



FROM PRE-K THROUGH LIFE

HORIZONS TAKES ON THE OPPORTUNITY GAP

THERE'S A PROBLEM WITH EDUCATION IN OUR COUNTRY, and it has very little to do with schools themselves. Good intentions and best efforts aside, there is a persistent opportunity gap separating low-income students from their more fortunate peers. And it's something all of us should be paying attention to.

According to Lorna Smith, CEO of Westport, CT-based Horizons National, this gap in opportunity affects everyone. "It's easy enough to think, 'this isn't my problem,' but the fact is, limited opportunity for *any* of us means a limited future for *all* of us."

Statistics certainly support that perspective. Today, 51% of all public school students come from low-income families, and by the time those students arrive in kindergarten, they're already months behind. It gets worse. Low-income students are six times more likely to drop out of high school, and fewer than one third of them will ever enroll in college. Without a college education or technical training, it's harder than ever to find a path out of poverty. The cost to society can be measured in stagnant economic mobility – and

an estimated \$300 billion in lost wages, taxable income, plus health care, welfare, and incarceration costs. In the New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut area alone, there are too many jobs that go unfilled because there are too few people qualified to fill them.

Why is this so? And why do we accept it? It happens over time, and the opportunity gap actually widens when school isn't even in session. Most students slip a little during summer vacation, when it's easy enough to forget some of the material they just learned. But for low-income kids, this "summer slide" is often profound, setting them back as much as three months by the time they get back to school in September. All summer long, children from low-income families aren't going to camps, or to museums, or on family trips – in fact, some aren't even getting the food, nutrition, and exercise they depend on during the school year. The cumulative effect, year after year, is troubling; by fifth grade, low-income students can be as much as two years behind their more fortunate peers.

Is there a way to fix this? Educators, parents, students, and communities might envision something like the Horizons programs

run by Smith's organization, Horizons National. In fact, trends in education – such as out-of-school-time learning, high-quality academics, social emotional learning, and long-term commitment – point directly to a solution like Horizons. But Smith wouldn't call these trends; at Horizons, they're more like proven steps to student success.

And Horizons should know – it has decades of experience taking those steps. Horizons started in 1964 in New Canaan, Connecticut, and has been expanding nationally since 1995; last year, Horizons programs served over 4,600 students through 51 sites across 17 states.

"Horizons is really a story about growth," says Smith. "It's about the growth of our students and their families – and their outlook on the future."

By any measure, Horizons students thrive. They improve their reading and math skills. They gain confidence. Most of all, they discover a new world of possibilities, things they never thought they could do or achieve.

How does Horizons do it? Smith points to the Horizons model: *long-term, in-depth, out-of-school-time instruction*. "A successful adult is not a short-term proposition," says Smith, "and a one-time intervention won't fix the problem."

For students, Horizons begins in the early stages of their development – when they're in Pre-K and kindergarten. Horizons commits to its students all the way through high school, providing a rare, long-term experience. "Our students and our teachers stay with us for years," Smith notes, "we have an average student and teacher

retention of over 80% annually across the network." Since lasting connections create the greatest impact, Horizons makes retention a priority; many families are involved for decades as younger siblings make their way through the program and graduates return to volunteer or teach at Horizons.

So – isn't this just summer school? Absolutely not. Horizons programs typically take place on the campuses of nearby independent schools, colleges, and universities – taking students out of their usual



routine and helping them shape a path for their own education.

Horizons students focus on reading and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), and also participate in the arts, fitness, nutrition, and field trips. Through an in-depth, six-week summer program, plus afterschool and weekend programs throughout the year, Horizons students (and teachers) experience the freedom of new ways of learning.

And it's an incredible return on the investment.

Said one Bridgeport, CT public school teacher, "If I can get two or three Horizons students in my class during the school year, it improves everything for everybody. It changes the class dynamic, and it changes how all of my students think about themselves and about their future."

It should come as no surprise that Horizons high school students have a 99% graduation rate, compared to a much lower rate for their same-income peers. And 91% of them go on to college or other post-secondary education.

What's next for Horizons? Smith would like to see the Horizons model extend to as many students and families who need it, and plans are already underway to explore new ways of scaling up. A retrospective study, looking at multiple school districts whose students attend Horizons, is also getting underway, and the results should go a long way toward better understanding how and why Horizons works.

Because Horizons programs are tuition-free, Horizons is funded almost entirely through private philanthropy. Behind every low-income child who improves his or her reading and math skills, learns to swim, gains confidence, and discovers a whole new world of possibility through Horizons, there are donors who make it all possible.

The opportunity gap is real. But luckily, so is Horizons, and the private resources it harnesses to help low-income students create community, continuity, and a way to envision, and pursue, a brighter future.

You can learn more about Horizons and its programs, and how you can help, at horizonsnational.org

