

# **RIISING TO THE CHALLENGE** | How Summer Programs Responded to the Needs of Youth and Families in 2020



**Summer provides a unique opportunity for youth to participate in learning experiences and programs** that they may not have access to during the school year. Research shows that summer programs yield positive outcomes for youth, including academic learning, social and emotional development, physical and mental health, and safety.<sup>1</sup>



**Summer 2020 was unlike any other summer.** With all of the uncertainty surrounding the current school year and upcoming summer, we solicited early findings, resources, and stories from national and local organizations about their summer 2020 programs. Preliminary data suggest that summer programs rose to the challenge in 2020 to provide youth and their families with opportunities to experience safety and belonging, develop meaningful relationships with adults and peers, and build skills.



**We are grateful to the organizations that shared their resources and preliminary findings to inform this resource:** [Afterschool Alliance](#), [After School Matters](#), [BellXcel](#), [Boys and Girls Clubs of America](#), [Horizons National](#), the [National Summer Learning Association \(NSLA\)](#), and [YMCA of the USA](#). Although this resource does not represent all of the many organizations that provide summer programs, we hope it offers practical examples of how a sample of national and local organizations responded to the needs of youth and families this past summer.



## **Pandemic 2020: What did summer programs do?**

**Pivoted to alternative program models to provide learning opportunities for youth.** In a survey from Afterschool Alliance, parents reported that their children participated in summer programs virtually (37%), in person (36%), or both virtually and in person (26%).<sup>2</sup> Summer programs created activity or supply kits for youth participating in virtual programs and delivered the kits to young people's homes.<sup>3</sup> For example, the NSLA learned through focus groups with NSLA members who offered summer programs that most summer programs delivered the kits to each young person's house weekly, biweekly, or at the beginning of the summer.<sup>4,5</sup>

**Sought to meet families' basic needs (e.g., food, access to technology).** Summer programs distributed food, grocery gift cards, and takeout to families and communities.<sup>3,6</sup> For example, the YMCA of the USA created an [interactive map](#) that families and communities could use to find their nearest meal distribution site. In addition, afterschool and summer program providers like After School Matters in Chicago and Horizons National distributed tablets, computers, and wireless hotspots to help facilitate young people's participation in programs.<sup>6,7</sup>

**Supported the adult staff who work with youth by sharing resources and offering professional development.** More than half (59%) of providers who responded to [Afterschool Alliance's survey](#) shared that they engaged staff in remote professional development and training.<sup>8</sup> For example, BellXcel, an organization that partners with school districts and youth-serving organizations to implement summer and afterschool learning programs, shared that summer program staff reported they had the skills, tools, and

preparation to begin to implement their summer programs.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Horizons National staff reported that they felt supported, connected, and prepared to run their programs.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Every Hour Counts, a network of afterschool and summer systems, compiled and shared a list of [resources](#), which includes back to school resources, virtual learning resources, resources for families and communities, policy resources, and fundraising advice.<sup>11</sup>



## What were the experiences of youth and families?

**Youth reported having caring and positive relationships with adult staff.** Preliminary feedback from youth who participated in remote summer learning programs with After School Matters, BellXcel, and Horizons National indicates that youth were satisfied with their summer learning experiences.<sup>6,12</sup> Youth surveyed by BellXcel reported that staff were trustworthy and supportive and created a safe environment.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, After School Matters youth reported that staff treated them with respect and that youth trusted the staff in their programs.<sup>6</sup>

**Youth indicated they had opportunities to connect with their peers, have fun, and develop their skills.** Youth from Horizons National's summer programs reported that these programs helped them make connections with other youth and adults, stay active, and do things they enjoy and find meaningful.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, After

School Matters youth reported that their program gave them something fun to do, provided an opportunity to try new things, and helped them develop and improve their skills.<sup>6</sup>

**Families also shared positive feedback about their programs.** Preliminary feedback from NSLA members who offered summer programs indicates that families were able to engage more in programs because the barriers that families faced during previous summers (e.g., transportation, childcare) were alleviated by the virtual environment.<sup>8</sup> For example, Boys and Girls Clubs of America shared that some clubs used text messaging apps to keep families informed and engaged.<sup>13</sup> Horizons National also shared that families provided feedback about the positive relationships between youth and staff and opportunities for youth to try new things.<sup>12</sup>



## What's next?

**Summer programs have always been adaptable, and summer 2020 was no different.** Summer programs adapted their program models and some of their core functions to meet the needs of youth, families, and their communities. Despite the many changes that programs had to make due to the pandemic, summer programs reported positive preliminary feedback from youth and

families who highlighted their relationships with caring adults and opportunities for developing critical skills. As we continue to navigate the 2020–21 school year, summer programs will continue to play a critical role in the ecosystem of supports for youth, families, and communities in a trying time.

## References

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