

Innovating to Meet the Moment

How BellXcel leveraged strategic alliances and disruptive thinking to create a new solution in response to COVID-19

By: Lauren Sanchez Gilbert, Chief Executive Officer, BellXcel

When the world turns sideways, you lean into what you know to be true. For our team, data, evidence, and experience have always served to guide our solutions in a rapidly changing world.

This past March, as schools and youth development organizations nationwide found themselves faced with re-imagining how they serve their communities, our team did what we have done best throughout our history – innovate to meet the moment. However this moment brought the added challenge of a 6-week window from concept to launch.

COVID-19 forced changes to virtually every aspect of life as we knew it, yet along with the unknowns and the very real crisis this pandemic represented, before us was an opportunity to disrupt our thinking and mobilize our resources into uncharted territory.

This was a moment to take 30 years of science and know-how and dig into our commitment for all children to excel.

A leading national nonprofit in youth development with nearly 30 years' experience innovating proven educational solutions, BellXcel is changing the way its youth development and school partners empower educators and reach exponentially more children and their families.

The Backstory

The COVID-19 pandemic caused upheaval nationwide as many schools confronted an abrupt shift to distance learning, families faced workplace transitions to homes, and job losses created financial insecurity for thousands of families. The inequity of remote learning between higher and lower income communities quickly came to light. Households became increasingly stretched thin with both time and resources as they struggled to also meet the technology needs of multiple adults and children. Even in cases where household technology was available, connectivity often was not; as many as one-quarter of children in low-income and rural communities lack access to broadband Internet.¹

As it became clear that the stay-at-home mandates were possibly extending toward summer, our experience told us that a significant number of school-aged children might not be reached by simply shifting existing summer learning programs online. We needed to innovate tools and resources for both high and low-tech environments to not only support the schools and the organizations serving children, but the educators, families and caregivers as well.

Clarifying Our Mandate

A fundamental step at the outset was to gain an understanding of the needs of our partners — youth-serving organizations and schools that serve communities across the country. Through our initial surveys, our partners highlighted that device access was an issue — either because of technology fatigue or families' lack of access. It was important to us that any solution we developed be accessible to families in high- and low-tech environments. It was also important to us that our solutions be led by teachers so that parents weren't overwhelmed and that children could receive high-quality instruction. We quickly recognized that to empower teachers to successfully lead these new learning experiences, we needed to provide them with professional development and resources to be effective. As an evidence-based organization, opportunities to provide feedback for continuous

improvement are vital. With no concrete timeline for a return to normalcy, it became clear that strategies and tools to attempt to measure the impact of this new program approach would be of great value.

With this information in hand, we focused on providing offline, online, synchronous and nonsynchronous options that gave families flexibility. To help teachers and administrators navigate and adapt to new and changing learning environments, we developed resources and professional learning opportunities. We called upon our affiliate, The Sperling Center for Research and Innovation, to create a Remote Quality Reflection Tool for our program partners to assess and understand remote program quality and then we also made this tool freely available to any program across the country.

To ensure equitable access, our driving principle was that technology couldn't be a barrier for anyone using BellXcel Remote.

Innovating Our Programmatic Model

The collective voice of our partners, while clarifying our mandate, also demonstrated that the needs of each community were unique. We analyzed all available data on remote learning during the pandemic to develop a new program model that could be responsive to each family's technology and availability, community requirements, and program staffing. The evidence was clear – our solution needed to meet our partners and families where they were. What came to be known as **BellXcel Remote**, would include the following elements:

- Built upon a strong social-emotional learning approach
- Guide to program implementation and set up for a new remote environment
- Teacher and educator professional development specifically designed for remote teaching and learning
- A full curriculum including a scope and sequence of lessons in math, language arts, wellness and STEAM and a corresponding scholar progress report
- A home kit provided to each family including authentic literacy texts, math and ELA workbooks, and a family guide
- ELA and Math workbooks designed for remote instruction that include “family coach” call outs and tips, brain breaks, and daily self-check-ins for the scholars
- Online Family Portal to help support scholar home learning environments and featuring SEL and wellness activities and resources
- Modular and flexible age appropriate sample schedules that can be condensed or expanded as needed
- Blend of instructional time from a teacher and independent work by scholars
- Independent work including Math, ELA, Reading Corner, SEL & Physical Wellness and STEAM Enrichment
- Live instruction plus one-on-one check-ins with students (by phone or computer)
- BellXcel virtual coach to provide advice and assistance for a successful program implementation
- Program quality assessment tools and evaluation assessments, culminating in program Impact Reports



Leveraging Our Strategic Partnerships

Our conviction to equity and addressing technology barriers while providing top-notch curriculum amidst an extremely short timeline led us to a critical early decision: we needed to leverage strategic partnerships and their supply chains to deliver. It was essential to collaborate with a recognized publisher with the necessary distribution capabilities that could deliver high-quality, high-interest hard copy materials directly to scholars' home. We sought an organization that not only could assist in the creation of the materials but also one that could handle intense pressure to distribute thousands of kits to partners across the country in a short period of time. This requirement cannot be understated. Due to the quick nature of summer, there was no room for distribution errors or delays. We were not willing to sacrifice tangible materials for digital copies; our commitment to equity was nonnegotiable. We also recognized that we had a broad set of interests to meet and needed subject matter expertise in not only the core subjects of ELA and Math, but also STEAM, social-emotional learning, physical activity, and mindfulness.

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Scholastic, our long-time publishing partner, who has curriculum expertise and worldwide distribution power, enthusiastically agreed to work with us. Together, in an uncommon for-profit and nonprofit joint collaboration, our organizations came together to form one team. We developed the overall design of the model using our research, survey results and implementation expertise, while Scholastic provided the authors and content experts to carry out our collective vision. This dream team curated new learning kits that provided each scholar

with an at-home library of leveled readers, authentic texts, and magazines. In addition to the texts, each family was equipped with uniquely designed corresponding workbooks that centered around the remote environment. These workbooks were a big part of the magic. They weren't adapted from other materials; they were designed from the ground up with the family at the center and could be used independently and for teacher-led lessons.

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Coming off of a very unusual spring term in school, it was also important to focus on scholar wellness, relationships, and routines—particularly given their scarcity in summer. We leveraged another strategic alliance, Sanford Harmony, for a variety of SEL lessons and interactive activities designed to practice social and emotional skills through common experiences and scenarios, and we sought new experts like BOKS (from the Reebok Foundation) and Well Together Now to co-design one-of-a-kind and easy-to-use wellness and mindfulness activities. In addition to equipping scholars, we wanted to help families engage with their children's learning through simple at-home activities.

With the product components now in hand, the participation, support and tenacity of our school and community-based partners on the ground cannot be understated. In the midst of all the challenges they were facing during this time, each one stepped up to be a vital link in our ability to deliver program materials to teachers, scholars and their families.



Empowering Educators

BellXcel partners typically have a wide range of staff that includes a mix of certified teachers, paraprofessionals, and youth development professionals. We know that teaching and learning is only as effective as the teacher's ability to instruct, paired with solid resources. We put careful thought into what training, tools, guides and resources educators would need in order to be successful. We created handbooks that were specifically designed for a remote environment including how to engage scholars, set up your virtual classroom, manage behavior in the virtual world and featured technical tips to running a distance learning experience.

To prepare for the program, we innovated new resources to support the BellXcel Remote program model for each educator that included handbooks: a teacher's edition to the curriculum; scholar management systems; and assessments (including a technology access survey) to support scholar wellbeing.

We innovated the new training, resources and support educators would need in this new learning environment

We had a huge advantage to the now required virtual professional development approach, as our standard professional development has long been a blend of virtual and in-person. This made the move to a total virtual environment fairly easy as we already had a framework in place and knew how to make the delivery successful. In addition, we knew the importance of assigning an individual training consultant to each partner to deliver pre-determined sessions in a synchronous setting. For BellXcel Remote, we prioritized flexibility by allowing users to access content on-demand via their choice of synchronous or asynchronous learning sessions. Our new Learning Management System (LMS) gave us the technology capability to achieve those goals.

For BellXcel Remote, we leveraged our LMS to develop professional development courses that provided teachers and administrators with access to related content and resources along with access to live or recorded webinars on essential topics:

ELA and Math Curriculum

- Overview of all print and digital curricula, sample pacing guides and overall scope and sequence
- Instructional approach to leading live and independent lessons

Essentials of Virtual Instruction

- Engaging scholars in a virtual environment
- How to run a remote classroom
- Managing the technology
- Setting up expectations of scholars and families
- How to access the teacher portal and walk through of portal

Program implementation and management

- How to organize your structure and schedule with the most flexibility
- Program design and set-up
- Hiring remote staff
- Using the quality self-assessment tool

Staffing and Scheduling

- Tips to recruit the right staff
- Sample scenarios to help families develop their schedules
- Tips on recording content for viewing on a mobile device
- Using phone calls, emails and texts to check in

Evaluation and Assessment

- Conducting Star pre- and post-tests at home
- Equipping families to set up a positive testing environment and troubleshooting issues remotely
- Administering online surveys with program leaders and instructional staff, students, and families

Teaching and Learning

- Offering virtual office hours
- Creating an ongoing cycle of timely feedback
- Promoting scholar agency and self-monitoring
- Organizing and sequencing instruction

SEL, Wellness and Enrichment

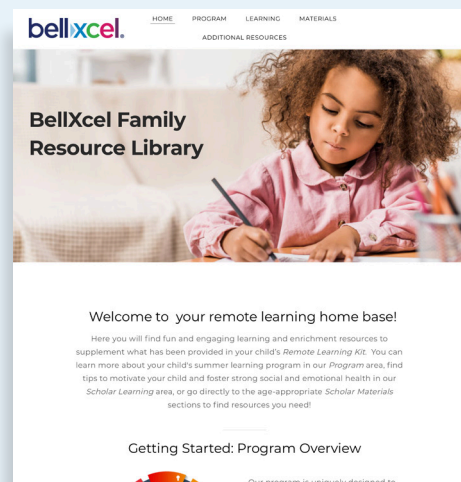
- Introducing virtual field trips, lesson plans and guided digital enrichment opportunities
- Learn about SEL and review SEL and Wellness units

Engaging Scholars and Families

- Recruiting and enrolling scholars
- Capturing daily attendance and completing progress reports
- Communicating with families
- How to use and encourage the access of the family portal

Supporting Families

Families were quickly overwhelmed by the task of helping to facilitate their child's education. Like me, many members of our BellXcel team are parents and caregivers of school-aged children. Along with the families engaged with our partners' programs, we rapidly discovered first-hand some of the challenges of establishing and supporting an impromptu home school environment. Our team rapidly set to work creating an easy-to-use family guide and a new online family resource portal to lead caregivers through the program, day-by-day, and provide tips for setting up productive learning environments at home, knowing that space and quiet are typically at a premium with multiple family members under one roof. Expanded tools and resources on topics from the family guide were made available through the family portal to include more background information on SEL topics and growth mindset to help caregivers support their children during a heavy time.



Catalysts For Success

As we document the quick decision-making and rapid development that took BellXcel Remote from an idea to a reality in just a couple of months, we must credit our organizational culture and strong strategic alliances as the true catalysts for success. We were able to create BellXcel Remote because of systems we already had in place—systems that support our work, day in and day out.

1. **Mission:** We started developing BellXcel Remote before we had dedicated funding because we knew it was the right thing to do and was critical to our driving motivation for all children to excel. With the knowledge and capabilities to make a difference, we didn't hesitate to find ways to support our partners, communities and scholars during this unprecedented time.
2. **Leadership:** Our leadership and Board of Directors have proven time and time again that they are willing to take calculated, necessary risks and have worked diligently to ensure our ability to pivot quickly to meet the moment, whatever that moment may be.
3. **Finances:** Our history of strong fiscal management and philanthropic partnerships provided us with the flexibility to innovate with great agility. Existing funders provided us flexibility with pre-committed grants to allow us to reallocate funding, and new funders stepped up to support the BellXcel Remote model's development and implementation.
4. **Cultural Environment:** Our enduring commitment to scholars and focus on innovation created an atmosphere that brought our entire team together to realize our collective vision. Our staff, who largely already work remotely, was well-prepared for this unanticipated shift, ready to collaborate and adapt early in the pandemic.
5. **Excellence:** We are committed to excellence. If we don't have the experts and evidence within our organization, we find those that do. This proved essential to the rapid development and execution of BellXcel Remote.

Learning From Summer 2020

We are all in uncharted waters, and the whole-child impact is important to understand, as it will surely inform the design of successful learning programs for years to come. How do remote environments impact all aspects of learning, from academics through social-emotional wellness, skills and development?

The program outcomes from BellXcel Remote provided a learning lab of sorts, helping us to more deeply understand the 'slow down' that may happen as a result of remote learning, and more importantly, what measures the field can take in the future to facilitate better outcomes in remote settings. Our team is debriefing the summer experience with our partners from across the country, gaining insight from their stories, and analyzing critical data to assess impact. We are committed to getting smarter about remote learning as an organization and publishing our insights along the way to improve the collective field.

Just before the pandemic, BellXcel established a research affiliate, Sperling Center for Research and Innovation (SCRI) to provide the knowledge and tools for youth development organizations and schools to elevate the quality and impact of their programs. SCRI has made key tools, such as the Remote Quality Reflection Tool to measure remote program quality, available freely to any youth programs anywhere.

Where Do We Go From Here?

With the Fall upon us, distance, onsite, and hybrid learning models are still the reality across much of the United States, with no clear timeline for a return to a consistent approach that resembles pre-COVID times.

We recognize that because of the digital divide, pandemic-related learning losses among Black and Latinx students from low-income communities are expected to grow existing achievement gaps by an additional 15-20 percent.ⁱⁱ

Our commitment to equity has not wavered. Through long-standing relationships with our partners, along with strong evidence, we are continuing to innovate solutions, tools, and resources for schools and youth development organizations to use during the school year in support of expanded learning time.

Our innovation work continues. BellXcel's Fall 2020 solutions are greatly informed by our experiences this summer and we continue our earnest effort to address inequities and the remote learning slow down, in service of our enduring vision for all children to excel.

bellxcel.
Anytime. Anywhere. Any way.

Remember your program is structured for distance learning, in-person or a hybrid approach. Choose based on your students, schedules, social-emotional learning and wellness programming to meet the needs of your students.

Flexible student programming.

ADMINISTRATORS

- Flexible student programming
- Remote learning
- Hybrid learning
- Onsite learning

SEL

- SEL integration
- SEL programming
- SEL resources
- SEL training
- SEL support

WELLNESS

- Wellness programming
- Wellness resources
- Wellness training
- Wellness support
- Wellness integration

ENRICHMENT

- Enrichment programming
- Enrichment resources
- Enrichment training
- Enrichment support
- Enrichment integration

Connect with the schools, students and families you serve. Confidently adapt to changing circumstances.

Administrators
New strategies to adapt and/or address learning options in hybrid program settings. New strategies to adapt and/or address learning options in hybrid program settings.

Teachers
Instructional, academic, technical, and resources through the BellXcel Teacher Resource Portal for learning and teaching in an alternate learning environment.

Families/Caregivers and Students
BellXcel Family Dashboard and Family Portal feature SEL and wellness activities and resources in English and Spanish.

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Professional Learning

Build a strong foundation, prepare teachers, and give the tools to confidently adapt to changing circumstances. Use wisdom of each learner and offer ongoing, self-paced, self-directed, and additional resources available on demand.

FOR ADMINISTRATORS

- ADMINISTRATION INTRODUCTION**
Discover the BellXcel framework and approach to program planning.
- PROGRAM STRUCTURE & LOGISTICS**
Learn how to design your program to meet the needs of your students, staff, and community.
- HIRING & MANAGING STAFF**
Learn strategies to recruit and hire the right staff and provide professional development.
- ENGAGING SCHOLARS & FACILITATORS**
Discover strategies and resources for recruitment, retention, and ongoing engagement.

FOR TEACHERS

- INTRODUCTION TO BELLXCEL**
Discover the BellXcel framework and approach to program planning.
- TEACHING & LEARNING**
Learn strategies to design your instruction, manage your classroom, and address changing circumstances.
- EVALUATION & ASSESSMENT**
Learn strategies to assess and evaluate your students and your program.
- SCHOOL PROGRAMMING & SCHEDULING**
Discover the curriculum, SEL, enrichment, and wellness components of your program.

Support at your fingertips.
The Administrators and Teacher Handbooks are available in both print and digital format.

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Curriculum Flexibility

Freedom to offer curriculum that best addresses needs of your students. Ensure the learning support you provide for your students aligns with your program goals.

Curriculum Options

- READY**
The Ready program is a self-paced, self-directed, and self-paced program that provides a comprehensive curriculum for students in grades 3-12.
- READY LITERACY**
The Ready Literacy program is a self-paced, self-directed, and self-paced program that provides a comprehensive literacy curriculum for students in grades 3-12.
- READY MATH**
The Ready Math program is a self-paced, self-directed, and self-paced program that provides a comprehensive math curriculum for students in grades 3-12.

Or choose your own!

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Whole Child Approach
SEL, Enrichment and Wellness

Social-emotional learning, enrichment, physical wellness, and wellness are woven throughout BellXcel to provide consistent opportunities for holistic learning.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

- SEL integration
- SEL programming
- SEL resources
- SEL training
- SEL support

The Scholar Pledge

- Learn to lead
- Learn to follow
- Learn to work together
- Learn to be a leader
- Learn to be a team player
- Learn to be a problem solver
- Learn to be a responsible citizen
- Learn to be a global citizen

MIND/BODY WELLNESS

- Physical wellness
- Mental wellness
- Social wellness
- Emotional wellness
- Wellness programming
- Wellness resources
- Wellness training
- Wellness support
- Wellness integration

ENRICHMENT

- Enrichment programming
- Enrichment resources
- Enrichment training
- Enrichment support
- Enrichment integration

Visit bellxcel.org/fall2020 to learn more

ⁱ Kewal Ramani, A., Zhang, J., Wang, X., Rathbun, A., Corcoran, L., Diliberti, M., & Zhang, J. (2018). Student access to digital learning resources outside of the classroom (NCES 2017-098). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2017098>

ⁱⁱ Emma Dom, B., Hancock, J., Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, E. (2020). COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime. McKinsey & Company. <https://mck.co/36Oa9rl>