



Making Funding Count for Education Equity

Coming together to meaningfully support education
opportunities for all young people



Education equity -- and the need to achieve it -- has never come into sharper focus than it did in 2020.

Under COVID-19 restrictions, the disparities we've combated for years in under-resourced communities received new scrutiny. For example, according to Pew Research, the majority of U.S. students don't have the same access to resources such as laptops and WiFi, which have posed barriers to education in the year of virtual learning. These barriers disproportionately impact communities of color.¹

Preliminary research (April 2020) from the Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA) Collaboration for Student Growth estimated students would return to school in Fall 2020 with roughly 70 percent of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year, but less than 50 percent of the learning gains in mathematics. In some pivotal grade levels, like 3rd grade, students were projected to be "nearly a full year behind what we would observe in normal conditions."² Of course, this assumed students would return to in-person learning in Fall 2020. According to NBC News, 76 percent of private schools have managed to stay open for in-person learning, but the same is true of only 38 percent of public schools. The extended nature of remote learning is sure to have lasting effects on youth for years to come.³



The good news is that funders are committed to advancing educational equity, and the pandemic has created additional urgency for the effort.

According to Grantmakers for Education's Trends in Education Philanthropy Benchmarking Survey, 75 percent of respondents targeted funding with an explicit focus on low-income populations, ethnic or racial minorities, people who identify as LGBTQ, immigrants and refugees, women and girls, and/or people with disabilities. Among respondents, efforts to promote educational equity primarily focused on providing resources to communities least well-served to increase equitable learning opportunities for youth.⁴

Horizons National is a nonprofit that supports a network of out-of-school academic, enrichment, and social-emotional learning programs that serve children in under-resourced communities from pre-kindergarten through high school. Our pursuit has always been to close gaps of opportunity, and as the sector looks for answers, we want to share -- based on our own work in the field -- approaches we believe are playing a role in advancing equity for all young people. While this list is by no means exhaustive, and we recognize that a coordinated, collaborative approach to addressing systemic challenges is needed, we see five areas where funders can invest to support a more equitable education for all students.



Invest in Out-of-School Time Enrichment Programs

Youth in some communities have access to activities such as sports, music, tutoring, summer camps, and college and career exploration that set them up for success in school and beyond. The need to provide these types of out-of-school time opportunities to every student in every community is urgent, especially with compounded learning loss as a result of COVID-19.

In the communities where out-of-school time learning programs are readily available, students get approximately 6,000 hours of extra learning by the 6th grade.

However, many young people don't have these activities readily available, or they are too expensive. As a result, by the 5th grade, summer learning loss can leave these students 2.5 to 3 years behind their peers. Summer learning loss is also one of the strongest contributors to the high school dropout rate, as the cumulative erosion of academic skills year after year makes it difficult for students to catch up. The consequences of the opportunity gap reverberate long past high school to negatively impact employment, college attendance, college graduation, and career success.⁵

These learning opportunity gaps between students in different communities are becoming even more pronounced by COVID-19, and the COVID Slide. According to McKinsey, students in communities where out-of-school time learning opportunities are often unavailable are also experiencing heightened learning loss as a result of the pandemic, "which will probably be



greatest among low-income, black, and Hispanic students.”⁶ Another McKinsey study notes, “Students of color could be six to 12 months behind, compared with four to eight months for white students. While all students are suffering, those who came into the pandemic with the fewest academic opportunities are on track to exit with the greatest learning loss.”⁷

It’s these out-of-school time programs that are going to make up for the differences and level the playing field for students in every community. The Learning Policy Institute states, “The traditional school day and calendar are not sufficient to offset the learning time that has been lost during the pandemic.... The most effective strategies include high-quality tutoring within and beyond the school day, which can produce large gains cost-effectively and even virtually; well-designed summer programs that stem summer learning loss; and after-school programs that align with the school’s academic learning goals and incorporate meaningful activities that engage deeper learning pedagogies.”⁸

There is ample evidence that high quality out-of-school time programs work. For example, Horizons programs achieve a 94 percent daily attendance rate, 85 percent of students return year after year, and students gain an average of 8-12 weeks of grade equivalence in reading and math over each 6-week summer session. With programs like Horizons, students can begin making up ground today, and continuing into the summer, out-of-school time learning will be a crucial factor in curbing learning loss.

While funders also recognize out-of-school time enrichment programs as critical, they are not prioritizing funding in this area as they should.

According to Grantmakers for Education’s Trends in Education Philanthropy Survey, expanding learning opportunities offered in the primary and secondary years through after-school, out-of-school, and summer programs has been identified as a critical priority by education funders: “All of the evidence suggests you can’t close the achievement gap without it,” concluded one respondent. However, only 24 percent of respondents to the 2018 survey indicated that they fund expanded learning opportunities.³



Invest in Social-Emotional Learning and the Whole Learner

According to Advancing Whole-Learner Education, “the concept of the ‘whole learner’ is grounded in the science of brain development and learning, which tells us that, at every stage of development, learning happens in an integrated way. Cognitive, social, emotional, creative, and physical skills are all deeply interconnected. Students learn and thrive when they develop skills across this wide range.”

Whole-learner approaches to education embrace a diversity of learning experiences and pedagogical techniques to reflect the dynamic, interconnected way in which young people learn, develop skills, and interact with the world.⁹

As an example, Horizons has always employed a whole-learner approach, introducing young people to academic enrichment, STEM, experiential learning, field trips, swimming, and more. And this doesn’t just happen over one summer -- it happens week-after-week and year-over-year, so students develop relationships with teachers, staff, mentors, and friends.

At the heart of our approach (and the whole-learner approach) is social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. The benefits of SEL are evidenced by increased academic performance, improved mental health, strengthened social skills, and positive behavior.¹⁰

The Economic Policy Institute notes, “reduced learning time has likely impeded student learning and also affected the development of the whole child. Once the pandemic allows it, we will need to make up for this time by increasing both the amount and quality of learning time—through extended schedules, summer enrichment and after-school activities, more personalized instruction, and staffing strategies that reduce class sizes and staff schools with sufficient and highly credentialed educators.”¹¹

Thankfully, education funders have ramped up support for strategies embracing the whole learner.³

Invest in Training and Empowering Teachers

Creating the foundation for a more equitable education system starts with our ability to recruit, attract, retain, and train effective educators from diverse backgrounds.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), “This means hiring and retaining a diverse and socially- and emotionally-skilled educator workforce, so all students see people of color as leaders and mentors in their communities.”¹²

The Learning Policy Institute reinforces this, writing, “Today’s learning must be supported by a transformed public education system that develops a diverse and highly competent educator workforce with the knowledge, skills and disposition to help all children succeed,” among other things.¹³

Major funders, such as The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, and the Wallace Foundation are investing in building this pipeline of talented and diverse educators. With a diverse pipeline of talent, the Raikes Foundation states, “We must... empower educators to continuously identify what’s working to improve educational experiences for all.”¹⁴

Horizons programs are taught by trained teachers, and we have found they thrive when we provide them with a flexible recipe for success, rather than a one-size-fits-all prescriptive formula. Out-of-school time and summer academic enrichment programs, like ours, also provide teachers with professional development opportunities beyond the typical school year.

Horizons has definitely helped me grow into a better person, as well as a better teacher, with the resources and the hands-on experience that I’ve been given.

– Ruthie, 5th Grade Teacher

According to a study by Rand Corporation, out-of-school time programs enable teachers to experiment and build confidence in low-pressure settings. They also support the learning of student-centered practices, particularly as they relate to students' social and emotional learning and positive behavior management.¹⁵

“It’s nice to be in an environment where we get to teach in a way that really aligns with our beliefs. We’re teaching students as whole children, tackling the social-emotional side, instead of just the academic piece.”

– Jeremy, 6th Grade Teacher



Invest in Education Initiatives that Center Race Equity

In “Pursuing Social and Emotional Development Through a Racial Equity Lens,” the Aspen Institute notes that an equitable education system goes beyond a student’s access to resources and educational rigor. They write:

“To make substantive progress toward improving educational equity, education leaders need to tackle inequity with race in mind—or through a racial equity lens—and at multiple levels: individual, institutional, and societal.”



Some of the things they encourage include adopting a strength-based approach to working with students, families, and communities that also addresses injustice and related trauma. They also suggest developing supportive learning environments that celebrate students’ backgrounds, languages, and achievements.

Aspen Institute states, “All students, and especially students of color, need to be in learning environments that reinforce their sense of academic belonging and send constant signals that they are valued for all their assets and deserving of investment and rigor. Improving learning environments by focusing on racial equity and integrating social, emotional, and academic development can improve individual academic and life outcomes and lead toward a more equitable society overall.”¹⁶

According to Grantmakers for Education’s Trends in Education Philanthropy Benchmarking Survey, “The national political environment has reinforced the commitment of funders to supporting diversity, equity and inclusion work.”³

Invest in Programs Committed to Engaging Families and Communities

Engaging families and communities in student education, learning, and out-of-school time programming can have significant positive benefits for youth. This approach promotes collaboration and co-creation of a young person's experience during or after school by parents, caregivers, and educators and leads to more open communication and trust-building.

According to the Expanding Learning and Afterschool Project, engaging families results in improved participation in afterschool programs, better academic performance for students, and a positive impact on learning at school and at home.¹⁷

In fact, according to "Focus on Families! How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After School," family involvement in afterschool programs is associated with greater involvement in school events and affairs, increased family assistance with children's homework, and improved relationships between parents and children.¹⁸

Knowing this, Horizons programs work hard to engage parents, families, and community members in various ways. From annual student celebrations and local partnerships to Board participation and Parent Councils, investment from families and communities is essential to Horizons.

Funders are also increasingly recognizing the value of engaging families and communities in shaping the education agenda. Among respondents to the Trends in Education Philanthropy Survey, 60 percent provided funding related to engaging family and communities in learning environments, and they anticipate strong growth in funding for these priorities over the next two years.³



McKinsey writes, “The COVID-19 pandemic has both illuminated and magnified the persistent disparities between different races and income groups in the United States. In education, attention has largely focused on the achievement gap, which is widening because of the pandemic. But to address the achievement gap, schools must focus on underlying opportunity gaps.”⁶

By streamlining priorities and working together, funders, nonprofits, educators, parents, caregivers, and community members can create a brighter future for all young people, regardless of race, ethnicity, or zip code.



Horizons National is committed to expanding learning, impact, equity, and opportunity for all young people. Learn more about our work and vision at horizonsnational.org.

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Page 2

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Page 3

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Page 4

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Page 5

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Page 6

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Page 7

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Page 8

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Page 9

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Page 10

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