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

LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC AND
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

National Center
for
COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

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475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1220
New York, New York 10115
Web: www.nccs.org | Email: nccs@childrensaidnyc.org

About the Children's Aid National Center for Community Schools

Children's Aid's mission is to help children living in poverty to succeed and thrive. Our goal is to provide transformative experiences to children and youth so that they may become healthy, productive, and independent adults. We provide children and their families with comprehensive supports along a cradle-through-college-and-career continuum.

The National Center for Community Schools is a practice-based technical assistance center that builds the capacity of schools, districts, providers, and communities to organize their human and financial resources around student success. Our expertise draws on nearly 30 years of experience implementing community schools in New York City and providing support to clients across the United States and beyond.

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next."- Arundhati Roy

On April 16, 2020, exactly one month after all New York City schools were shuttered in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced a budget plan that reflected the priorities of a city trying to manage a crisis of unprecedented proportions. New York City was an early epicenter of the pandemic in the United States, with more than 200,000 cases reported during the first three months and a daily death rate peaking at just over 1,000 by the time the mayor released the new budget that day. "We will keep people safe, protect their health, make sure there is a roof over their head, and that food is on their table," is how the mayor summarized the plan, which – in response to projections of significant revenue shortfalls – contained devastating cuts to a wide swath of city services, including the complete elimination of summer camp and summer employment programs for some 145,000 children and youth.

At that early point, many were already concerned that the pandemic would have a disproportionate and lasting negative impact on children and families, especially those of color and living in poverty. Rates of infection, hospitalization, and mortality were highest among the city's Black and Latinx residents and in high-poverty neighborhoods – the very communities that had been struggling the most with homelessness, inadequate education, unemployment, food insecurity, and other results of racial inequity and injustice for decades *before* the pandemic struck. For many of these young people, school closures and stay-at-home orders disrupted their access to what is needed for healthy development: engaging academic and social-emotional learning opportunities, regular meals, positive relationships with peers and caring adults outside the family, physical activity, time outdoors, and more.

The immediate impact on community-based organizations (CBOs) and other nonprofits that provide expanded learning and employment opportunities to young people was also significant. In addition to needing to transition their programming to virtual platforms like Zoom seemingly overnight, many organizations also found themselves going beyond their normal offerings to triage and meet the basic needs of their constituents, arranging for food deliveries and telehealth appointments, for example, either directly or via existing or newly formed partnerships.

As the weeks went by, there was a growing realization among program providers of how dire the situation was becoming – for their participants and for themselves. Too many students did not have access to technology devices and/or broadband, complicating their ability to participate in remote learning and contributing to the alarmingly large numbers who were completely disengaged from school by late spring. The trauma, fear, and anxiety experienced by young people grieving the loss of loved ones or struggling with isolation were compounded by the economic, food, and housing insecurity they and their families were facing and the racial tensions boiling over following the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. The city's announced cuts to summer programming led many nonprofits to layoff or furlough staff, hampering their capacity to connect with and support their students and families.

The need for meaningful and safe summer experiences that could keep young people connected to vital supports and engaged in learning was therefore arguably more important than ever before. The proposed elimination of these programs would not only remove critical opportunities to make up for lost time in school, it would result in the dismantling of the social services infrastructure. Without funding, nonprofits would be unable to keep staff in place and the opportunity to use the summer months to engage youth and prepare them academically, emotionally, and socially for the start of the school year would be lost.

It was against this backdrop that a coalition of practitioners formed that spring to plan what would later be called Recovery Lab. With funding provided by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for "backbone" support provided by the National Center for Community Schools, dozens of organizations contributed to the design and execution of an effort that sought to salvage and re-envision summer as a critical bridge into the uncertainty brought about by COVID-19.

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 beyond.

"Our collective impact as a field is infinite. We are the field... We know how to best serve our community, and I think that the agency that we have been given to figure out how to deal with this pandemic has been incredible." - Recovery Lab Practitioner

At the time when Recovery Lab was being conceived, human service providers were grappling with an evolving, complex situation with extensive public health, education, psychological, and economic implications. Communities of color and families living in poverty were disproportionately devastated by illness and loss as well as by unemployment, food insecurity, and myriad challenges to their safety and wellness. School closures coupled with stay-at-home orders threatened students' academic progress and their social and emotional well-being. While the school system continued to provide meals and remote learning, all other school-based programs and services would go by the wayside.

In the face of this crisis, the National Center for Community Schools (NCCS) facilitated a multi-faceted, collaborative process with many stakeholders to identify barriers to meeting young peoples' needs during this ever-changing context and to exchange ideas about promising practices – giving rise to Recovery Lab. The goals of the effort were threefold:

- 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 are 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.

Key Features

Recovery Lab was propelled by three key features: (1) a collaborative planning strategy that engaged multiple stakeholders in the design phase, (2) an investment strategy to leverage public and private sources of funding, and (3) an implementation strategy that straddled summer and fall 2020.

Collaborative Planning Strategy

Anchored in the principles and practices of the collective impact approach,* NCCS held a large virtual town hall meeting in early June 2020 to communicate the goals of Recovery Lab and to invite attendees to join one of three Working Groups (elementary, middle, and high school) that would co-develop a vision and plan for the summer. A total of 40 individuals representing more than two dozen organizations answered the call, meeting repeatedly in their groups over the course of the following six weeks to analyze needs assessment data, define an outcomes framework (see appendix), and identify priority geographies and sub-populations that they felt would need particular attention.

Investment Strategy

In light of the city's planned cuts to summer programs, and bolstered by the outputs of the Working Groups, Recovery Lab sought to raise public and private investments to support summer implementation for young people, particularly in the city's most impoverished communities. On the public funding front, thanks in part to advocacy from the nonprofit community, the city ultimately passed a budget that restored some of the summer funding cuts. Simultaneously, just over $6 million was raised from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies, the Robin Hood Relief Fund, the Gray Foundation, and the NYC COVID-19 Response and Impact Fund in The New York Community Trust to support implementation. Robin Hood also agreed to develop an application process to disburse resources to program providers.

*See https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact.

This trajectory of the public funding – first completely cut, then partially restored at the eleventh-hour – resulted in a complex and changing environment in which to leverage the dollars raised from private sources. Initially, the prevailing strategy was to make the most of the private investments by using them to add as many slots as possible. By the end of the planning process, however, when the public funding picture had changed, it became clear that the best use of private resources was to add as much value as possible: to foster flexibility and incentivize creative responses to the pandemic from which to learn.

29

ORGANZIATIONS FUNDED (52% LED BY PEOPLE OF COLOR)

13 COMMUNITIES SERVED

BEDFORD PARK | BROWNSVILLE | CENTRAL HARLEM
CONCOURSE/HIGHBRIDGE | EAST HARLEM | EAST NEW YORK
EAST TREMONT | HUNTS POINT | MOTT HAVEN | MORRISANIA
UNIONPORT/SOUNDVIEW | UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS
WILLIAMSBRIDGE

1,163

STAFF EMPLOYED

12 REMOTE PROGRAMS

1 IN-PERSON PROGRAM

16 HYBRID PROGRAMS

6,672

STUDENTS SERVED

96% STUDENTS OF COLOR

92% STUDENTS LIVING IN POVERTY

Implementation Strategy

A total of 29 organizations were funded through an application process quickly established and administered by the Robin Hood Relief Fund. While grantees were given the specific guidance about outcomes developed by the Working Groups, they were granted broad flexibility on how best to achieve them with regard to curriculum, dosage, staffing, timing, etc. Still, there were a few common features in all of the funded programs:

- Age- and stage-appropriate academic support
- Social-emotional development opportunities
- Support to transition into school in fall 2020
- Pre- and post-assessments to determine program outcomes
- Responsiveness to students, families, and communities

Recovery Lab programs were required to support young people in service of at least two of seven outcomes identified by the Working Groups:

- Improved self-awareness along one or more of the following domains: self-confidence, self-efficacy, the ability to identify emotions, accurate self-perception, and the ability to recognize one's strengths;
- Improved self-management along one or more of the following domains: impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal-setting, and organizational skills;
- Improved social awareness along one or more of the following domains: empathy, perspective-taking, appreciating diversity, and respect for others;
- Improved relationship skills along one or more of the following domains: communication, social engagement, relationship-building, and teamwork;
- Improved decision-making by strengthening one or more of the following skills: identifying problems, analyzing situations, solving problems, evaluating, reflecting, and identifying ethical standards;
- Gains in English Language Arts skills, including decoding, comprehension, retention, and/or critical analysis; and
- Increased knowledge or proficiency in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and/or mathematics).

It is important to emphasize the "bridging" aspect of the implementation strategy. To ensure engagement with students as they transitioned back to school, organizations were expected to run programming into September. This aspect proved especially prudent, given the delayed start to the school year. Recovery Lab provided needed consistency during that period.

Sample Recovery Lab Results

Program 1: 160 K-8 students

Programming Offered	Results Achieved
Evidence-based social-emotional and academic curriculum with a focus on literacy. Goals: 1) 60% of participants will improve their literacy scores between the STAR Reading Enterprise pre- and post-tests and 2) at least 80% of youth demonstrate age appropriate skills in two or more social-emotional competencies by the end of the program	Of the students who had matching pre- and post-tests, 52% improved their grade placement score; 96% of students improved their ability to communicate effectively with one another, teachers, and school staff; 99% improved their ability to engage in discussions about issues that affect them and their peers; 96% improved their ability to identify and solve problems

Program 2: 228 K-8 students

Programming Offered	Results Achieved
Three hours daily of synchronous reading intervention, social-emotional learning activities, and athletics, health, and wellness programming as well as asynchronous "virtual trips" and enrichment activities every Friday. Goals: 1) at least 90% of participants will maintain or advance their reading level and 2) support development of self-management and social skills through positive peer-to-peer interactions	97% of youth participants met or exceeded literacy growth, thereby avoiding the summer slide; 86% of youth reported the program helped them process their feelings; 92% reported the program helped them maintain relationships with their friends

Program 3: 165 students in grades 9-12

Programming Offered

Blended and gender-based activities focused on current topics such as leadership, self-care, and social and racial justice; college access and career exploration programming in groups and one-on-one settings. Goals: 1) improvement in college- and career-readiness skills and 2) social-emotional learning gains

Results Achieved

Of the students who had matching pre- and post-assessments, 60% reported improved academic self-efficacy in reading and 63% reported improvement in writing and speaking; of students participating in SAT preparation, 79% improved their scores, with 53% increasing their scores by 75 points or more; nearly one-third of students showed improvement in problem-solving and feelings of belonging with peers

"The program helped me feel more comfortable in getting ready for the transition into high school. The program has helped me through a lot of academic work and personal growth. I've learned more about how to handle my future assets as well as improving my own character. They also offer a safe space for anyone that needs it. It's a place where everyone can feel comfortable."
- Recovery Lab Participant

Despite operating under crisis conditions, the coalition of nonprofits knew that documenting and learning from the Recovery Lab experience would be critical. To that end, NCCS collected data through individual interviews and a series of meetings with all grantees to gather qualitative information and feedback – positive and constructive. Recovery Lab grantees also submitted final reports to Robin Hood that NCCS reviewed in order to identify and codify their important insights. The following section presents a set of promising practices that were implemented by many of the sites, followed by high-level themes and recommendations that emerged from those convenings and analyses.

Promising Practices

As mentioned earlier, Recovery Lab programs were required to support young people in at least two of seven outcomes identified by the Working Groups – one in the social-emotional category and the other in academics. This pairing acknowledged what practitioners and researchers have always known about the importance of meeting the comprehensive needs of youth in an integrated way. It supported a central notion of the initiative: that social-emotional well-being coupled with academic enrichment would enable youth to transition into the 2020-2021 school year with greater promise.

While program plans varied in the strategies that they implemented to achieve their goals, there were five key "Promising Practices" found across programs that generated positive results for participants. They include: Family Engagement, Caring and Trusting Relationships, Youth Voice, Holistic Services, and Strategic Partnerships. Below are descriptions of these practices, accompanied by ways in which practitioners can implement them moving forward. It is important to note that the effectiveness of these practices is often linked to high-quality staff supported by agencies that invest in their capacity and well-being. This seemed to be especially true during the pandemic. In addition, many of these practices were adapted and used in all settings: remote, in-person, and hybrid.

1. Family Engagement

Like others across the city, many families served by Recovery Lab were dealing with unemployment, food insecurity, loss of loved ones, isolation, and trauma that resulted from the pandemic. Helping to address and remove barriers that impeded their well-being was a core strategy that Recovery Lab providers used to support program participants. The flexibility of grant funds enabled agencies to move beyond traditional funding parameters that normally emphasize a focus on the youth participant to a focus on the family unit. Family engagement during the pandemic was germane to youth engagement and development.

Recovery Lab Practice: Regular Check-Ins

To engage families, sites conducted regular check-ins that helped to assess the needs of families in real time and on a consistent basis. Check-in frequency varied across sites with a minimum of at least once a week, and modes of communication included phone calls, text messaging, and video chats offered in each family's preferred language, when possible. These touchpoints helped to surface tangible supports families needed, including food, technology devices, and financial support, as well as medical, behavioral health, and education services. Some agencies were able to meet family needs within their organizations, while others relied on referrals to partnering agencies. Many organizations reported that check-ins coupled with immediate responses to needs helped to bolster the connection between families and programs, as well as trust.

Family Engagement Moving Forward

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 on to get their input and buy-in on all program plans
- Collaborate with government funders, including the Department of Education (DOE) and Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), 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

During the pandemic, frequent interruptions in school programming as well as necessary shifts to remote platforms increased the level of disconnection that children and youth experienced in their lives. Knowing that caring and trusting relationships are critical "mediums" of development, Recovery Lab sites anchored their programs in relationships that helped to bolster program participant connectedness, which in turn helped to foster engagement, retention, and motivation.

Recovery Lab Practice: Primary Persons

Many sites assigned a "Primary Person" to their participants. Primary Persons served as a main point of connection for young people and provided social-emotional and, in some cases, academic support. Primary Persons included tutors, mentors, advocates, counselors, social workers, and support staff who carried a set number of young people on their rosters. They checked in with young people regularly – daily at some sites. They helped young people set goals and supported them in achieving them, while also connecting youth to additional services as needed. Primary persons played a key role in monitoring young people's attendance and were in regular communication with teachers and families about the participation and engagement of young people on their rosters. In many cases, primary persons also engaged the families of the young people to assess their needs and provide supports and referrals as necessary.

Recovery Lab Practice: Scheduled Wellness Checks

Sites scheduled frequent wellness checks and "touchpoints" with young people to assess how the young people were doing and feeling. Some sites used needs assessments (both formal and informal) to understand challenges that the young people faced in real time. These assessments better positioned sites to respond quickly and appropriately to the young people's needs. Check-ins took place both in groups, such as during advisory or morning meeting, and individually. Flexibility in modality allowed for staff to reach more young people. For some sites, this meant speaking to young people before or after school and checking in virtually or via phone. It is important to note that some sites folded wellness checks into the support provided to young people via the Primary Person, while other sites conducted wellness checks in addition to or in lieu of a Primary Person.

Caring and Trusting Relationships Moving Forward

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

The loss of control that many people faced during the pandemic was notable. Young people felt particularly vulnerable given the number of decisions being made locally and nationally without their input. In particular, many youth of color contended with the impact of social injustices on their daily lives, including the disproportionate numbers of deaths in their communities. Providing spaces for them to voice their opinions, share their input, provide support to one another, and lead was an intentional strategy that Recovery Lab sites used to foster their empowerment and elevate their contributions. Involving youth not only empowers them, it also motivates them, heightens their interest and engagement in programs, and sets the stage for lasting learning.

Recovery Lab Practice: Opportunities for Youth to Contribute

Young people contributed to sites in various ways. They led discussions and projects with their peers on topics that were relevant to them and their communities. They provided feedback on the programs as well as made suggestions around how to improve participants' experiences. Some sites enlisted older youth, alumni, and college students as peer mentors for the young people in their programs. Sites reported that when young people were able to contribute, they felt like "true members" of the community and felt valued. In addition, for some youth, opportunities to contribute shaped their ability to view themselves as leaders and to hold themselves and others accountable, including adults in the community.

Recovery Lab Practice: Platforms for Expression and Reflection

Many sites provided safe spaces for youth to discuss concerns and community issues. Topics included the effects of COVID on their lives and communities, the trauma and fear they experienced as a result of the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, as well as other developmentally appropriate struggles they faced. In some sites, these platforms were offered on a regular and formal basis; for other sites they emerged in response to something that occurred in real time. In all cases, the power of these spaces – which were often facilitated by a trusted and skilled staff member – provided a chance for youth to process raw and complex emotions. Many young people reported feeling less isolated and "not alone" in their experience regardless of the degree to which they shared. While some platforms were more solution-based and led to community projects to address issues that emerged, others were centered in healing-based practices of self-expression and community building during times of distress.

Youth Voice Moving Forward

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

The multi-layered trauma that youth experienced during the pandemic required a response that was holistic in nature. Some young people were disengaged in school for a variety of reasons, including interruptions in instruction because of school closures and lack of remote access to engage in online learning. Others were dealing with depression, feelings of isolation, grief, and disconnectedness caused by stay-at-home orders, unemployment, and loss of loved ones. That said, too many students from communities severely impacted by COVID were already disengaged prior to the pandemic. Toward the objective of being holistic in their responses, practitioners provided youth with individual and small group spaces to address academic setbacks and incorporated mental health supports coupled with social-emotional learning opportunities to manage their emotions and deal with the many stressors that impacted their daily activities. There was a clear need for young people to feel safe and supported while focusing on their academics or other programmatic goals.

Recovery Lab Practice: Integrated Social-Emotional and Academic Supports

All sites attempted to find ways to integrate social-emotional supports into academic services as well as academic support into social-emotional learning. Educators implemented check-ins into individual and group sessions in an effort to address barriers that impeded learning. This included feelings of anxiety that some youth felt from being in person, as well as navigating conditions at home while engaged in remote learning.

When necessary, educators provided referrals to counseling and social work staff, and at a minimum, made efforts to follow up with youth including when non-academic challenges emerged. The latter was especially true when educators also served as Primary Persons. In addition, staff who delivered social-emotional support and services included activities and strategies that helped to foster academic behaviors (communication skills, self-efficacy, organizational skills) and helped students to reflect on academic progress, set goals, and access supports including tutoring when necessary.

Recovery Lab Practice: Targeted and Personalized Academic Support

Many sites identified youth who were deemed to need additional help by DOE and provided individual and small group instruction in subject areas in which they struggled. In some cases, programs provided individualized curricula and lesson plans for youth that helped to mitigate learning loss, while others relied on established curriculum developed by educational partners. Baseline assessments were used to identify and personalize academic support along with other data points such as attendance, language of origin, and school history. In sites with high-school age youth, college and career exploration and preparation were included in the academic programming.

Recovery Lab Practice: Social-Emotional Learning and Development

Sites incorporated curricula that offered a variety of activities to help young people develop relationship skills, social awareness, and decision-making skills. Sites created activities to help students develop coping strategies to help with the transition back to school. They identified "priority areas" for students and focused their curriculum and activities in these areas, and administered pre- and post-assessments to measure growth.

Recovery Lab Practice: Increased Health and Wellness Services

Sites increased their counseling and mental health services. Social workers and other support staff were trained in grief counseling, as many families were dealing with the death of a family member. Sites provided ongoing counseling and support to young people and families and made sure that all young people had wellness checks weekly, if not daily. At some sites, all staff – regardless of their particular role – received training and support to best be able to serve young people.

Holistic Services Moving Forward

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 of 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

CBOs' heightened awareness of the varied needs of youth and families resulted in the need to establish partnerships – with other community organizations and with city agencies like the Department of Education and Department of Youth and Community Development. These collaborations expanded the providers' offerings, thereby enabling families to get support in areas including, but not limited to food, housing, mental health, and technology assistance.

Recovery Lab Practice: School-Community Collaborations

Sites worked with schools and community partners to identify young people who were most in need and leveraged resources to support them. By working together, programs gained an understanding of the needs of young people and how to best serve them. Sites partnered with outside organizations to bring in more volunteer staff and provide more resources, thus reaching more young people and providing an increased level of support. As families communicated their needs, it became essential for sites to partner with community organizations to provide resources, and referrals to meet the pressing needs of the families.

Recovery Lab Practice: Spaces to Share Practice

The shift in programming caused sites to create new curricula, approaches, and training. Organizations that exchanged practices with others benefitted, as it allowed their staff to spend less time creating curricula and more time supporting young people.

Strategic Partnerships Moving Forward

- 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

THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recovery Lab sites were committed to share the aforementioned practices in an effort to aid other practitioners to help youth mitigate learning loss, strengthen their social-emotional well-being, feel a sense of empowerment, strengthen family support, and ultimately support the young people to succeed and thrive in and outside of school. They also felt compelled to share themes around conditions, priorities, and policies that help to set the stage for strong programs. The section that follows highlights five notable themes coupled with recommendations that can help to inform the fields of youth development and education in any recovery and revitalizing strategies aimed at youth and their families moving forward.

1. FLEXIBILITY FACILITATES INNOVATION

While Recovery Lab programs were guided by the common set of clearly articulated outcomes referenced earlier, grantees were provided a great deal of flexibility to design and adjust their budgets, staffing patterns, programs, and assessments. This freed them up to be more creative and responsive to the nuanced and changing needs of their young people and families, such as redirecting resources to purchase equipment needed for remote instruction or providing stipends to teen participants. This unusual level of flexibility even allowed some providers to serve populations not usually served in summer programming, such as undocumented students or out-of-school youth.

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. Funders might consider engaging in trust-based philanthropy, the tenets of which are threefold – center equity, humility, and transparency; rebalance the power between funders and grantees; and value the quality of relationships. These ideas came up time and time again during the Recovery Lab process, with grantees empowered to quickly respond to new information and ideas as they emerged.

National Center for COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

2. Avoid a "post-pandemic" funding cliff. With the promises of widespread vaccination and schools reopening, we run the risk of going back to business as usual too soon while the effect of the pandemic on young people will last for years. 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. This will require advanced academic interventions, enrichment, social-emotional learning experiences, mental health counseling, and more – services that are not often fully funded by public and private grants. Multi-year funding commitments provide the stability CBOs and young people need.

3. Support planning, professional development, and needs assessment in addition to direct service. Too often, the normally restrictive nature and level of funding precludes the ability of practitioners to make strategic investments in program quality, such as supporting professional development or planning. 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. Planning with school partners and other community organizations, professional learning for staff, and frequent needs assessments and analyses are particularly critical to keep up with the demands of delivering quality programming during and after the pandemic.

4. Invest in innovation. While a track record of success is one way to hypothesize which programs will be effective, a reliance on data from past programming leaves little room for piloting and prototyping new ideas. This has always been true, but is especially relevant as we navigate the current realities. 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 nearly impossible for them to fully engage. This was especially true for students experiencing homelessness. At the same time, some providers reported having greater engagement and contact with students (and families in some cases) remotely as compared to in-person programming the year before.

1. Meet students' technology needs. Equitable access to programming requires equitable access to technology. This means having a laptop/tablet, reliable Wi-Fi connectivity, accessories such as headphones and chargers, and a safe and quiet place to learn and engage. We must identify and allocate resources toward the true cost of fully meeting these needs. 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 more effectively than through in-person programs. Stellar teaching artists can lead remote activities for multiple organizations, even on the same day. A college readiness workshop can be opened up to hundreds of young adults across the city.

3. Connect with families. In a context in which needs were changing rapidly, it was critical for programs to stay in frequent, meaningful contact with parents and guardians to shape activities and wrap-around supports that would meet participants' evolving needs. Given new technology and comfort communicating virtually, CBOs should continue this model of deep family engagement through text-based communication, virtual home visits, and parent/guardian support groups that create community across families.

The demands of building relationships and developing skills of young people remotely and bridging from the summer into the school year require a new set of skills, making the retention of quality staff and professional learning and capacity building a necessity in the COVID-19 context. The volatility of public funding during summer 2020 resulted in numerous CBO staff being laid off or furloughed, complicating their ability to support students ably and responsibly. The infusion of Recovery Lab resources mitigated some of the losses, but the longer-term concerns about sustainability remained. It is worth noting that a lack of stable infrastructure is not unique to operating during the pandemic, with budget cuts and shifting funder priorities often causing CBOs to find themselves without the resources needed to operate, but it was particularly challenging in this context.

1. Ensure a robust, quality staffing pattern. Hiring talented youth development professionals and educators requires a personnel budget that pays competitive, living wages. Moreover, youth-serving programs typically hire part-timers, and just enough staff to maintain the required staff-to-youth ratios; this practice results in frequent reshuffling of plans when a staff member is absent or leaves their role. 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. In addition, a deeper investment in staff has the potential to reduce turnover, a significant challenge in the field and one that makes it difficult to provide stable adult relationships year-round and especially during transitions, a critical component of engaging youth.

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. And, both virtual and hybrid programming require new policies and procedures to ensure spaces are inclusive, healing-centered, and accessible and that proper expectations are set for staff, participants, and families. Identifying changes to program protocols and building staff capacity require time and resources for professional development.

3. Support staff wellness. In addition to providing healing-centered spaces and supports for young people experiencing trauma, the pandemic has reminded us that supporting staff to maintain their own physical, mental, and emotional wellness is key both to delivering strong youth services and to living our values. 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. Moreover, the sector must look at structural ways to ensure staff well-being, from paying a living wage to ensuring staff have access to adequate health insurance and child care.

4. CBOS ARE KEY

It is now often said that those closest to the challenges are closest to the solutions, and yet, the lived experience, content expertise, and cultural competence of community-based organizations are generally not consulted when designing programs and policies. CBOs know their communities well and have proven to be incredibly resourceful during the pandemic, with many providing services to constituents that the city was not able to provide, often going above and beyond their organizational mission and capacity. 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.

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. In addition to bringing insightful, creative ideas to the processes, CBOs can often anticipate structural and operational challenges that, if caught early on, can be mitigated or can influence decisions about policy and funding.

2. Invest in building strong community partnerships. CBO partners have a proven track record of supporting students' academic success as well as their social, emotional, and physical wellness. The need for consistent and continuous support to communities was especially critical during the pandemic, given the range of instabilities that youth and their families experienced daily in

the areas of resources (finances, food), education, health care, and relationships (loss of loved ones). 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. This requires group norms that facilitate trust and transparency, a group culture built on collaboration over competition, and a common continuous improvement methodology (such as the Plan-Do-Check-Act Cycle) to generate actionable lessons.

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

As Recovery Lab planning unfolded in early summer, there was an important evolution in the Working Group members' appreciation for engaging students via both academic and social-emotional programming. Initially, in response to students' challenging experiences with remote schooling, they wanted to focus exclusively on social-emotional support and peer engagement. The shift occurred, in part, from the realization of the predicted long-term nature of the pandemic and that too many students – especially those in low-income neighborhoods who were already struggling academically and who had limited access to technology – would likely suffer inordinate learning setbacks during an indefinite period of remote school. They imagined the opportunities Recovery Lab could create to meet the comprehensive needs of students and prioritized a more balanced approach to summer programming and a supportive transition to the start of the 2020-2021 school year.

1. Ensure social-emotional learning is prioritized alongside academic learning. Recovery Lab partners agreed that both academic support <u>and</u> social-emotional learning together are what made the difference in their programs. This is not unique to the summer learning setting; research has shown repeatedly that social and emotional skills are correlated with academic success. Schools can and should take an explicit approach, ensuring all students are programmed for, and ensuring 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-to-adult relationships are critical to students' success. As described in the previous section, the Primary Person model, in which staff members are charged with developing intentional relationships such that each student has a caring adult they can trust and rely on, was found to be particularly important. These relationships provide stability when other aspects of a young person's life might be in flux, and ensure each student feels welcome, safe, and valued.

3. Assess impact in traditional and creative ways. Among the many changes that came from COVID-19's impact on education was a realization that traditional measures of success – attendance, grades, test scores – alone may not be the most reliable, or even available, measures to track progress toward positive youth outcomes, let alone to understand students' needs and assets. Additional measures can help provide a fuller picture. 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. Furthermore, CBOs should consider tracking results that often feel immeasurable, such as the impact of strong youth/adult relationships or the ability to quickly pivot to address an emerging community need.

CONCLUSION

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.

National Center for COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

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Recovery Lab Community of Practice Members

Karen Drezner | Amber Charter Schools
Jessica Santana | America On Tech
Sarah Benis Scheier-Dolberg | Areté Education
Dominique Jones | Boys & Girls Club of Harlem
Danique Day | Capital Prep Schools
Dolores Concepcion | Capital Prep Schools
Christopher Forbes | Center for Family Life
Julie Stein Brockway | Center for Family Life
Jessica Sloan | Change for Kids
Kevin Ervin | Change for Kids
Scott Horowitz | Children of Promise
Caitlin Robisch | Children's Aid
Ronald Cope | Children's Aid
Kevin Dahill-Fuchel | Counseling In Schools
Andrew Waters | DREAM
Kalila Hoggard | DREAM
Margie Weiner | DREAM
Troy Burton | Dreamyard
Jawana Johnson | Eagle Academy
Risa Whipple | East Side House Settlement
Gilda Gomez | Elevate New York
Kevin Singleton | Elevate New York
Carolyn Foster | Fresh Youth Initiatives

Susan Gonzalez | Fresh Youth Initiatives
Wendy Peña | Fresh Youth Initiatives
Gayle Villani | GO Project
Jennifer Benstraum | GO Project
Chante Brown | Good Shepherd Services
Makeda Peters | Grand Street Settlement
Jane Martinez Dowling | KIPP NYC
Jeffrey Imwold | KIPP NYC
Devin Thornburg | New York Edge
Marisol De La Rosa | New York Edge
Nancy Guida | New York Edge
Ydhelca Perez | New York Edge
Ashley Lahoud | Northside Center for Child Development
Deborah Carroll | Northside Center for Child Development
Mariel Mejia | Partnership with Children
Marcos Clander | Read Alliance
Sonia B. Sisodia | South Asian Youth Action
Kezia Roopnarine | Sunnyside Community Services
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APPENDIX

Recovery Lab Outcomes Framework

All Recovery Lab grantees were required to design and implement programming to meet certain social-emotional and academic outcomes, and to create targets against relevant indicators. Although the specific strategies and tactics differed amongst them, all grantees identified indicators and assessment mechanisms to measure and report progress. Example indicators, assessments, and targets for each outcome are provided in the table that follows.

Part I. SEL Outcomes	SEL Example Targets
Demonstrate improved self-awareness along one or more of the following domains: self-confidence, self-efficacy, the ability to identify emotions, accurate self-perception, growth mindset, and the ability to recognize one's strengths	At least 95% of participants will agree or strongly agree with the following statement on the end-of-program survey: "I believe that if I work hard, I will achieve my goals" By the end of the program, at least 80% of participants will score in the top 25th percentile for self-confidence.
Demonstrate improved self-management along one or more of the following domains: impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal-setting, and organizational skills	At least 75% of participants will agree with the following statement on the end-of-program survey: "I have learned new ways to cope with anxiety."
Demonstrate improved social awareness along one or more of the following domains: empathy, perspective-taking, appreciating diversity, and respect for others	By the end of the program, at least 80% of participants will improve their T-score for interpersonal awareness.

APPENDIX

Part I. SEL Outcomes (continued)

Demonstrate improved relationship skills along one or more of the following domains: communication, social engagement, relationship-building, and teamwork

Demonstrate improved decision-making by strengthening one or more of the following skills: identifying problems, analyzing situations, solving problems, evaluating, reflecting, and identifying ethical standards

SEL Example Targets

At least 75% of participants will score Average, Above Average, or Well-Above Average on relationship skills on the SSIS as completed by parents/guardians.

By the end of the program, at least 80% of participants will demonstrate Typical or Strong decision-making skills.

The number of participants who respond Yes to the question "I enjoy solving problems" increases by at least 10 between a pre- and post-survey.

SEL Example Assessments

Self-Report Survey Questionnaires:
- Google Forms
- SurveyMonkey
- Developmental Assets Profile (DAP)
- PAIRIN Readiness Management System

Interview-Based Assessments:
- Berkeley Puppet Interview

Observational Assessments:
- Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS)
- Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA)

Performance-Based Assessments:
- SELweb
- ZooU

SEL Example Indicators

Survey Responses
- Survey Responses
  - Y/N or Agree/Disagree
  - numerical scale
  - quantitative metric
- T-Score
- Percentile
- Standard Score
- Measure of Strength

APPENDIX

English Language Arts (ELA) Outcomes

Demonstrate gains in English Language Arts skills, including decoding, comprehension, retention, and/or critical analysis

ELA Example Targets

- At least 75% of participants will improve their reading comprehension scores based on pre- and post-assessments.
- At least 80% of participants will see an increase in their assessed reading level based on pre- and post-assessments.
- 100% of all participants will maintain or improve their reading level between their last interim assessment and the first SY 2020-2021 interim assessment

ELA Example Assessments

- Achieve 3000
- Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)
- Early Reading Diagnostic Assessment (ERDA)
- Fountas & Pinnell
- iReady
- Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI)
- STAR Reading Enterprise (STAR)

ELA Example Indicators

- Grade Level Proficiency
- Lexile Score
- Reading Level or Scale Score
- Vocabulary Level or Score
- Reading Comprehension Score

APPENDIX

STEM Outcomes

Demonstrate increased knowledge or proficiency in science, technology, engineering, and/or math

STEM Example Targets

- The percentage of participants deemed grade-level proficient will increase by at least 5 percentage points between pre- and post-assessments.
- At least 80% of participants will master a new math standard between pre- and post assessments.
- At least 60% of participants will improve their raw score in science by at least 20 points.

STEM Example Assessments

- iReady
- NWEA MAP
- Scholastic Math Inventory (SMI)
- Stanford Achievement Test
- STAR Math Enterprise (STAR)
- TerraNova
- Tools for Early Assessment in Mathematics (TEAM)

STEM Example Indicators

- Grade Level Proficiency
- RIT Score
- National Percentile
- Standard Mastery
- Computational Scale Score
- Raw Score