1.07) in the pre-survey (n=53) to 3.6 (SD .97) in the post survey (n=46), on a 4-point scale.

In one secondary school, several students in the end-of-summer focus group described how the program supported them in making friends and forming meaningful bonds with teachers. Participants at that school experienced some growth in teacher-student relationships, a core SEL competency.<sup>4</sup> For example, average ratings on the item “How many of your teachers would you be excited to have again in the future?” increased by a point between the first and last day of the program, moving from “a couple teachers” (average: 3, SD 1.2, n=16), to “several teachers” (average: 4, SD 0.9, n=16). These findings are promising, as this school specifically aimed to support new incoming students in forming connections with peers and staff to aid in school acclimation and connectedness.

***“I think it will be easier going into the school year because I know people’s names now... and it gives me better understanding of the teachers I haven’t had yet, and a better view of the school I have not experienced yet. I know I’m not alone.” -Secondary student***

Previous research suggests that strengthened relationships with both peers and school staff is a key factor in students’ social and emotional well-being and can be positively impacted by shorter-term programs.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, evidence points to the value of unstructured activities (e.g., hands-on activities, crafts) in supporting relationship building, underscoring the importance of incorporating experiences and activities that center collaboration and interaction in summer programs.



## Methodologic Notes and Limitations

**Data Sources.** We analyzed data from four sources.

**Administrative Data.** All four schools provided data on summer program attendance and demographic characteristics of program participants. This included the total number of students who attended the program by grade level, gender, race, and whether students received free or reduced-price lunch. This data was available for 100% of program participants (N=221). Schools provided academic and behavioral data from spring 2022 (collected at the end of the Quarter 4 grading period in academic year 2021-2022) and fall 2022 (collected at the end of the Quarter 1 grading period in academic year 2022-2023). One elementary school provided a) the total number and percent of program participants who tested at grade level in the grading period (as determined by standardized test results) and b) the total number of program participants who had any behavior incidents in the grading period (defined by higher-level actions including suspension and expulsion). The other elementary school was unable to provide these data. One secondary school provided a) the average difference in number of credits attempted and earned among program participants in the grading period (7% of data were missing for this measure due to credit data being unavailable for new students) and b) the total number of program participants who experienced any behavior incidents (defined as referrals through their restorative justice program) in the grading period. The other secondary school was unable to provide these data.

**Social-emotional Assessments and Surveys.** The two elementary schools administered either the SAEBRs<sup>9</sup> or BESS<sup>10</sup> screening assessments in spring 2022 (collected at the end of the Quarter 4 grading period in academic year 2021-2022) and fall 2022 (collected at the end of the Quarter 1 grading period in academic year 2022-2023). These assessments were administered school-wide to students in Grades 2-5. One school reported these data at both grading periods among program participants, with a response rate of 77%. The other school was unable to provide these data. Both elementary schools also administered an original SEL survey on the first (response rate 89%) and last day of the summer program (response rate 77%), which measured mood and self-regulation, self-esteem, and relationships with others. One secondary school administered an original SEL survey measuring six domains from CASEL's SEL competencies<sup>4</sup> on the first (65% response rate) and last day of the summer program (30% response rate). This school had attrition and noted that several participants were off-site on the last day of the program. 11% of data were missing within survey responses. The other secondary school was unable to collect these data.

**Program Satisfaction Surveys.** All four schools had program participants complete a survey on the last day of summer programs to understand satisfaction with program offerings and structure, likelihood of recommending the program to others, and suggestions for improvement. The response rate was 53%, which was impacted by program attrition, limited staff availability to complete the survey with participants, and participants being off-site on the last day of the program.

**Participant Focus Groups.** One secondary school conducted a staff-led focus group on the last day of the program with seven participants to understand the most valuable parts of the program, personal social-emotional growth, and other program impacts. Staff selected participants to have diversity in grade level, race, and which program activities they participated in. The focus group lasted roughly 30 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed.

**Data Analysis.** We analyzed quantitative measures descriptively. We conducted a content analysis of open-ended survey questions and the focus group transcript to identify themes and representative quotes.

**Limitations.** Not all data points were available for all schools, due to time/resource availability to collect data and incomplete reporting. Thus, this brief includes school-specific findings, with aggregated data where available. In addition, we examined a short timeframe, looking at pre/post-tests over a few weeks in the summer, and comparing spring to fall term, a short window to see potential change. We were not able to examine potentially longer-term impacts, for example, over the course of the subsequent school year. Finally, other factors (outside of the summer program) may have played a part in changes we observed.

## References

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