



4th grade scholars from Horizons at Ethel Walker. One of the 15 amazing Horizons sites I visited this summer.

Reflections From The Road

How diverse local programs drive one national commitment to equity and joy

By Guybe Slangen, Senior Director of Expansion, Horizons National

After nearly three weeks traveling throughout the Northeast, visiting 15 Horizons sites across four states, I'm finally back home in foggy San Francisco—and feeling deeply grateful, proud, and moved. For me the journey was more than a sightseeing tour of programs; it was a window into the power of shared purpose and collective impact.

While I've been connected to Horizons through the San Francisco Friends School's Horizons program I helped launch in 2014, I'm a relatively new addition to the Horizons National team, having joined in March of this year. The goals for my trip were to see, learn, and connect, all in an effort to broaden my understanding of the depth and breadth of the Horizons network. Each visit deepened my understanding of the meaningful ways Horizons supports students, families, and communities nationwide. It also reaffirmed something I've long believed: summer can and should be seen as a powerful tool to advance educational equity—providing vital experiences in and out of classrooms that ignite learning, foster growth, and spark joy.

A Network as Diverse as the Communities It Serves

One of the most striking aspects of my travels was the diversity within the Horizons network. There are currently 71 different sites serving close to 8,000 students nationwide. I visited programs hosted at boys schools and girls schools, urban campuses and rural ones, boarding

schools and day schools, universities and preschools. Some sites were celebrating their first summer; others were in their 61st. No two programs were exactly alike, but every single one embodied the core ingredients of Horizons: a caring community, passionate educators, an integrated balance of academics, social-emotional learning, and experiential education—and above all, **JOY**.

This diversity isn't just a nice-to-have feature of our network—it's a foundational strength. It reflects the belief that equity must be grounded in the unique contexts of local communities while also driven by a shared commitment to a larger purpose. For me it was clear to see that Horizons is equity in action, shaped by and for the communities it serves.



Horizons students learn in and out of traditional classrooms. One way they do that: through swimming—it is a core part of every Horizons program.

The Power of Relationships

Time and time again, I was reminded that Horizons is built on relationships—ones that are authentic, reciprocal, and enduring. These principles are both aspirational and lived daily at every site I visited.

Authentic: The need for Horizons has never been greater. As public education systems continue to grapple with persistent post-pandemic learning loss and face significant reductions in federal support—such as the recent \$6.8 billion cut to the Department of Education—students from under-resourced communities are experiencing widening opportunity gaps. Recent studies indicate that students require nearly five additional months of instruction in reading and over four months in math to catch up to pre-pandemic levels, with the most substantial deficits among low-income and historically marginalized students. On my trip, I witnessed how

independent schools hosting Horizons are authentically meeting this moment—not as saviors, but as partners. Horizons offers a concrete, high-impact way for schools to animate their values, engage their communities within and beyond their walls, and help shape a more equitable future for all learners.

Reciprocal: The “win-win” nature of Horizons partnerships came to life in every classroom and conversation. Public and private school educators teaching, learning, and collaborating together, modeling shared ownership and leadership. Everyone—students, teachers, families, schools—grows through these connections. In addition to the impact on Horizons students, host schools I visited also reported benefits that extend well beyond summer. By integrating Horizons onto campus, schools not only serve their broader communities—they also create meaningful opportunities for their own students, alumni, and professional staff to both give and grow.

Enduring: Horizons’ cohort model allows students (and their families) to return each summer, and the relationships between students, teachers, staff, and families deepen and strengthen over time. Many educators, volunteers, and directors have also been with Horizons for years—even decades—because of the relationships they have forged. Studies also show that the earlier students start with consistent support and interventions, the more impact they will experience over time. With some programs starting in Pre-K and continuing through high school and even into college, we’re talking about years of long-term, sustained connection, growth, and impact. This can only happen through the community-building, consistency, and continuum of care that Horizons embodies.



A few of the dozens of student volunteers along my journey.

Joy Is the Secret Sauce

Regardless of where the program is housed or located there's something unmistakable you feel the moment you walk onto a Horizons campus: joy. It's in the music that echoes through hallways, the laughter on playgrounds and in the pools, and the high-fives after solving a tough math problem. Whether swimming, singing, exploring nature, or diving into a book, students are immersed in experiences that spark curiosity and confidence. That joy is intentional and at the core of every program I saw. And this doesn't happen by accident—it's a product of learning, belonging, and resilience.

Hard Work and Heart Work

These are indeed challenging and uncertain times, but what I saw over these past few weeks left me feeling hopeful and inspired. The educators I met are doing the hard work of teaching—navigating challenges, meeting diverse needs, and adapting in real time. But more than that, they are doing the *heart* work: leading with compassion, nurturing trust, and creating environments where every child feels seen, supported, and celebrated.

Just this past week, in our nation's capital, Aaron Dworkin of the National Summer Learning Association [reminded us why this matters so deeply](#). He spoke about summer not as *time off*, but rather as time on—for learning, connection, and possibility. For millions of students from under-resourced communities, summer can either deepen disparities or spark transformation. The opportunity is real—and so is the responsibility.

Programs like Horizons are answering that call. Across the network and the nation students are experiencing summer as a season of growth, joy, and impact. From city centers to country campuses, from higher ed institutions to Kindergarten classrooms, Horizons is proving that summer can be part of the solution—not only interrupting learning loss, but advancing equity, belonging, and potential.

As I reflect on this journey, I'm filled with gratitude—for the communities that welcomed me, the stories that were shared, and the unwavering commitment I witnessed. I'm also incredibly proud to be part of an organization and network that is deeply values-driven and equity-centered. This summer reaffirmed for me the vital importance of summer itself—and how Horizons creates lasting impact that stretches far beyond it, through a vibrant, diverse network rooted in a shared commitment to something greater: educational equity, relationship-based learning, and long-term impact.

As we look ahead to growing the network, I'm excited to share what I've seen with others who are ready to be part of this purpose-driven and joyful work.

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