RECOVERY LAB:
SUPPORTING STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL NEEDS

LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC AND
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
In spring 2020, New York City’s children, youth and families faced monumental and intersecting challenges: illness and loss from the COVID-19 pandemic, shuttered schools, job loss and economic instability, and painful examples of racial inequity. In response to projections of significant revenue shortfalls, city government instituted devastating cuts to a wide swath of services, including the complete elimination of summer camp and summer employment programs for some 145,000 children and youth.

It was against this backdrop that a coalition of community-based organizations (CBOs) formed to launch Recovery Lab, an initiative designed to:

- address the immediate academic and social-emotional needs of children and youth in New York City neighborhoods most affected by the global coronavirus pandemic;
- ensure students were prepared to transition to the 2020-2021 school year; and
- identify and promote systemic changes that link academic success and social-emotional well-being in how young people are served going forward.

This report shares the experience of planning and implementing the Recovery Lab initiative, not only to document the approach and results, but also to establish key lessons learned in terms of both practice and policy. While the impetus of Recovery Lab was to respond immediately to what everyone hoped would be a temporary, once-in-a-lifetime set of circumstances, what was collectively identified along the way are a set of ideas that have long-term implications and which should influence practitioners and policymakers as they reimagine and begin to shape a post-pandemic future in New York City and potentially beyond.

Below is a brief summary of the promising practices, key themes, and recommendations from the Recovery Lab initiative that are discussed in the full report.
1. Family Engagement
Staying connected to and engaged with families is core to any recovery strategy that aims to support the successful transition of youth back into school. As organizations plan summer bridge programs and solidify plans for the fall, it is important that they:
- Continue to find ways to assess and address the emerging needs of families in the summer and beyond
- Partner with families early to get their input and buy-in on all program plans
- Collaborate with government funders to engage families in ways that are comprehensive and non-duplicative
- Establish staffing patterns and resources that will help maintain family engagement, such as consistent check-ins throughout the summer and beyond

2. Caring and Trusting Relationships
Leveraging positive relationships between young people and adults in communities, including in schools, will help bolster consistency and connectedness, which are associated with increased participation and engagement. It is critical that recovery efforts find ways to:
- Assess the needs of youth and assign them to Primary Persons best suited to support them directly and/or through referrals
- Determine the number of youth per Primary Person based on youth needs and staff capacity, and establish clear responsibilities for Primary Persons (outreach, monitor attendance, conduct assessment, set goals, facilitate referrals, etc.) that are aligned with the organization’s human resources and safety policies
- Retain staff from the school year into the summer and vice versa to build on and extend relationships with students and families
- Establish clear expectations about frequency of check-ins with Primary Persons and acceptable modalities (in-person, phone calls, texting, video conference, etc.)
- Establish protocols and processes by which to share pertinent information about young people with other adults in the community (teachers, families, other staff) in an effort to surface and address challenges that emerge in a collaborative and intentional manner
3. Youth Voice
Integrating youth voice is a critical step to establish buy-in and ensure program responsiveness and engagement. Agencies must leverage young people’s gifts and talents as much as possible, making commitments to:

- Create formal and informal ways for youth to provide input and feedback, and explicitly share the ways in which their feedback is used
- Provide opportunities for youth to take on roles of leadership coupled with support via training and/or staff mentorship
- Provide support for youth to feel safe to share and process their lived experiences, and opportunities and support for them to take action on issues that impact them and their communities
- Set expectations for staff around their responsibility to activate youth voice as well as bolster their ability to foster youth voice/leadership including through training

4. Holistic Services
Young people need the skills to continue to develop and thrive both academically and social-emotionally. In the coming year, in the pursuit of interventions that support the holistic needs of youth, practitioners should:

- Identify areas of need and opportunities for growth via academic and social-emotional assessments
- Provide a variety of services and modalities (individual and small group) to address academic and social-emotional needs based on assessments
- Provide training to staff who lead social-emotional support on ways to integrate strategies that bolster academic behaviors and skills
- Provide training to staff who lead academic activities on ways to integrate strategies that cultivate social-emotional skills
• Conduct frequent formal and informal touchpoints with youth to check in and address social-emotional and academic needs
• Provide trainings for all staff so they are equipped to support young people as they deal with trauma, both in their personal lives and in their communities

5. Strategic Partnerships
Addressing the varied needs of youth and families requires partnerships – with other community organizations and with city agencies. These collaborations expand providers’ offerings, thereby enabling families to get support in areas including, but not limited to food, housing, mental health, and technology assistance. Recommendations to expand and enhance partnerships include:
• Work with partnering organizations to expand resources and referrals for young people and families
• Communicate with city agencies to ensure that the young people who are most in need are receiving services
• Connect with schools to best serve young people and ensure they are receiving consistent messaging and supports
• Create community of practice meetings where sites can share ideas and resources
While Recovery Lab programs were guided by the common set of clearly-articulated outcomes, grantees were provided a great deal of flexibility to design and adjust their budgets, staffing patterns, programs, and assessments.

**Recommendations**
1. **Funding flexibility is critical.** Public and private funders should entrust grantees to design programs and, when necessary, make adjustments to strategies and budget allocations based on what they believe would be most effective and beneficial for the young people they serve.
2. **Avoid a “post-pandemic” funding cliff.** CBOs will need a sustained investment via multi-year contracts to continue to flexibly mitigate the impact of learning loss and social isolation faced by so many of the youth they serve.
3. **Support planning, professional development, and needs assessment in addition to direct service.** Programs and funding streams administered by public agencies can best support providers by allowing enough time and resources for the work needed to deliver quality programs in addition to what happens at the point of service with students.
4. **Invest in innovation.** Public and private funding streams should have explicit mechanisms for new organizations and new program approaches to secure resources.

**2. TECHNOLOGY IS BOTH A BARRIER AND A BRIDGE**

Too many participants struggled with access to devices and/or reliable Wi-Fi, making it near impossible for them to fully engage. At the same time, some providers reported having greater engagement and contact with certain students.

**Recommendations**
1. **Meet students’ technology needs.** Equitable access to programming requires equitable access to technology. Regardless of whether they are learning in-person or remotely, all students need access at home.
2. Scale high-quality resources virtually. One unintended but positive benefit of remote programming is the ability to share resources across locations more effectively than through in-person programs.

3. Connect with families. Given new technologies and increased comfort communicating virtually, providers should continue engaging families through text-based communication, virtual home visits, and parent/guardian support groups that create community across families.

3. STAFF TRAINING AND STABILITY ARE CRITICAL

The volatility of public funding during summer 2020 resulted in numerous CBO staff being laid off or furloughed, complicating the providers’ ability to support students ably and responsibly.

Recommendations

1. Ensure a robust, quality staffing pattern. Hiring talented youth development professionals and educators requires a personnel budget that pays competitive, living wages. More adequate funding for staff will allow organizations to attract the talent needed and have more caring adults at the ready to deliver group and individual support.

2. Upskill staff and leaders to deliver virtual and hybrid programs. Virtual youth engagement requires a different skill set than running in-person programs, from connecting with youth through video and chat to using breakout rooms for one-on-one support.

3. Support staff wellness. CBOs can and should provide training on self-care and accessing mental health resources, and leaders should be aware of and act to mitigate the impact of vicarious trauma from working in distressed communities on members of their teams.
4. CBOS ARE KEY

CBOs know their communities well and have proven to be incredibly resourceful during the pandemic. They are oftentimes among the few stable, trusted sources of information and support for students and families and can offer critical perspectives to planning processes.

Recommendations
1. Include practitioners in planning – early and often. Funders and city agencies should actively engage program providers in the design, planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of future summer and school-year initiatives.
2. Invest in building strong community partnerships. Effective partnerships require a shared vision, significant planning time, regular communication, and joint data collection, analysis, and action.
3. Create the conditions for authentic partnerships across organizations. To deliver programming that effectively addresses the significant needs of students, convening organizations must hold space for providers that allows them to be honest about challenges, quickly learn from one another, and pivot as needed.

5. ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND – NOT OR – SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Providers used a balanced approach to summer programming to meet the comprehensive needs of students and foster a supportive transition to the start of the 2020-2021 school year.

Recommendations
1. Ensure social-emotional learning is prioritized alongside academic learning. Schools can and should take an explicit approach, ensuring all students are programmed for, and teachers and staff receive effective training in, social-emotional learning.
2. Put relationships at the center of program design. Small group learning experiences and one-on-one youth/adult relationships are critical to students’ success.
3. Assess needs and impact in traditional and creative ways. Valid and reliable tools to track social-emotional development have become more prevalent in recent years and should be used both to customize supports for individual young people and to document the value of youth programs more broadly.
As summer 2021 approaches, practitioners and policymakers continue to grapple not only with keeping students and staff healthy and safe, but also mitigating over a year of grieving, learning disruption, family instability, isolation, and anxiety. As described in this report, the lessons learned from Recovery Lab should inform the decisions made for the coming summer, but beyond it as well - summer programs can and should be forever changed after seeing the power of meaningful planning, flexibility for providers, and community responsiveness. CBOs are positioned to have a tremendous impact on students, families, and neighborhoods, and they need to be supported with ample and flexible funding, professional development, and peer support.

To CBOs, funders, schools and districts, intermediaries, and policymakers – the time to act is now. By joining together, students, families, organizations, and communities will be on the road to recovery.