

## To Support Educators in Promoting SEL, Leverage Summer More Effectively



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Over the past 20 years, summer learning programs have gained increasing recognition as important contributors to a child's educational journey. Since youth spend 80% of their waking hours outside of school, summer and afterschool programs provide additional touchpoints for healthy development, academic achievement, and exposure to enriching experiences. At BellXcel, we have believed in the power of summer learning for over 25 years. We partner with schools and community-based organizations across the country to ensure more young people have access to high-quality summer experiences – particularly young people living in under-resourced communities. Over time, we have carefully crafted our logic model to confirm we had the right inputs to support the success of enrolled students, who we refer to as scholars. These inputs include high-quality instructors, 3 hours of rigorous and dynamic academic instruction coupled with 3+ hours of enrichment, social-emotional-learning (SEL) with an intentional focus on growth mindset, family outreach and engagement, all within a welcoming culture and climate to reinforce positive interactions. Our approach to SEL strongly aligns to CASEL's integrated framework

and emphasizes self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. We weave SEL skill-building into community time, academic instruction and enrichment activities through both explicit instruction and authentic interaction.

Until recently, our focus had been almost exclusively on the impact we're having on our scholars and their families: Are we increasing math and reading achievement and developing social-emotional competencies? Are we exposing children to enriching activities and community resources that excite, engage, and reinforce learning? Are our families more involved with their child's education? We have always prioritized recruiting and hiring high-quality staff and providing them with pre-program and ongoing professional learning – but we missed an opportunity to ask: Are teachers gaining instructional strategies and competencies through BellXcel summer, and more importantly, are they taking these skills with them into the school year? And if so, could summer be a key ingredient to improving teacher practice, particularly in areas like promoting SEL development in students?

### What's different about summer for teacher professional learning?

Research tells us that teachers' own social emotional competence and well-being strongly influence their classroom environment and students. Positive, warm instructor-youth interactions are more likely to encourage children to take risks and engage in difficult tasks. So how do we support educators in strengthening their own competencies and promoting SEL development in students? Significant time and resources are invested every year in teacher professional development, yet despite their good intentions, school-year efforts to help teachers grow often fall short.

Just as summer is an exceptional time for scholar learning, the same holds true for educator development. High quality summer programs offer a dynamic learning environment and touchpoints for teachers to hone their SEL practices and instruction. In an ideal summer program, teachers engage in pre-program professional development with peers,

including targeted practice with curriculum, receive ongoing coaching and feedback throughout the summer as they're implementing new strategies, and have regular times to reflect with peers about what's working, and what's not. Adults learn best when able to test and apply new strategies in lower-stakes, real-world environments, and engage in rich conversations with peers about lesson design and how to handle challenging situations.

Summer programs also tend to have more targeted goals, focusing on specific literacy and math skills, or on building STEM or SEL competencies, but not tackling every subject offered during the school year. This empowers teachers to go deeper into a smaller set of learning goals and allows them the freedom to try out new approaches without the pressure of covering massive amounts of content.

## What did teachers tell us about their summer BellXcel experiences?

In the fall of 2016, BellXcel launched its first educator survey. Our goal was to learn more about educators' experiences in their summer programs. We had a hunch educators were taking skills learned during the summer and applying them to their school-year teaching, but we wanted evidence. We asked educators demographic questions to help us understand their backgrounds – such as how many years they worked with BellXcel, previous teaching experience, and education levels. But the primary focus of the survey was twofold: to learn whether and how we were succeeding in helping teachers strengthen instructional strategies related to positive behavior management, growth mindset, student-centered learning, using data, differentiation and collaborative teaching; and whether they were transferring what they learned in BellXcel Summer to their school-year practice.

We found that a large majority of teachers (83%) were, in fact, applying BellXcel instructional strategies during the school year. **Facilitating growth mindset and positive behavior management** – our surveyed areas that align to our SEL approach – topped the list as the most used strategies (between 70% – 80% of respondents).

## Leveraging summer more effectively – where do we go from here?

About 1/3 of households nationwide report that at least one child participates in a summer program, but only a fraction of school districts take advantage of summer as a vehicle for educator development. What if more districts began to prioritize summer as an optimal time for student and teacher learning? Could we tackle the achievement and opportunity gaps between lower- and higher-income youth while simultaneously building educators' skills and confidence?

Beginning this year, BellXcel partnered with the RAND Corporation to further explore our hypothesis of summer as an accelerator for educator development. We asked RAND to investigate the following research questions:

- What are the core features of BellXcel's summer professional development model and to what extent do they include best practices for educator professional learning?
- How are the core features of BellXcel's professional learning implemented across different summer sites?
- To what extent do BellXcel educators apply knowledge and practices learned during the summer to their instruction during the school year?

Through document review, observation, interviews, focus groups and surveys, RAND will help us learn more about what we can do to leverage summer even more effectively in service to scholars and teachers. We're also taking advantage of RAND's American Teacher Panel (ATP) to gain insights into teachers' summer experiences nationally. Since little is known about the professional learning experiences teachers engage in over the summer, we aim to document the specifics of those experiences and whether and how they are aligned to best practices in educator

Instructors also reported feeling more confident and energized as a result of their summer experience, factors we know influence the learning environment.

In fall of 2017, we dug deeper and interviewed a group of teachers in their first year of implementing BellXcel Summer. Bellwether Education Partners conducted a rapid turnaround study to explore if, how, and why the practices BellXcel teaches and emphasizes with its educators are implemented in the summer and, subsequently, in the school year. The findings were even more encouraging: 100% of the interviewed teachers reported that what they learned during the summer positively influenced their approach to teaching in the new school year. Bellwether noted, "...teachers described experimenting with new instructional strategies that were emphasized by [BellXcel], like integrating growth mindset language, deploying positive behavior management tactics, and allowing students more choice and agency in their learning." While these findings are only exploratory in nature, they suggest that summer can and should be leveraged more effectively to help educators learn and apply new skills.

development. Our hope is that this study will offer valuable insights that we can share beyond BellXcel to the broader field of education and summer learning. Until then, we're excited by the sentiments of our teachers and the early evidence we've collected on the promise of summer.

### BellXcel Educator Quotes:

*"I think my approach to my teaching is completely different overall. The growth mindset is embedded in everything I do now."*

*"It was good to go back to growth mindset and positive behavior and creating a safe learning environment. What's nice about [BellXcel] is it provides the opportunity to do all that because [BellXcel] is more project-based. During the year it's more drive-by teaching."*



This article was originally published in Measuring SEL, a CASEL-led collaborative of leading researchers and practitioners in PreK-12 education, assessment, social and emotional learning (SEL), and related fields.