

Equitable Learning Recovery

Lessons from the
Summer of 2021



Thought Partners

Thank you to the following partners for helping to guide this project from conception to recommendations.



This study was conducted by WithInsight.



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1. Executive Summary

What if COVID relief funding was an opportunity to advance equity and accelerate learning? With more than \$1 billion in federal relief funding, Minnesota has an opportunity to address long-standing disparities in K-12 education. We took a close look at the summer of 2021 to learn how relief funds were used and the extent to which the funding enabled creative solutions to meet young people's academic, social-emotional, and mental health needs. The Equitable Learning Recovery project captured new strategies that were tried, challenges that were faced and to what extent community partners were involved.

WE DEVELOPED SIX RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION BASED ON WHAT WE LEARNED, WHICH ARE SUMMARIZED HERE AND DETAILED ON PAGES 23-26 OF THIS REPORT.

1. Build structures that prioritize voices of students and families who are most marginalized.

Communities need to proactively set up processes and groups to ensure they have regular ways to provide input. In times of crisis, the existing infrastructure determines to what extent community voices are included, so it is essential to build and sustain these venues.

2. Redefine partnerships and invest in intermediaries. We need to redefine partnerships as networks of support, as opposed to the traditional notion of one-on-one partnerships. When we invest in coordinating entities like intermediaries as the “glue” that bonds districts and community organizations, we create more sustainable partnerships that are inclusive, responsive and innovative.

3. Create and sustain spaces for shared problem-solving and innovation. Innovation and partnership can be challenging during times of crisis. School districts and community partners need shared spaces where they can innovate and problem-solve together, and these spaces need to be intentionally built.

4. Develop equitable funding systems. The funding structure for COVID relief funding prioritized efficiency over equity to get resources to communities quickly. Equitable funding systems would direct more resources to marginalized communities and to community partners that tend to be more nimble and have a greater ability to think outside of the box.

5. Address the “fiscal cliff” now. We need flexible, long-term funding solutions for districts and community partners. An increase in the Targeted Services reimbursement rate and the ability to roll over relief funds beyond 2024 are two examples that could help address the impending financial drop.

6. Evaluate, learn and improve. Given the flexibility of relief funds, evaluation is not automatic. In order to make real gains in equitable learning recovery, we need to capture lessons learned, effective programs and other successes. It is essential that we invest in evaluation; otherwise, these lessons will be lost.

2.

Introduction

In 2020 and 2021, over a billion federal dollars came to Minnesota as part of “learning recovery” through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). The ARPA Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER III) allocated \$1.3 billion to Minnesota, with about \$238 million of that set aside to address learning loss specifically.¹ Following the 2021 legislation, Ignite Afterschool, Generation Next and Greater Twin Cities United Way commissioned this project to understand how COVID relief funding was used to provide summer learning programming in the summer of 2021 and utilize the findings to inform ongoing implementation of relief funding as well as future education funding streams.

The intentional naming of the project conveys its key objectives and context. The Equitable Learning Recovery project was centered around the young people most impacted by the dual pandemics. The dual pandemics refer to (1) the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) historic and ongoing systemic racial injustice in our country. The racial reckoning following George Floyd’s murder in May 2020 brought increasing attention to systems of racial injustice and elicited responses from organizations and

corporations in Minnesota and across the country.

Another contextual factor was Minnesota Governor Tim Walz’s [Due North](#),² a statewide plan released in January 2021, which was intended to create an education system where “every child receives a high-quality education, no matter their race or zip code.” The governor engaged stakeholders across the state and developed the plan as the education vision to guide his administration’s approach to education strategies, including

decisions related to relief funds, which he and the Minnesota Department of Education Commissioner had discretion over. The plan prioritized meeting the needs of students during and after the pandemic, with a specific focus on students of color and Indigenous students.

The Equitable Learning Recovery project was designed to capture the impact of the dual pandemics on young people across the state of Minnesota and the extent to which the relief funding enabled creative solutions to meet their needs—from academic to social-emotional to mental health and well-being. We wanted to learn about new strategies that were tried, challenges that were faced, and to what extent community partnerships were leveraged and created to meet these needs.

Methods

We utilized a mixed-methods approach that included a statewide survey to capture a broad overview of the summer of 2021 and in-depth interviews in eight municipalities to gather deep insights in specific communities. Table 1 (on page 5) outlines the process and participants for each method.

The statewide survey was administered in the fall of 2021 and was used to identify potential

communities for in-depth interviews. The following criteria were developed based on the project goals and used to select the eight communities for the interview phase:

- **Race/ethnicity:** Prioritize Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities.
- **Language:** Prioritize communities with students who are English-language learners.
- **Locale type:** Mix of rural, urban and suburban.
- **Geographic location:** Mix of Metro Area and Greater Minnesota.
- **District size:** Mix of small, medium and large school districts.
- **Community engagement:** Mix of communities with and without existing partnership models (e.g., collective impact initiatives, out-of-school time intermediaries).
- **Survey data:** Survey responses and respondents offering to be interviewed.

In total, we invited eight communities to participate in community stakeholder interviews based on these criteria, including two urban cities, two suburbs,

two rural communities and two regional hubs. The interviews allowed us to go deeper with district and community stakeholders to learn what enabled or hindered success.

In one of the rural communities, we did not achieve sufficient participation in the interviews to conduct a community-level analysis. We conducted one interview with a community partner, which was factored into the overall analysis; however, we were unable to report on the community overall because of the limited participation. Though we have one rural community out of the sample of seven, the perspective of rural communities should be prioritized in future work to better understand their experiences and challenges.

Equitable

a focus on equity and those most impacted by the dual pandemics, i.e., COVID-19 and systemic racial injustice

Learning

a holistic view on learning, including social-emotional learning (SEL), developmental relationships, academics and community-based learning

Recovery

strategically using relief funding to think boldly, change the status quo and create systems change



Table 1.

Methods

Survey offered a broad overview across the state while interviews provided in-depth insights about experiences and perspectives.

Method	Selection Process	High-Level Questions	Sample	Timeline
Survey	Invited as many program providers, community partners, school district leaders and intermediary staff across the state as possible. Utilized existing listservs and networks from project sponsors to invite respondents. Respondents were entered into a raffle to win one of three \$100 VISA gift cards as an incentive for participating.	<p>What needs did summer learning prioritize?</p> <p>How were community partners involved?</p> <p>What were the barriers?</p>	164 responses	September - October 2021
Community Stakeholder Interviews	Invited program providers, community partners, school district leaders and intermediary staff in eight communities to be interviewed; four to 11 stakeholder interviews were conducted per community.* The majority of interviews were conducted one-on-one; however, there were a few that were conducted in a group setting with multiple community partners, i.e., as a focus group. Interviewees were also asked to complete the survey if they had not done so already. Interviewees were offered a \$50 VISA gift card as an incentive for participating.	<p>Which students were most impacted by the dual pandemics?</p> <p>Who was involved in decision-making?</p> <p>What community partnerships were possible?</p> <p>What were the barriers?</p>	48 interview participants	December 2021 - March 2022

*NOTE: IN ONE OF THE RURAL COMMUNITIES, WE WERE ONLY ABLE TO CONDUCT ONE INTERVIEW WITH A COMMUNITY PARTNER, SO WE WERE UNABLE TO REPORT ON THIS PARTICULAR COMMUNITY.

Figure 1.

Counties Served by Largest Shares of Survey Respondents

Geography of survey respondents generally reflect the state's population share; the eight largest counties in Minnesota had high response rates.

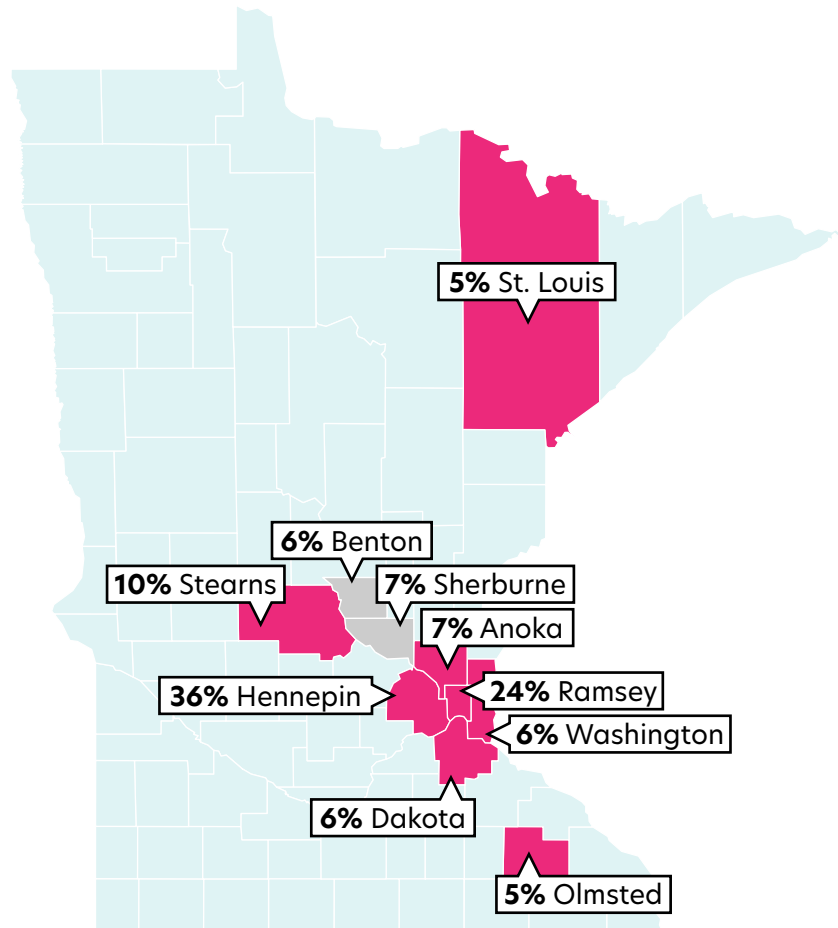
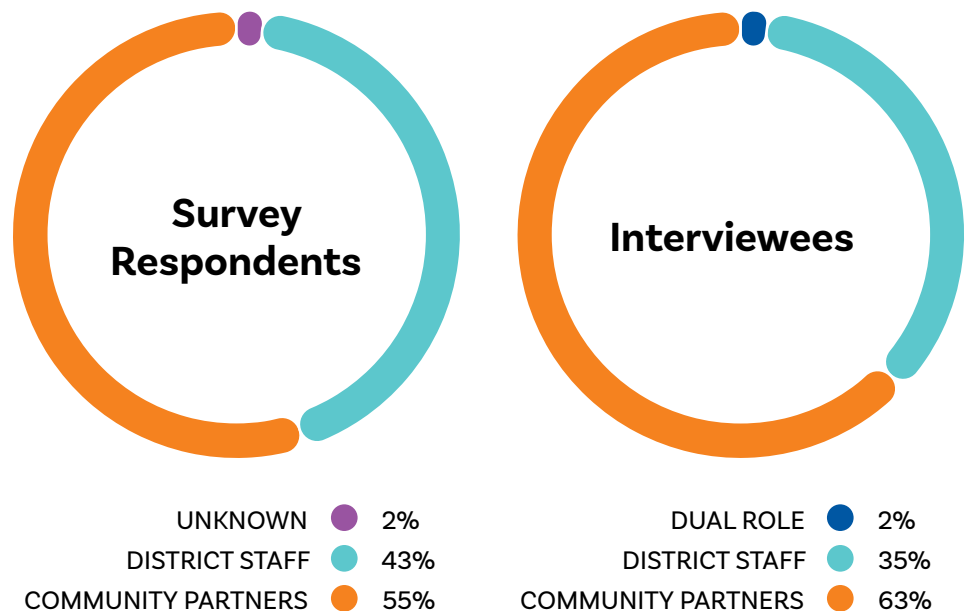


Figure 2.

Roles of Interviewees and Survey Respondents

Community partner and district perspectives were well balanced across data collection methods.



Survey Sample

There were a total of 164 survey responses from across the state. Of the 87 counties in Minnesota, 55 of them had at least one respondent that provided services in that county. Figure 1 (on the previous page) displays the percent of respondents that provide services in each county for the top 10 counties. Slightly more than half (55%) of survey respondents represented community partners, while 43% came from districts, as shown in Figure 2 (on the previous page).

Interview Sample

In total, we interviewed 48 individuals across eight communities. Interviewees tended to serve in leadership or management positions at their organizations. On average, they were employed at their organization for nine years and have served in their current roles for five-and-a-half years. In the seven communities that fully participated, at least two district staff members completed interviews. The number of community partners varied by community. For example, the urban cities have a substantial number of community organizations compared to the more rural

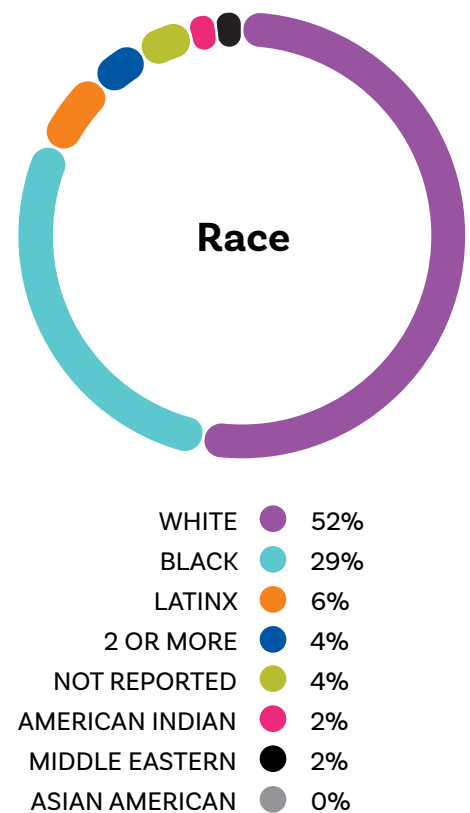
or suburban communities, and therefore, had a larger number of interviews allotted for community partners. Across the seven communities, we had a minimum of two community partners in rural/suburban communities and a maximum of nine community partner participants in urban communities. Based on the number of community partners in each location, participation across districts and community organizations was overall well balanced, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 3 displays the breakdown of how interviewees identified racially or ethnically. Just over half of interviewees were white. The makeup of interviewees in urban locations and regional hubs tended to be more diverse, reflecting the general population in those communities. It is important to note that none of the interviewees identified as Asian American. We intentionally reached out to culturally specific organizations that serve Asian American students, but we were unable to connect with them for interviews. While many of the interviewees spoke to the needs and experiences of Asian American students, it is nevertheless a missing perspective that should be prioritized in future research and outreach related to this work.

Figure 3.

Racial Identities of Interviewees

About half of interviewees identified as white; we missed the perspective of Asian Americans in the interview process.



3.

Findings

The findings of the project highlight the youth most impacted by the dual pandemics, decision making about relief funds, community partnerships, challenges faced and new strategies that were tried.

“COVID has deepened the disparities in a way that our system is not responding quick enough and well enough to. We are seeing families fighting systems that were supposed to support them.”

COMMUNITY PARTNER

Impacted Youth

This project was framed around the needs of the young people most impacted by the dual pandemics, i.e., COVID-19 and systemic racial injustice. Through the survey and community stakeholder interviews with district leaders and community partners, we gathered stories about youth struggles and resilience. One limitation of this project is that we did not directly speak with youth; what is shared in this report reflects the perspectives of district staff and community partners. We asked interviewees about the young people most impacted in their community. Figure 4 outlines the groups of young people that communities identified as most impacted, with youth experiencing poverty emerging as the top theme across all communities. In

six communities, BIPOC youth were named as the students most affected; interviewees in the rural community did not mention BIPOC youth when discussing the students most affected.

Interviewees explained that COVID-19 exacerbated inequities that existed prior to the pandemic, especially those that fall along racial and ethnic lines. As a community partner articulated, “The students who were impacted by COVID are the same as the students most impacted by social and racial injustice. It has deepened the disparities in a way that our system is not responding quickly enough and well enough to. We are seeing families fighting systems that were supposed to support them.” Another community partner shared, “Immediately what I think of are families of color in racially isolated schools. Throughout the pandemic, they have received the shortages; they have received transportation shortages, staffing shortages. The families I think of are kiddos with the most ground to make up before the pandemic, and yet they have been quarantined the most, have had the most distanced learning and have had the least resources.”

Another theme that surfaced was youth and families that are disconnected from school districts, sometimes as a result of the

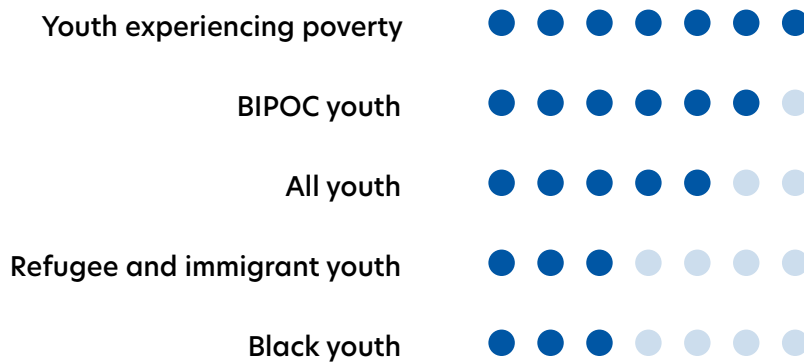
Figure 4.

Who Needed Support & Their Needs

These depictions show the top areas where young people needed support in the summer of 2021. Representatives from seven communities were asked which students were most impacted by the dual pandemics, and then they were asked which student needs they thought were most critical to address.

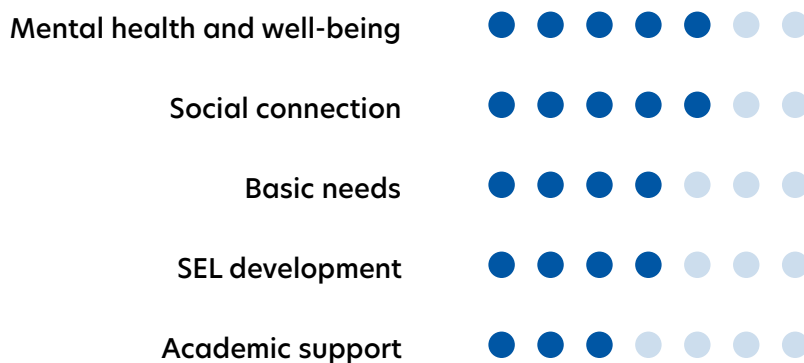
All seven communities identified youth experiencing poverty as most impacted by the dual pandemics; all but the rural community identified BIPOC youth.

YOUNG PEOPLE



Five of seven communities identified “mental health” and “social connections” as needs, more so than they did “academics.”

NEEDS



pandemic. District staff described the challenge of reaching the students that need summer programming the most. During virtual learning in 2020-21, districts experienced greater chronic absenteeism and disengagement, and some districts said that carried over to the summer. Other district staff shared that this is an ongoing issue that predates the pandemic. One leader stated, “We are always trying to get student engagement. Those that need it the most are sometimes the least likely to participate.”

Figure 4 lists the top areas where young people needed support in the summer of 2021. Mental health and well-being were most commonly identified, followed by social connection, basic needs and social-emotional learning (SEL). It is noteworthy that academic support was only mentioned across three communities, showing up less frequently. These findings suggest a recognition of more holistic needs. Interviewees described how the pandemic brought social-emotional learning and relationships front and center. One community partner shared, “We are open to anyone, that’s what we are here for. All the kids from [the community] didn’t have that anymore when we closed. The relationship building, adult relationships, all of a sudden, that was gone.”

A district leader reflected a similar sentiment: “Having been in distance learning, they were so socially isolated. Coming back to school, it’s like having to learn being tolerant of each other, being able to let some things go. They didn’t know how to handle problems that involve others.”

The statewide survey explored to what extent youth needs were prioritized and met in the summer of 2021. The majority of respondents (73%) agreed or strongly agreed that young people’s social-emotional needs were met; 67% agreed or strongly agreed that their well-being and mental health needs were met. When asked whether the needs of specific groups were prioritized, survey respondents were more likely to agree that young people from families with low incomes and BIPOC youth were prioritized, as shown in Figure 5. More than half of respondents disagreed that the needs of young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) were prioritized. This aligns with responses from interviewees, who emphasized prioritizing youth experiencing poverty and prioritizing BIPOC youth; interviewees did not mention LGBTQI+ youth.

Figure 5.

Which Students Were Prioritized in Programming

A majority of respondents agreed that summer programs in 2021 prioritized the needs of young people from families with low incomes and BIPOC youth.

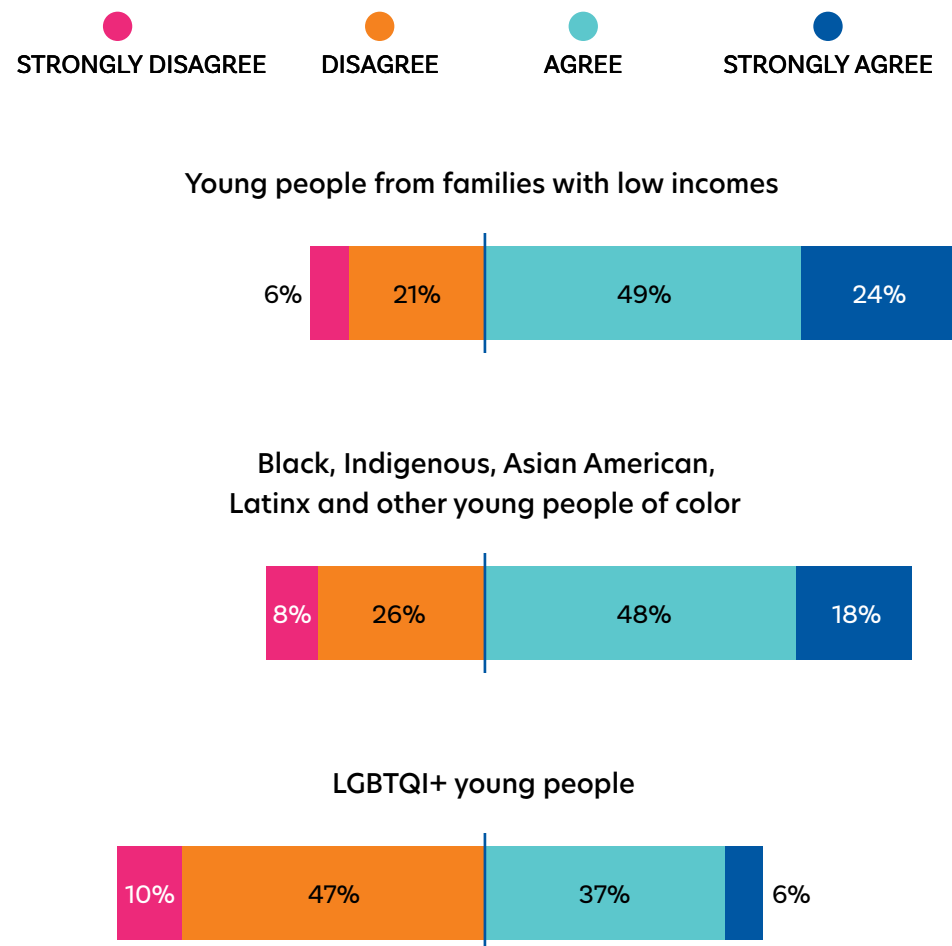
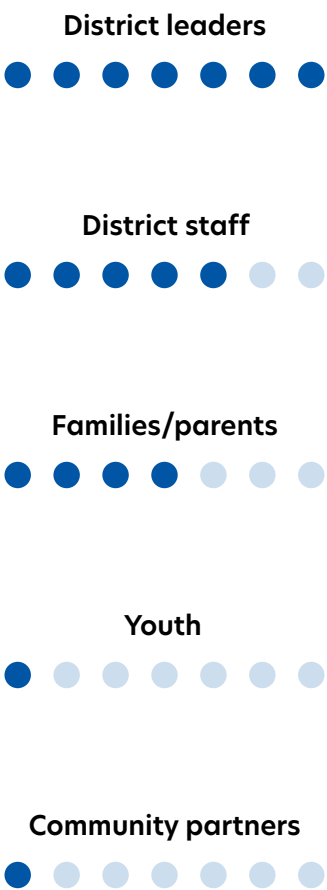


Figure 6.

Who Made Decisions

District leaders made decisions in all seven communities; youth and community partners were the least likely to be involved.



Decision-making about Relief Funds

We were interested in how states, municipalities and local education agencies made decisions about how to spend the COVID relief funds over which they had decision-making authority. Decision-making power is an important factor in educational equity. Equitable decisions involve centering the experiences and voices of youth, families and the community. In our interviews, we specifically asked district leaders about their decision-making process and who was involved in deciding the allocation of funds.

WHO WAS INVOLVED

We captured the decision-making process used by each of the seven districts interviewed. As often occurs in times of crisis, districts turned inward and relied on their internal processes to make decisions about how to use relief funds for the summer of 2021. Figure 6 depicts the stakeholders that were involved in relief funding decisions for the summer of 2021 across the seven communities. Senior leadership within districts led the decision-making process in all seven districts.

In terms of stakeholder involvement, district staff were the most likely to be included in the decision-making process. In five

of the seven communities, district leaders were given opportunities to provide ideas or recommend ways to spend the money. In one exemplary district, the committee of senior leaders responsible for relief funding decisions created an online form where teachers and staff could submit their ideas. The form outlined the district’s priority spending goals, which were created “based on information collected through community engagement, asset mapping, tribal consultation and needs assessment activities.” Staff and teachers shared their ideas, the priority spending goals they aligned with and how the ideas were directly related to the pandemic; the leadership committee then determined which proposals would be accepted or declined.

When talking with district staff, the key reason for relying on internal processes was the timing of the funding. One district leader explained, “The way the money came in was a challenge. You didn’t know what you were getting. During the process leading up to summer, we planned for having the money, but we didn’t know if we would need to cut stuff. The speed of it before summer began was really hard.” All districts shared plans to have deeper stakeholder engagement in future decision-making related to relief funding. The same district leader said, “This

year will be easier. We are already planning. We know we have additional funding, and we know what to expect.”

A key theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of existing infrastructure for community engagement. Parents and families were involved in the decision-making process in four of the seven communities, and this was often because of an existing parent committee or process to gather input from families. For example, one community mentioned its American Indian Parent Advisory Committee that meets regularly and serves in an advisory role for the district to ensure that American Indian students are receiving culturally relevant and equitable educational opportunities. The committee in this district gave input on how to use the relief funds during the summer of 2021. In places where the preexisting community engagement infrastructure was lacking, external stakeholders were less likely to be involved. One intermediary representative remarked on this learning: “The connections you have when you are in a crisis are crucial. Once it happens, you are putting out fires, so the infrastructure is essential.”

Only one community directly involved youth in decisions about the summer of 2021. Districts

tended to rely on existing or secondary data sources from youth to inform their decisions. Some examples included regular feedback loops that are built into programming to gather feedback from youth and parents, such as end-of-programming surveys from the prior year. One district used data collected from parent surveys conducted in 2019 and student focus groups conducted in May 2021 to plan summer programming. However, these data collection methods were not designed to provide input in the decision-making process. They served as more general feedback or needs assessment opportunities, and the data was leveraged to inform the decision-making process.

When we asked community partners about who was involved and the process used for relief funding decisions, the majority of community partners did not know. They were frustrated by the lack of transparency and their inability to influence decisions. Some described the challenge of gaining access to the decision-making tables, as expressed by one community partner: “I was never able to enter the space and say here is what we can offer. I don’t even know how to get in the door.” Others described the decision-making as top-down and driven by privileged leaders: “People really far away from the problem decided and used voices

“From a more practical standpoint, a lot of things related to COVID have happened fairly quickly and suddenly. If the infrastructure wasn’t already there to include community voice, then ramping it up in time for this particular use might not have been plausible.”



INTERMEDIARY REPRESENTATIVE

One community from the interview process proactively engaged community partners in its decisions regarding relief funding.

This district is a positive outlier with its intentional process for engaging stakeholders in the decision-making process. The district uses the [Spectrum of Participation](#), a framework for clarifying and communicating levels of participation, in its decision-making processes. The district leader explained, “We are being intentional about which level of participation the community is at. If we say they are at the input level, they get an opportunity to provide input. We are being careful not to over-promise that they are going to make a decision.”

The district led a front-end process to gather input from community-based organizations, parents and community members. Based on the input collected, they built a framework that outlined their top funding priorities and then offered another round of constructive criticism on the priorities. In the end, the district decided to partner with an intermediary organization to grant out a portion of the funds for community partners to provide summer programming in 2021. The district described the importance of partnering with a community organization to allocate the money. “We were able to have a flexible, nimble partner that we trust and get the money in direct-service hands.” As a connected organization that had served as a pass-through before, the intermediary was able to utilize its network and engage a diversity of programs quickly.

of privilege to drive it.” One person of color shared, “No one who looks like me was involved. We were not even at the table.”

In one district, several community partners who were able to gain access questioned the authenticity of the district’s community engagement efforts. The district set up a committee including external partners to influence the allocation of relief funds. One participant said it felt like they had already made their decision before they met. Another shared, “I was on the committee to talk about how they would decide to use the dollars. It was a presentation, and we were there. We gave input, but at the end of the day, they did what they felt they needed to do.” The fallout from inauthentic community engagement may be worse than not doing it at all, as one community partner pointed out: “My faith in stakeholder groups with [the district] is not there. ... There is a duality—stakeholders spending time and energy thinking they are part of the process and part of the team and taking stuff back to their organizations and parent groups and getting input. And in the meantime, they are meeting internally and deciding what they will do with the money. There is something called authentic community engagement. BIPOC parents are always focus-grouped and convened, and then it goes into a black hole that we don’t ever see.”



The statewide survey also asked about community partner engagement. Respondents were asked whether community organizations made key decisions about how COVID relief funding was used to provide summer learning. Less than half of respondents (48%) agreed or strongly agreed that community partners made key decisions about how relief funding was used. District staff were more likely to agree, with 54% of district staff agreeing or strongly agreeing, compared to 42% of community partners. There is some tension between these survey results and what interviewees shared about community partner involvement. Of the seven communities interviewed, only one reported directly engaging community partners in decision-making.

How and When Partners Were Involved

A key goal of the project was to learn how community partners were involved in summer programming in 2021. The statewide survey asked respondents whether community partners were engaged in planning and whether they were engaged in delivering summer learning opportunities. As shown in Figure 7, more respondents agreed that community partners were engaged in delivering summer learning (70%)

Figure 7.

Community Partner Engagement in Summer Learning

More respondents agreed that community partners, in general, were engaged in summer learning while culturally specific organizations in particular were less engaged.

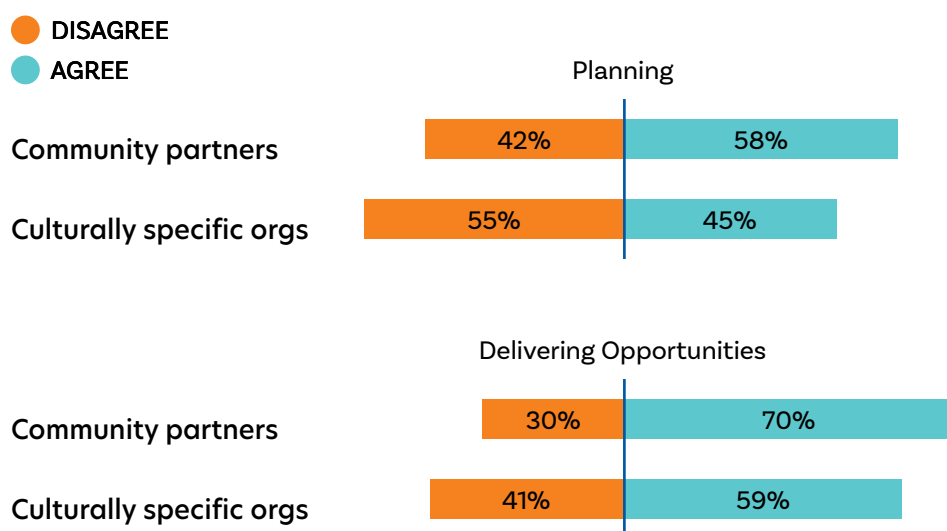
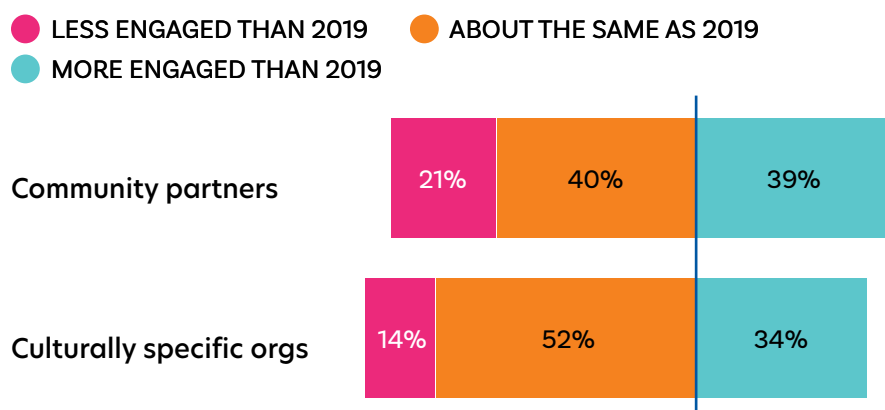


Figure 8.

Community Partner Engagement 2019 vs. 2021

Most respondents reported that community partners were engaged less than or about the same as the summer of 2019.





compared to planning (58%). Fewer respondents agreed that culturally specific organizations were involved in delivering (59%) and planning (45%) summer programming. This data aligns with the findings about funding decisions; respondents reported lower engagement for culturally specific organizations. In addition, the more influential activities (e.g., funding decisions and planning) were less likely to have community partner engagement compared to program delivery.

The interview data provides more in-depth insights into the ways in which community partners were involved. All seven districts utilized community partnerships to provide summer learning in 2021. Across the seven districts, three of them

engaged new community partners. One school district created a new partnership with a culturally specific program that teaches ice skating to BIPOC students. They wanted to increase the utilization of the public rinks the district manages, expose BIPOC students to a sport that is predominately white in Minnesota and engage a Black-owned organization in delivering new programming.

All districts described relying on their existing partnerships and programmatic structure in the summer of 2021. One district employee explained, “The things we were able to do increased, but we have always had the partnerships.” The survey data reflects this theme as well. As shown in Figure 8 (on the previous

page), the majority of respondents reported that community partners were engaged less than or about the same as the summer of 2019.

District leaders and community partners attributed this pull inward and reliance on existing partnerships to the stress of the pandemic. There were countless internal demands during this time of crisis that pushed school systems to turn inward as a way to protect their capacity. One leader explained, “The district was so internal. We had retreated from partnership.” As a result, they were unable to build new partnerships and engage proactively with community organizations. They relied on their existing partnership infrastructure

and the organizations with which they already had relationships.

The access to funding also reflects this trend. Many community partners did not know how to access funds or the tables where decisions about the funds were being made. The community organizations that did receive relief funding through school districts reached out proactively and leveraged their existing relationships. One district leader shared, "I know partners reached out. Of those who reached out, some were able to get partnered. ...The savvy ones who reached out were invited in."

The interviews revealed some of the implications of these partnership challenges. Community partners identified the speed of district responsiveness and their inability to think outside of the box as significant barriers. One interviewee shared how the pandemic impacts creativity, explaining, "Strategic thinking is really difficult when you're traumatized, exhausted and worried." As districts turned inward and dealt with the ongoing crisis of the pandemic, they were less likely to generate innovative solutions and utilize relief funding as an opportunity to change the status quo. One intermediary leader described her experience trying to work with districts: "What I was hoping for is that

Partnership Example from Different Perspectives

One benefit of in-depth interviews in the same community is the multiple perspectives offered about the same events. In one community, we heard two different perspectives on a partnership that was built in the summer of 2021. The school district partnered with a community organization to create a new career pathways program grounded in high-quality practices. District leaders lifted up the partnership as an example of a new program created with relief funds. From another perspective, community voices felt it was not accessible to the students who needed it the most.

School district

The district partnered with a BIPOC-led community-based organization to create a career pathways program that was run by high school students and served elementary school students. High school students were paid staff who received career pathway support to advance their own career and academic goals. The program took place at the high schools to demonstrate the pathway to high school and encourage elementary school students to stay within the district. A district leader explained: "We gave the students swag and hoped it would encourage them to go to the high school. The program took place at the high schools to demonstrate the pathway to high school and encourage elementary school students to stay within the district."

Community partner

One community partner specifically raised this new program as an example of programming that is inaccessible to the students who need it the most. She explained, "It is a tale of two summers: summer for white and privileged families and summer for BIPOC students and families." There were concerns about program accessibility, especially for working families. While she thought the program was valuable, she argued the schedule and lack of transportation made it inaccessible for the most marginalized. She explained, "What working mom can do that? The kids who have privilege were able to do that. For the folks who needed it, they couldn't. Inconsistent summer programming will never work for these families."

**“Aligning ecosystems
and providers to create
transformative learning
opportunities; that is
what I would like to
have seen.”**

COMMUNITY PARTNER

the flood gates would open and [the schools] would say ‘help.’ We were so ready. There was no call for help. It was the status quo. Money was not the cure. It only made it more complicated, and the expectations ramped up even more. It probably helped address shortcomings that happened because of the pandemic, but it did not spur creativity, innovation or vulnerability. Lots of innovation happened, but it wasn’t through the schools. They were coping and still are.”

Community partners felt they were underutilized, even exploited, during this time of crisis. As smaller, more nimble organizations that tend to have deeper relationships with specific communities and families, they see themselves as spaces where innovation and

change can thrive. One community partner asserted, “Our schools are not the place where innovation happens. They are not going to come up with innovative solutions for our systemic problems. Aligning ecosystems and providers to create transformative learning opportunities; that is what I would like to have seen, but no, it was a random group of individuals meeting in a room, deciding where the money goes. That is why we do the work we do to counteract what the schools are doing.” In two communities, partners felt they were taken advantage of for their community relationships. These partners were not granted funds or formal partnerships with the district, but they were relied upon for their closer relationships with students and families.



One reason behind this inability to think creatively is the upcoming fiscal cliff. Many district staff made funding decisions based on the reality that relief funding will be gone after 2024. One leader shared how the focus on sustainability prevented innovative thinking: “I try to plan for sustainability. I didn’t make a huge wish list or dream up something big. I know if you do that, you let people down once the money isn’t there. I did things we could maintain when the money is not here.”

Challenges

Through the survey and interviews, we wanted to identify the challenges individuals and systems faced in meeting the needs of the young people most impacted by the dual pandemics in the summer of 2021. We wanted to know the barriers they faced in using relief funds to advance equity.

FUNDING CHALLENGES

Despite the influx of unprecedented amounts of money, survey respondents and interviewees described funding as a challenge. From the community partner perspective, they were often referencing the inability to access funds, which was described in the decision-making and partnership findings above. From a district perspective, several leaders

identified the funding structure of Targeted Services, a key funding mechanism used to pay for out-of-school time programming, as a challenge. Feedback from district leaders reflected the findings from a 2019 study³ commissioned by Ignite Afterschool to examine the Targeted Services funding stream and how it could be improved. Targeted Services funding has remained stagnant since 2002 and the reimbursement level limits how much districts can pay teachers, often resulting in increased class sizes to save costs. Some districts used relief funding to increase staff wages or to serve students who do not qualify for Targeted Services; however, these districts all mentioned their concern about the upcoming funding cliff when the money will no longer be available.

Another funding challenge that surfaced was related to the identification of students who receive free or reduced-priced lunch. The federal government temporarily expanded the school nutrition program, providing free school meals for all students during the pandemic. With universal free meals, there was little incentive for families to complete the form used to identify their children as qualifying for free or reduced-priced lunch. This was especially problematic in Minnesota since the state education funding formula uses

this data to calculate its funding and provide additional dollars to schools and districts with high proportions of students experiencing poverty. One leader described the impact on her district: “We lost a lot – \$5 million because of those free and reduced-priced lunch forms not getting filled out.” The district ended up using its relief funding to backfill the shortfall.

Sustainability was a core concern for school districts. One leader shared their fear of losing the social work team they have built with relief funding: “We can keep building out and get used to having a full social work and counseling team on site for summer programming. And it’s going to feel like we’re taking something away when federal funding stops. That’s going to hurt. Because we’re not adding things that are unnecessary.” Research like this is just starting to capture the needs of young people resulting from the pandemic, and many of those needs will continue beyond the span of the relief funds. Both districts and community partners expressed this concern. One community partner who received relief funding said, “The funding is for 30 months. What will happen when it is gone? Are we thinking long-term? Racial equity work will not be done in 30 months.”



TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES

Another common challenge that surfaced in the survey and the interviews was transportation. Transportation is required in order for young people to access programming, especially for young people who come from more marginalized families. Urban districts experienced issues with major bus driver shortages. One district raised wages and added a signing bonus to attract candidates. Rural districts faced transportation issues prior to the pandemic.

Both community partners and district staff identified transportation as a significant barrier. Community partners are often located in neighborhoods and in communities closer to the families they serve, which can

make transportation less costly. However, their budgets tend to be smaller and their funding sources often prevent them from using money on transportation. One nonprofit leader asserted that foundations need to provide general operating funds to allow nonprofits to allocate the money as needed, to fill gaps like transportation needs.

One rural district leader explained, "There is a 52-mile radius we draw from. Sometimes parents have to meet the bus someplace. We would have to have another bus and another bus driver to meet the needs. And some kids already have an hour ride." Transportation is an access issue that prevents students with the highest needs from participating. One community partner explained that the internal district program "got a ton of

money, and they are going to be in every school, but there is no transportation. The money could have gone to culturally specific organizations. The kids who need the programs the most won't be able to go because of transportation."

STAFFING CHALLENGES

Staffing emerged as a theme intertwined with many of these other issues. In the statewide survey and the community stakeholder interviews, staffing surfaced as a major challenge for both districts and community partners. The pandemic, together with the Great Resignation,⁴ has impacted both schools' and nonprofits' ability to recruit and retain staff. Beyond the bus driver shortages mentioned earlier, unfilled positions and teachers out

sick have reduced instructional capacity in districts, where non-teaching staff with a teaching license have had to fill in on a regular basis.

District leaders identified burnout and staff turnover as barriers to delivering summer programming in 2021. Some districts increased hourly wages to encourage teachers to teach during the summer, with mixed results. One leader shared, “A lot of our teaching staff and student support staff were burnt out, and money isn’t the motivating factor. It’s more mission-driven. Even after raising our hourly rates of pay, it was very difficult to staff all of our programs. We had to close our registration.” However, a staff member in another district attributed their ability to fill positions to the increase in wages: “We added an additional \$3 per hour per summer employee. Because of that, I think it helped us get our staff. When we added that amount, none of the coordinators expressed a single issue with hiring.”

One district leader highlighted an equity issue related to the wage increases for licensed staff. Since many districts utilized Targeted Services funding to provide summer programming, they were bound to the requirement of using licensed staff to deliver programming. As a result, districts were primarily focused on recruiting licensed staff

for summer programming, utilizing the additional funding to increase wages and improve recruitment of licensed teachers. The district leader explained, “I found that problematic from an equity lens because it increased the gap. ... The non-licensed staff are more likely to be people of color. We talk about equity, and we don’t look at our own pay practices. They sometimes make more money at Aldi, and our paraprofessionals and non-licensed staff provide really valuable support to students, in a way that licensed staff do not.”

Community partners experienced similar staffing challenges—burnout, high staff turnover and unfilled positions. Low wages tend to be even more exacerbated in community partner organizations, which are often small nonprofits

with limited budgets. Interviewees from community partners explained that competitive wages from corporations limited their ability to recruit and hire staff, especially direct service staff. One manager shared, “We realized how outdated our job scales and pay specs can become. FedEx can hire someone in a day for \$18+ an hour. It takes a long time for us to hire, and our pay scale is lower. We are vulnerable, and we get priced out pretty quick.”

One district leader highlighted the compounding effect of these workforce shortages. Limited staff capacity has made it harder to spend the relief funds. She explained, “We’ve been running into the issue of being able to spend the money because of our workforce shortages. We



are spending it, but not at the clip we thought we would. ... School districts are going to need extensions to spend the money responsibly because of the labor shortage."

SYSTEMIC RACISM

The interview process also gave individuals the opportunity to reflect on the systemic factors that influence these challenges. Many interviewees talked about institutional racism and systemic oppression as factors that have contributed to the diverging experiences of communities during the pandemic and the barriers to addressing the needs of the young people most impacted by the dual pandemics. One manifestation of this is seen in the lack of diversity in the teaching force, as described by one district leader: "In a community with our demographics and schools that are steeped in systemic racism, you see explicit examples of how harm has impacted the existing structure. The racial demographics of our staff don't align with the students we serve. I know so many staff have high-quality relationships with families, but we're still dealing with questions like how families see their role in their child's education."

Several interviewees questioned the ability of relief funding to address these root causes.

One community partner stated, "Funding streams did not have the mindset of community-oriented solutions. We still have five years of deep, deep work to do here. To plant new seeds and grow something new. We have a system of funding that doesn't grow new trees. It prunes existing trees. The deep systemic work is not happening because current funding streams do not operate this way. We're not getting to the real root of things." They lamented that the large infusion of money was maintaining the status quo instead of changing systems and policies.

New Strategies

Despite the reported lack of systems change, COVID relief funding did provide opportunities to try new ideas and strategies. The flexibility of the funding allowed districts and community partners to pilot new models, test out ideas and expand on promising strategies. In the statewide survey, 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that new learning opportunities and/or strategies were tried in the summer of 2021 that should continue in their communities. The community stakeholder interviews provided an opportunity to capture some of these strategies.

Districts and community partners were focused on re-engaging students in the summer of 2021 because so many of them had disconnected during remote learning in the 2020-21 school year. As a result, many organizations tried new strategies to increase accessibility for summer programming. Some programs reduced or eliminated registration fees to ensure that families with low incomes could access programming. Because transportation was a major barrier, a few community organizations intentionally went out into neighborhoods to provide programming in parks, apartment complexes and other spaces that were easily accessible by young people. In some cases, districts and programs turned to virtual programming to address the lack of transportation. For example, several districts offered virtual credit recovery for high school students. Families required technology to participate in these virtual opportunities, so providing devices and internet access was another strategy that many interviewees mentioned.

There was a tension between the benefits of virtual programming and a desire to provide in-person programming focused on experiential learning. During the summer of 2021, there were examples of districts and community programs in



New Strategy to Scale

One school district used relief funding to create a new position called “What I Need Now” (WINN) teachers. These are licensed teachers who are based within a building to proactively provide support to students as they need it. The district has seen gains in student achievement since they instituted WINN teachers, so they want to incorporate the position across the system.

all seven communities utilizing outdoor programming. Outdoor programming was often used to address COVID safety concerns and to allow young people to disconnect from technology. One interviewee described the healing that came from in-person opportunities where young people reconnected with their peers and spent time in nature. Some examples of outdoor programming included a gardening program where students planted, maintained and harvested their own garden; an outdoor art project that focused on social justice themes; and in-house field trips in partnership with the local nature center. Outdoor programming is one approach

many interviewees said they will continue because of the benefits they noted.

Mental well-being was a core need identified by interviewees, and many of the strategies were intended to address this need. Relief funding allowed districts to add mental health supports, whether through the addition of staff or community partnerships. One of the smaller districts expanded its partnership with a mental health provider during the summer of 2021. The district staff member shared that prior to the pandemic, “at the elementary school level, one fourth of students were receiving mental health services. We know it is

probably worse now.” Through the partnership, they had four mental health practitioners and one therapist at the elementary level, as well as three mental health practitioners and one therapist at the high school level working with students during summer programming.

Community partners described the need for a parallel process with staff—spaces for healing and processing their own personal losses and trauma, as well as secondary trauma. One out-of-school time collaborative partnered with an Indigenous healer who was present at its regular meetings with community partners. The intermediary leader

explained, “We are hearing about people’s family members dying. We are present for one another. People feel safe in our space.” These practices also stemmed from the challenges related to burnout and staff turnover.

In addition to these programmatic strategies, there were examples of strategies that were geared toward systems. One county has an equity-focused committee that helped BIPOC-led organizations apply for relief funding. In addition, they waived some of the financial requirements that they typically require when granting money, such as liability insurance. The county brought together a group of BIPOC-led organizations to conduct a needs assessment and better understand the barriers to accessing funding, which led to these changes. One interviewee shared her experience as a small BIPOC-led organization: “Some of us that are smaller, we have more of what is needed. We are the community, we are from the community. It is a different outcome when you give money to organizations not from the community. They realized that and were ready to work with us to get to a level where we could compete.” This was an example of a government agency changing its policies and providing support to increase access.

Top New or Expanded Strategies

Approaches to increase accessibility

- Utilized virtual programming options
- Provided technology and internet access to families
- Lowered or eliminated registration fees
- Added staff to serve more kids or serve kids with special needs
- Provided programming in neighborhoods

Experiential and outdoor learning

- Provided programs and activities outdoors
- Hosted in-house field trips
- Emphasized hands-on activities and programming
- Offered athletics

Focus on mental health and well-being

- Trained on and implemented trauma-informed practices/ approaches
- Created spaces for healing for staff and students
- Added mental health supports like staff who specialize in mental health for students
- Provided drop-in mental health resource fairs for families and students

Family-oriented programming

- Provided meals to youth and families
- Developed activities/programming for the whole family

Culturally specific programming:

- Expanded culturally specific programming
- Partnered with culturally specific community organizations

4.

Recommendations

This report highlights the challenges, successes and lessons learned during the summer of 2021. Our goal is to use those findings to help inform the most advantageous uses of remaining COVID relief funds, as well as guide ongoing education funding streams.

We recommend the following actions to advance equity, improve systems and meet the needs of young people most impacted by the dual pandemics:

1. Build structures that prioritize voices of students and families who are most marginalized.

Communities need to proactively set up processes and groups — either through the school district or with its clear commitment — to ensure they have regular feedback loops and ways to provide input. Communities with districts that had a strong, pre-existing infrastructure for community engagement were more likely to robustly and authentically involve stakeholders in funding decisions, and that's key to equity.

One school district that is particularly successful at this has adopted an intentional input structure that defines who is involved in decision-making and how they are involved, resulting in community engagement that is clear and inclusive. Conversely, the least successful examples came from partners who were disappointed that their input was requested, but not used.

2. Redefine partnerships and invest in intermediaries.

Throughout this process, “partnership” was a word we heard time and again. It's clear that working in partnership is intrinsic to meeting young people's needs in an equitable way. When partnerships were lacking or fell apart, innovation suffered.

In times of duress, districts turned inward to protect their limited capacity, relying on the strongest systems and relationships that were already in place. New and emerging partners — who are often best positioned to connect disenfranchised communities — were left out.

In order to make a long-term impact, we need to redefine partnerships as networks of support. That means intentionally investing in coordinating entities like intermediaries as the “glue” that bonds districts and community organizations as part of a connected ecosystem working in alignment, without being hampered by one-on-one partnerships.

In this broader view of partnership, a nimbler and more inclusive network of support would provide resources and ideas to a larger pool of organizations. Equitable funding would increase and duplication of services

would decrease, resulting in system-wide efficiency and space for innovations to occur.

We see an opportunity to build a robust partnership infrastructure that goes beyond *just* program delivery and also includes strategy, decision-making, planning and prioritizing.

- **For districts**, this means investing in capacity to manage partnerships and build wider networks of support. In some cases, that might require additional staff positions dedicated to this work. However, in many cases, it's appropriate to simply name and prioritize the partnership work that staff members are already doing in their current roles. For example, a collaborative mindset in which summer learning is seen as a task shared by district staff and community partners could benefit both entities by improving transparency, increasing community partner influence and reducing the burden on district staff.
- **From the community perspective**, a robust intermediary can also play this role. The district we interviewed that had the most success turned to an intermediary to distribute relief funds to community partners. (It's important to note that this particular community had 10+ years of systems-building and partnership groundwork before the pandemic.)
- **For private funders**, that means valuing, funding and incentivizing community-school partnerships and intermediary organizations. It also means providing flexibility so funding can be applied as needed across the education ecosystem.

3. Create and sustain spaces for partnership, innovation and problem-solving.

This project clearly showed the importance of existing infrastructure — when the infrastructure was lacking, the work did not happen. It also revealed how challenging innovation and partnership can be during times of crisis.

We recommend that districts and community partners work together to develop shared spaces for partnership, innovation and problem-solving. Creating regular, structured ways to engage with one another and conduct ongoing needs assessments would facilitate shared problem-solving and innovation.

We see an opportunity to increase efficiency and generate more effective ideas. For example, transportation is a challenge experienced by most districts and community partners. Larger entities (like the Minnesota Department of Education or regional intermediaries) could convene district and/or community leaders on a wider geographic scale to determine the best approaches and solutions, which could then be shared. This would reinforce the broader concept of networks of support while maximizing resources.

4. Develop equitable funding systems.

Funding pathways also fell back on familiar, established routines during the pandemic. Waves of fiscal stimulus flooded local governments with relief funding that did not flow directly to community partners.

Activating large institutions (cities, counties and districts) to distribute and spend a substantial amount of money in a short period of time was an efficient way to quickly get resources into communities and respond to immediate needs. However, relying on existing structures and connections prioritized efficiency over innovations that could increase equitable outcomes for young people.

Reliance on these large bureaucracies reinforced the status quo. Meanwhile, community partners, who tend to be nimbler and have a greater ability to think outside of the box, were underutilized.

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) explicitly encouraged community partnerships, which likely helped facilitate collaboration. MDE should build on that momentum by providing examples of, and support for, community-based partnerships in future use of federal funds and state resources.

We also see an opportunity for both government and private funders to be more intentional about equitable funding, which would prioritize directing resources to communities of color and communities with low incomes.

5. Address the “fiscal cliff” now.

Both community partners and districts expressed the need for sustainable funding that is significant enough to truly meet young people’s needs.

One benefit of relief funding was its flexibility. There were few requirements and restrictions compared to traditional federal funding streams. Prior to the pandemic, this would have been seen as risky. But district staff and community partners noted the benefits of flexibility and how it allowed them to try new strategies and respond to needs more effectively. The “fiscal cliff” is a major concern as stimulus funding ends in 2024, but young people’s needs will not.

We recommend a two-pronged approach to developing flexible, long-term funding solutions for districts and community partners:

- **For districts**, the Targeted Services funding stream needs to increase. Districts will no longer be able to maintain increased wages after relief funding is spent down, resulting in a staffing crisis. In addition, Minnesota should explore how Targeted Services legislation or interpretation of the statute could be changed to incorporate non-licensed instructors. As discussed in the findings, the wage disparities between licensed and non-licensed staff is an equity issue, and this change could help address staffing shortages and wage gaps.

Additionally, the federal government should allow districts to roll over relief funding and spend it beyond 2024. This would allow districts to spend the money more responsibly and meet the needs of youth and families that will extend into the future.

Finally, the state should adopt alternative methods for calculating the percent of students who meet income requirements instead of relying

on applications for free and reduced-priced lunch. With large statewide data systems that track other benefits, there are alternative ways to determine eligibility that do not depend on families completing annual paperwork.

- **For community partners,** a stable funding source for summer learning and afterschool programs is sorely needed. Ideally this would be a public investment that recognizes the important role out-of-school-time partners play.

The results of this project make a strong case for the sustainable funding of youth programs, as well as intermediary and community partners that are uniquely positioned to support their efforts. Instead of thinking narrowly about only schools, lawmakers need a mindset shift that recognizes the critical role of community partners in improving educational outcomes and funds them accordingly.

We recommend that funding be made directly accessible to community partners. Community-based organizations do not have capacity to navigate the complexities of multiple funding streams with differing requirements and processes. And this report revealed the challenges that districts faced in allocating funds to community-based organizations, so that is not a reasonable solution either. We recommend one streamlined process for funding community organizations that includes multi-year contracts to ensure commitment and sustainability.

6. Evaluate, learn and improve.

An unprecedented amount of money was infused into education through COVID relief funding. Even with the influx of money, it is unlikely that we will see drastic improvements in educational outcomes by 2024, especially considering the ongoing challenges faced by youth and families.

Nevertheless, we see an opportunity to capture lessons learned, promising practices, effective programs and other successes. That learning is crucial to shaping effective policy changes and making real gains in equitable learning recovery. It is essential that we invest in evaluation – otherwise, these lessons will be lost.

Given the flexibility of relief funds, evaluation is not automatic. One goal of this project was to learn about the outcomes from summer learning in 2021; however, so many traditional evaluation processes were not implemented, so we were unable to do so. Districts and programs alike went into crisis mode, sacrificing their typical data collection processes in order to focus on meeting the pressing social emotional-learning, mental health and well-being needs of students.

In this moment, we have an exceptional opportunity to capture and share the learnings from this unique infusion of money to inform future decisions and advocate for the resources needed to realize the full potential of Minnesota's next generation.

Endnotes

- 1 "American Rescue Plan," Minnesota Department of Management and Budget, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://mn.gov/mmb/arp/>.
- 2 "Due North: Minnesota's Education Plan," Office of Governor Tim Walz and Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://mn.gov/governor/onemn/>.
- 3 Ignite Afterschool. (2020, July). *Targeted Services Report: Executive Summary*. <https://igniteafterschool.org/afterschool-policy>.
- 4 Parker, Kim, and Menasce Horowitz, J, "Majority of Workers Who Quit a Job in 2021 Cite Low Pay, No Opportunities for Advancement, Feeling Disrespected," Pew Research Center, March 9, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/09/majority-of-workers-who-quit-a-job-in-2021-cite-low-pay-no-opportunities-for-advancement-feeling-disrespected/>.



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