

Expanding Access to Out-of-School Learning: Lessons from Year 1 at ReSchool Colorado

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On a March afternoon, tucked into a corner of the hospital cafeteria, two women are deep in conversation. Maria is filling Lauren in on the latest news of her five children. For the last couple of months, Maria and Lauren have been meeting during Maria's breaks at the hospital to talk about Maria's children, their schooling, and their plans for the summer. During this time, Lauren has met Maria's children and, together in meetings at the hospital and over countless texts and emails, she and Maria have searched for and discussed the activities the children will participate in next summer, and have prepared for upcoming school choices.

During the meeting, the two reviewed Maria's plans so far. Her oldest child, 15, is planning to get a lifeguard certification so he can get a job. She also hopes he will take driving lessons so he can get himself to any future job. Her daughter, 13, will be participating in an art program. She likes art, particularly photography, but doesn't get the chance to do that in school. Her five-year-old twins and her one-year-old will take swimming lessons so they can join the rest of the family at the pool—a favorite pastime of the family's.

Lauren later asked if Maria's son had applied for the summer soccer coaching job—he hadn't. He'd been uncertain of how to prepare his resume. Lauren noted that and said she would send along resources to help him and would be happy to work with him on his resume.

Lauren and Maria met when ReSchool Colorado, a local education nonprofit, began a partnership with St. Joseph's Hospital in Denver to provide the Learner Advocate Network (LAN). As a benefit to the hospital's employees, ReSchool's LAN advocates provide one-on-one support and guidance to parents in accessing in and out-of-school learning opportunities for their children. Their primary focus has been helping parents access summer learning for their children, but LAN advocate Lauren's help often extends beyond the search for summer camps to include discussions about the children's schools and school choices. ReSchool's goal is to help families like Maria's take advantage of the rich and diverse learning opportunities that are offered in the Denver area, but that are too often inaccessible to working families.

Introduction

In 2017 ReSchool Colorado launched a set of initiatives to expand access to out-of-school learning opportunities for children in the Denver area. This brief seeks to provide an initial, formative assessment of lessons learned in the first year of the initiatives, focusing on the core issues of families' expectations for out-of-school time, availability of programs across communities, and equitable access.

Colorado high school students spend about 18 percent of their waking hours each year in school.¹ That number is likely even less for elementary school students. This time in school is obviously important, but it is clear that students spend much more of their time out of school. How they spend it has important consequences for their learning.

Out-of-school time, especially in the summer, offers students an opportunity to explore new passions, build friendships and relationships, and experiment with independence. Research suggests that taking advantage of such opportunities matters. Taking field trips, visiting museums, and going to camp can all boost students' learning and social development.² Away from school, students have an opportunity to recharge, build memories, grow their interests, and engage their critical thinking. When students don't have engaging experiences outside of school, they lose ground. The well-documented "summer slide," for example, is associated with learning gaps that grow and persist throughout a student's schooling.³

But engagement in and access to these vital opportunities are not equitable. Many parents, especially those who are new to the country or living in historically underserved communities, are unfamiliar with these opportunities or their potential value to their children. And these opportunities can often be expensive, costing anywhere from a few hundred dollars to even thousands of dollars, making it difficult if not impossible for less affluent children to participate. Even when interest and resources are not a barrier, information about when and where the opportunities exist and how to enroll children are often fragmented and difficult to find, leaving parents to rely on their informal social networks or their own legwork to track down information.

ReSchool's initiatives seek to address barriers to accessing out-of-school learning and build the capacity and agency of parents to support their children's learning experiences. These initiatives—a searchable website that aggregates summer learning opportunities across the region and a Learner Advocate Network pilot that provides one-on-one expert support to parents—are the first steps ReSchool is taking as part of its agenda to empower all families with the necessary tools and support to organize rich and diverse learning experiences for their children, both in and out of schools.

In their first year of implementation, we found that:

- Denver-area parents are seeking enrichment and relationships for their children but available summer programs tend to be academic.
- Access to summer learning in the Denver area is uneven.
- ReSchool took on (and possibly lowered) critical barriers to accessing summer learning.

ReSchool's early successes, though encouraging to anyone favoring expansive learning opportunities that span inside and outside of school, also highlight the need for dedicated resources and structural solutions to support families at scale. This brief recounts ReSchool's experiences during the first year of these initiatives, where they are headed, and what they imply for a more fundamental shift in our nation's learning systems.

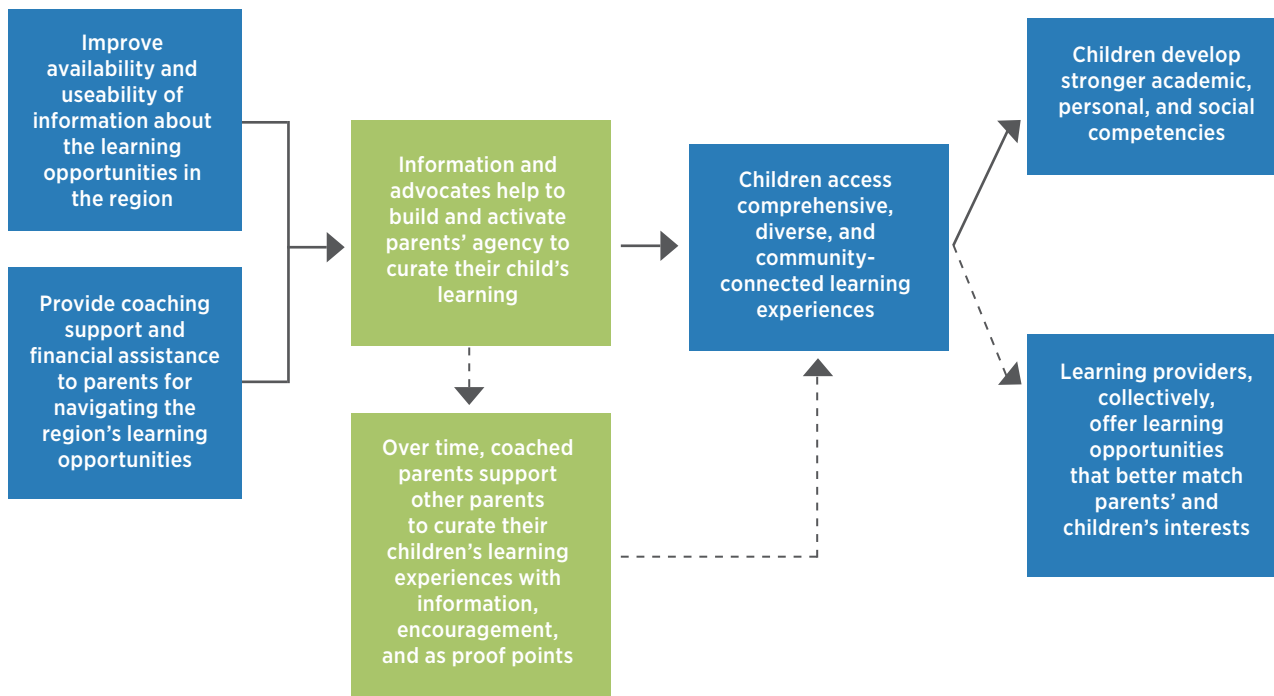
Empowering Parents and Children to Improve Children’s Learning

ReSchool partners with families to build their capacity to navigate expansive systems of learning and aims to eliminate barriers to accessing out-of-school learning opportunities. The expectation is that, with agency, information, resources, and opportunity, parents and children will curate learning experiences that develop the child’s identity, as well as academic, social, and personal competence (while hopefully having fun in the process). When asked what success would look like for ReSchool’s first year of work, Lauren Fine, the learner advocate, explained that the goal was for “families [to] further strengthen their capacity to advocate for their children and, as parents continue on their journey a year later, that they confidently access learning experiences for them and their children in the system.”

In the short run, ReSchool believes it will help parents and children build agency by providing them with information about learning opportunities, scholarships (as needed), and personalized coaching on how to navigate and access those opportunities. Reschool believes its support of parents and their children will result in families who are better informed and more likely to seek and assemble a comprehensive bundle of learning experiences over time. In the long run, ReSchool hopes the families it works with will be able to support other families in their community, expanding ReSchool’s reach and impact.⁴

In addition to impacting the demand side of the equation, ReSchool sees the development of agency as a way to increase the responsiveness of learning providers. ReSchool Executive Director Amy Anderson explains that when more families are equipped with information, resources, and agency, they will be in the driver’s seat. Learning providers will need to ensure their programming is welcoming, interesting, and valuable to this growing diversity of clientele. When families who have been historically underresourced and disenfranchised gain the capacity and resources to get what they want and need for their children’s education, systems will be transformed. Figure 1 outlines this relationship between building parent agency and improvements in student learning and system responsiveness.

FIGURE 1. Building Parent Agency and Resources to Improve Student Learning and the Learning System



Reschool's Program Components: Learner Advocate Network Pilot and Blueprint4Summer Colorado

ReSchool launched the Learner Advocate Network (LAN) pilot in partnership with St. Joseph's Hospital in Denver. Under the program, a LAN advocate helped interested hospital staff navigate learning opportunities for their children. Throughout the year, the advocate worked one-on-one with 12 parents, meeting between two and three times per month over the year. In most cases, the advocate met with participants at the hospital during work breaks. During early meetings the advocate focused on learning about the parents and their children; later, the advocate helped parents search and select summer learning opportunities. ReSchool provided the LAN families with program scholarships (up to \$250 per child) to support access to summer learning opportunities. In total, 25 children received scholarships. LAN families also received vouchers for transportation through [HopSkipDrive](#), a ReSchool partnership organization that offers ridesharing services for children.

An important aspect of the LAN support is that although the advocate communicated most directly with parents, she aimed to support the family as a unit. The advocate came to know the children and she and the parents considered what learning opportunities would work logistically for the family and what kinds of experiences could bolster their relationships. For example, the advocate helped one parent enroll her youngest children in swimming lessons because the parents enjoyed going to the pool with their older children. With lessons, the youngest children could join them.

In addition to the LAN pilot, ReSchool partnered with Blueprint4Summer St. Louis, an online searchable platform that aggregates the city's summer learning programs, to provide a similar platform for Denver and surrounding communities. [Blueprint4SummerCO](#) (B4S) went live in winter 2017. B4S featured more than 3,300 summer camp sessions. Knowing that cost is a barrier to summer learning for many Denver families, the B4S team sought to highlight free and low-cost learning opportunities on the website. Overall, 23 percent of summer camp sessions included on the website were free and another 10 percent cost less than \$100. Fifty-three percent of the available sessions offered scholarships to students.

During winter and spring the B4S team marketed the tool using paid and earned media, hosting tables at parent events around the region, visiting schools, and partnering with schools and other organizations. At events, the B4S team introduced parents to the tools and gave them time to explore the website. By mid-June 2017 the site recorded more than 15,000 unique searches and over 30,000 page views.

Examining the ReSchool LAN and B4S Pilot Initiatives

In 2017 CRPE began a formative evaluation of ReSchool's LAN and B4S initiatives, focusing on three core questions:

1. What are children's and their parent's goals for their out-of-school time and how do these expectations vary across families?
2. What out-of-school opportunities are available and how do they intersect with learners' interests, parental expectations, other family demands (e.g., financial resources, work schedules), community conditions (e.g., crime and safety, information), and how do those factors shape the activities learners choose to engage in?
3. To what extent and in what ways do the LAN and B4S programs disrupt the barriers to accessing summer learning experiences and change the use of summertime for children in underresourced communities?

In this first year CRPE conducted an array of data collection to answer these questions, including:

- Interviews with the ReSchool staff about the organization’s theory of action, goals, and early lessons.
- Observations of LAN parent meetings with two parents.
- Observations of B4S marketing events at a Rocky Mountain Prep (RMP) parent meeting and a Boulder Housing Partners (BHP) parent meeting. At RMP we interviewed parents in one-on-one conversations, and at BHP we interviewed parents in a focus group.
- Surveys from parents using a series of three short-form (two minutes) surveys designed to collect information about what parents were looking for in summer activities for their children, the activities their children had participated in previously, the goals parents have for their children, and the barriers parents faced in accessing summer learning. These surveys were collected from 67 parents who attended B4S marketing events, including an Aurora STEM event, the BHP parent meeting, the RMP parent meeting, and a PTA convention.
- An observation of a B4S event to train summer program providers from the Denver Public Libraries to submit information to the B4S platform.

In addition to these original data collections, CRPE examined:

- Interviews with parents, conducted by the learner advocate, about their children’s experience with summer learning activities.
- Scholarship allocation and usage data collected by ReSchool.
- B4S site data, including entries and search results.

Lessons from Year 1

The first year of the LAN and B4S programs revealed three important insights about parents’ expectations for summer learning and the barriers to access they face.

Parents are seeking enrichment and relationships for their children but available summer programs tend to be academic.

Over the spring and early summer, parents conducted about 16,000 searches on the B4S platform, which covered more than 3,600 camp sessions from 62 providers.⁵ Analysis of these searches, as well as interviews with LAN parents and parent surveys, consistently showed that parents want enrichment for their children in the summer more than they want academic programs. Parents want summer experiences that their children cannot get in school.

One LAN parent, for example, explained that her daughter wanted to go to art programs in the summer because she doesn’t get much opportunity to do art in school. Another LAN parent was interested in veterinary camps so her daughter could indulge her passion for animals. Another parent chose to enroll her teenage stepson in driving lessons, knowing he will need to drive himself to the afterschool job he soon hoped to get.

On the B4S website, the most popular searches were for art (49 percent) and sports and outdoor programs (each with 20 percent). Academic programs were the second-most common offering (after art) on the platform, but only garnered 12 percent of searches. Although parents are most interested in nonacademic enrichment, the available sessions on the current platform appear to be skewed toward academic support programs.

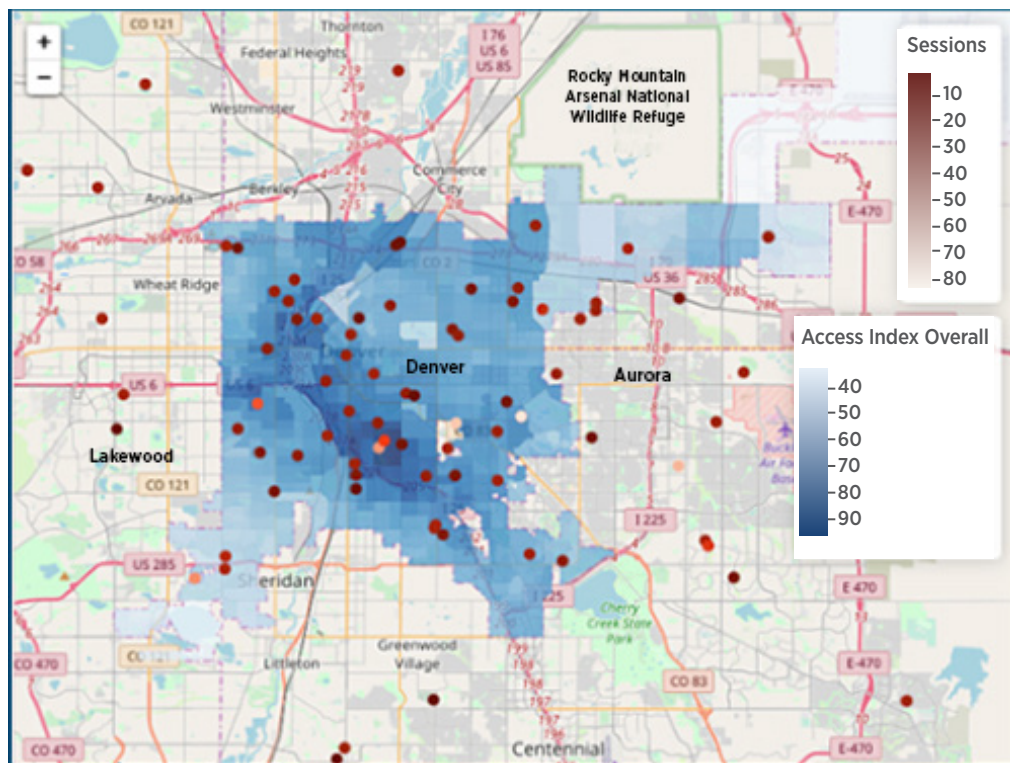
During interviews, parents also noted the importance of forming new relationships in summer camps. In our limited surveys, parents reported that they wanted their children to make friends in camp. On the flip side, one parent expressed concern over the lack of diversity in his daughter’s camp. He said he was surprised and a little worried when he realized how few children of color were in his daughter’s art camp.

Access to summer learning in Denver remains uneven.

The ReSchool team invested in recruiting organizations to advertise their camp sessions on the B4S platform with the goal of populating the site with a large number of opportunities—particularly free or low-cost camp options—distributed across the region. In 2018 ReSchool identified thousands of camp sessions located in 115 different zip codes. In addition to these camps, Denver is host to numerous cultural and recreational activities such as museums, parks, and community recreational centers. Despite these direct efforts to promote summer camps and the Denver region’s network of cultural and recreational institutions, access to these opportunities remains uneven across the region.

An analysis of the dispersion of the B4S camps along with the permanent cultural and recreational activities revealed that children in the Southwest and Northeast regions, which are predominantly home to low-income families and families of color, have the least access to these out-of-school learning opportunities (figure 2). In particular, the city’s black families are consistently located in neighborhoods with the lowest access to out-of-school learning opportunities.

FIGURE 2. Access to Learning Opportunities across Denver



Note: The blue shading reflects the degree of access children living nearby have to out-of-school learning opportunities. The red dots indicate the total number of B4S camp sessions available in the census block.

Surveys suggest that families face barriers to access that go beyond the uneven geographic distribution of out-of-school learning opportunities shown in figure 2. Affording the cost of programs, for example, was the most common worry for parents when they thought about summer learning opportunities.

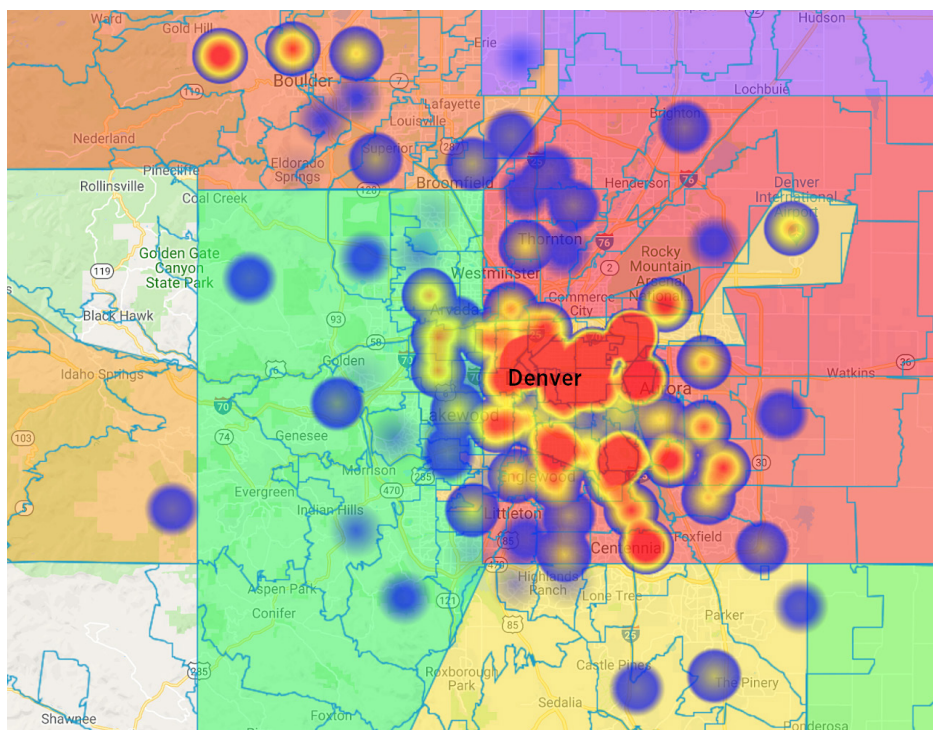
ReSchool took on (and possibly lowered) critical barriers to accessing summer learning.

In different ways and to different degrees B4S and its marketing, as well as the LAN pilot, confronted information, financial, and transportation barriers that limited parents' access to summer learning. Evidence on B4S usage, observations of parent events, and early reports from LAN participants suggest that these initiatives may be helping to lower these barriers to summer learning.

ReSchool used a range of events to introduce B4S to many parents. At some events, ReSchool introduced the notion of summer learning to parents who reported that they had never sent their children to a summer camp. For example, at an event hosted by a regional community-based organization and attended by nearly 20 local parents, fewer than half reported that their children attended a summer camp the previous year. Parents posed a variety of questions (about costs, schedules, transportation) during the meeting, suggesting that they were unfamiliar with summer camp options.

By summer, search data from the B4S website showed that parents across the Denver metro area used the platform to search for summer learning opportunities (figure 3). Unsurprisingly, Denver—where the population is most dense and the platform offered the largest number of summer camp sessions—had the highest concentration of users.

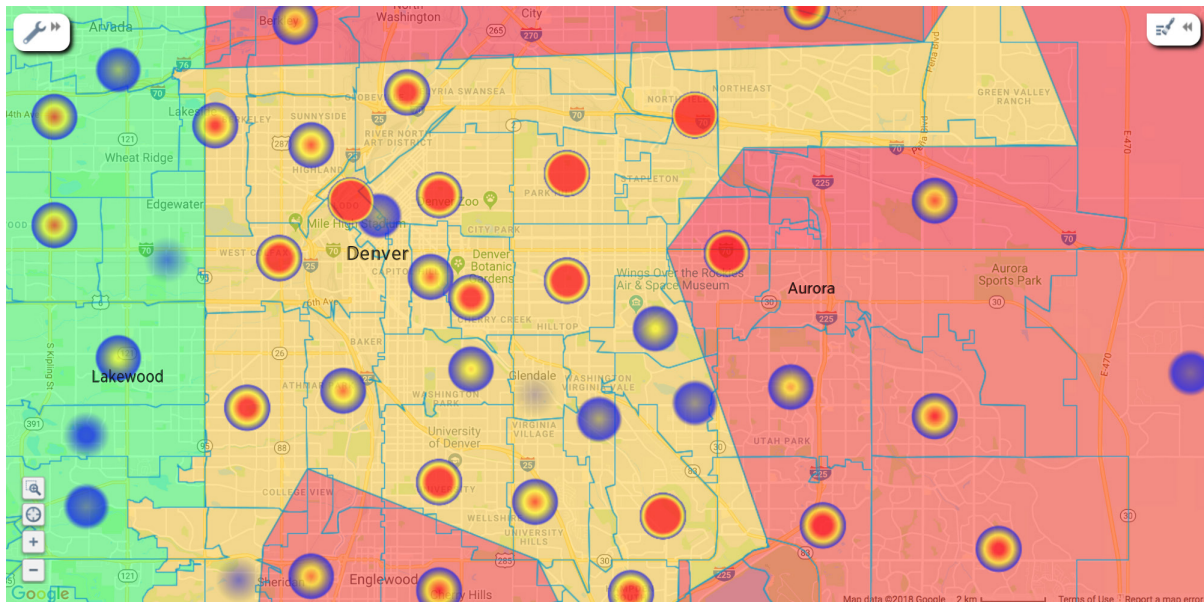
FIGURE 3. B4S Search Activity Data Shows Highest Concentration of Usage in Denver



Note: Figure generated by eSpatial from data exported from Google Analytics. The density of usage increases as the color shifts from light blue to yellow to red, with red indicating the highest density of usage.

A more detailed view of Denver users (figure 4) reveals variation in usage across the region, though the usage patterns do not necessarily correspond with economic or race and ethnicity patterns in the city. For example, parents in Far Northeast neighborhoods, home to a high concentration of low-income families and families of color, showed high usage, as do some central neighborhoods that are home to affluent families. The reverse is also true: relatively low-usage areas include both low-income and affluent neighborhoods. Notably, the strong usage in some low-income neighborhoods may be the result of ReSchool’s explicit efforts to introduce the platform at parent events in those neighborhoods. ReSchool will likely need to continue monitoring local usage patterns as the platform grows its offerings and recognition across the city.

FIGURE 4. B4S Search Data Shows that Usage Varies across Denver Neighborhoods



Note: Figure generated by Google Analytics. The density of usage increases as the color shifts from light blue to yellow to red, with red indicating the highest density of usage.

The deep engagement with LAN parents also yielded benefits. Each of the 12 parents in the first LAN cohort enrolled their children in summer learning activities. According to the advocate who worked with the families, this was the first summer camp experience for about half of them. All but one of these parents made use of the scholarship to defray the costs. The advocate reiterated that these scholarships opened up opportunities that families might not have been able to afford previously. Five of the twelve parents took advantage of HopSkipDrive vouchers, with three of those parents reporting that the transportation support was reliable, easy to use, and helpful—even if there were still some details to improve (for example, having more drivers from nearby neighborhoods and reducing the time required to book a trip from the current eight-hour minimum window).

Looking Forward: ReSchool Seeks to Expand Reach, Diversify Their Model, and Prepare for Sustainability

ReSchool's LAN program and its B4S tool are currently in their second year of operation. As of mid-February 2019 the LAN has expanded from one advocate, one employer partner, and 12 parents to two advocates, two employer partners, and 51 parents (and their more than 100 children). The advocate team aims to work with 70 parents and their families by the end of 2019. In keeping with ReSchool's priority to support underserved families, the second employer partner is, again, a hospital, which provides Reschool with access to a large number of lower-wage workers.

B4S is looking to expand as well. By Spring 2019 ReSchool hopes to advertise 5,000 camp sessions on B4S—about 2,000 more sessions than the previous year. ReSchool has also planned a marketing strategy to increase the number of site visits from 30,000 to 50,000 and the number of unique searches from 17,000 to 30,000. The marketing strategy is designed to use community-based media outlets, as well as more conventional media outlets, with the goal of reaching underserved families.

In addition to growing in size, both the LAN and B4S teams are refining and adding features to their work. As the learner advocates support a growing number of parents, they are exploring a rolling sign-up process and differentiating the levels of engagement they provide to parents. The B4S team is focused on increasing the number and types of free summer learning opportunities on its platform, and recruiting providers in neighborhoods where children have the lowest access to out-of-school learning opportunities. With an eye toward offering more scholarships, ReSchool is raising more funding for direct scholarships to LAN families and to smaller learning providers. And new this year, ReSchool is partnering with selected (larger) learning providers to leverage existing scholarship programs for LAN families and others in the community at large, and in particular for low-income youth who have been historically underrepresented in programming in these institutions.

Though still a relatively young organization, ReSchool is already setting the foundation for sustaining the initiatives, which do not have any obvious public funding source or champion. For now, both programs depend on philanthropic support but ReSchool is exploring alternative funding models. Currently, the two participating employers are providing financial support for the LAN team's engagement with their employees. To date, this revenue does not fully offset the costs of the LAN but ReSchool continues to refine the service model for cost efficiencies and to seek additional revenue sources.

The B4S team is also starting to explore a long-term strategy for operating the website. In these preliminary conversations, the team is considering how to most efficiently populate the site with data, what resources are needed to maintain the site, whether and how the site could provide coverage for all of Colorado, and what all of these considerations might mean for a potential long-term host for B4S (ReSchool does not intend to operate the site permanently). The ReSchool team is also thinking ahead about how it might better assess the quality of learning opportunities.

Conclusion

ReSchool has shown that direct support can influence the in-school and out-of-school opportunities families access for their children. While it is still unclear whether the B4S online platform has changed what families access, its usage suggests that the information in an aggregate and searchable format is filling a need for parents. These outcomes for the LAN and B4S, though still formative, should encourage anyone who sees a future in which children participate in diverse and community-connected learning in and out of school. With a combination of tools and support, families—including those whose circumstances position them furthest from opportunity—can build this portfolio of experiences for their children.

Amid this encouragement, the question of scale looms large. The LAN advocate indicated that she could reasonably work, as she did with Maria, with up to 50 parents in a year. But clearly thousands of families in the Denver area would benefit from her support, suggesting a need for a very large team of advocates or network of advocates across the region. ReSchool has expanded to a second employer, but low wage workers can be found across hundreds of workplaces in the city. Negotiating employer partnerships has been challenging; doing this with numerous employers seems daunting.

To shift to a more expansive and equitable system of in- and out-of-school learning experiences at scale our public systems must invest in families in ways they never have before. A nonprofit like ReSchool can show us what supporting families should look like and catalyze a larger movement but, at the end of the day, structural solutions will be needed to scale and sustain this support. Locating a stable funding stream and building the systems to deliver that support is a fundamental challenge to reaching this new vision. Over the next year CRPE will continue to partner with ReSchool to observe the expansion of the LAN and B4S initiatives, but also to follow the conversations and progress made on moving the initiatives toward sustainability and scale.

Endnotes

1. Colorado Rev. Stat. § 22-32-109 (2016).
2. Susan J. Bodilly and Megan K. Beckett, *Making Out-Of-School-Time Matter: Evidence for an Action Agenda* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005); J. P. Greene, Brian Kisida, and Daniel H. Bowen, “The Educational Value of Field Trips,” *Education Next* 14, no. 1 (2014); Jay P. Greene et al., “The Play’s the Thing: Experimentally Examining the Social and Cognitive Effects of School Field Trips to Live Theater Performances,” *Educational Researcher* 47, no. 4 (March 2018); Brian Kisida, Daniel H. Bowen, Jay P. Greene, “Measuring Critical Thinking: Results From an Art Museum Field Trip Experiment,” *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* 9, no. sup1 (November 2015); Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland, eds. *Beyond the Soundbite: Arts Education and Academic Outcomes*. Conference proceedings from “Beyond the Soundbite: What the Research Actually Shows About Arts Education and Academic Outcomes” (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Center, 2000).
3. See Karl L. Alexander, Doris R. Entwisle, and Linda Steffel Olson, “Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap,” *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 2 (April 2007): 167–180.
4. ReSchool currently does not actively train parents to support other parents but is considering what that could look like in future years.
5. A camp session is considered a certain program offered at a specific time. For example, a three-day reading workshop offered at a library during the first week in June would be considered a single session. If the library offered this three-day workshop in four different weeks, it would count as four camp sessions.

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