

Addressing Opportunity Gaps for Kids in Learning and in Life

Out of School Time in Fort Worth



Classrooms are not the only places that kids learn, and academic learning is not the only learning that students have lost because of the pandemic. More than 80% of Texas students' time is spent learning **outside of school**. High-quality out of school time (OST), which includes afterschool, summer, and enrichment programs, provides applied learning opportunities that help kids develop critical social and emotional skills as well as nurturing peer and mentor relationships that accelerate academic learning and prepare youth for postsecondary success.

OST is a critical component of the functioning ecosystem of support necessary for whole child development and whole communities. Community-based providers have been essential during the pandemic, standing up additional health and safety measures to continue offering in-person care and learning while also connecting families to critical services and resources, such as food, technology, and healthcare. Strong partnerships between schools and these community-based organizations are vital to our state's successful recovery.

Fort Worth SPARC—which stands for Strengthen Afterschool Programs through Advocacy, Resources, and Collaboration—works to ensure that kids in underserved communities have access to excellent out of school time programming that addresses the opportunity gaps in their everyday lives.

SPARC also advocates at the state and local levels for increased support of OST programs and for action on issues that affect children's wellbeing, such as e-cigarettes. SPARC played an instrumental role in the passage of the nation's first e-cigarette resolution between a city and a school district.

SPARC is a small but impactful organization that does a lot. It offers training and professional development to about 1,000 OST programs in Tarrant County, ranging from private daycare settings to the YMCA, Girls Inc., and Fort Worth After School. It also strengthens connections between OST and traditional classroom professionals.

Launched in 2012 as a collaboration with the City of Fort Worth, today SPARC is housed at United Way of Tarrant County and works with OST providers, community leaders, and all 19 local independent school districts across Tarrant County. Their goal is to build a strong network of OST providers for the approximate [500,000 young people](#) who live in the the county.

Serving families is a priority. SPARC partners with area nonprofits and service providers to ensure that families have what they need, such as food, clothing, and medical care. For parents, SPARC maintains an online OST program locator to help them identify quality programs for their children.

A Focus on Need

Tobi Jackson, SPARC's Executive Director and only paid staff member, says that the organization uses ZIP code data to drive its decision-making. For example, ZIP code 76105 is the county's most impoverished and the third most impoverished in the state, with a population that is primarily Latino and Black and has a median annual household income of less than \$27,000. Some 8,000 school-age children live in 76105.

In terms of programming, SPARC partnered with BookNook to offer free, twice-weekly tutoring in reading for 600 children in kindergarten through third grade. In addition, SPARC operates a program addressing asthma in youth so that they avoid emergency room visits and improve their school attendance. Asthma is a significant problem among school-age children in Fort Worth. Studies show that after SPARC launched its original Asthma 411 program in 2017, absences associated with asthma fell by 51%.

“With the ZIP code analysis, we know where poverty is, and we know where there are huge opportunity gaps,” says Jackson, who's also the currently-elected President of the Fort Worth Independent School District Board of Trustees representing some of these neighborhoods. “We know that many kids in



these ZIP codes can't read, and, if they can, their proficiency is probably limited because they're most likely living in a household where English isn't the primary language.”

Accordingly, SPARC has prioritized 76105 and several other ZIP codes with high levels of poverty for programming and other resources, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, SPARC delivered food, supplies, home libraries, and laptops to over 1,000 homes in 76105. It also provided education on COVID-19 safety to the community and facilitated flu shot distribution to support community health.

In addition, SPARC runs Camp SPARC, an afterschool program for sixth and seventh graders who live in 76105 that provides individualized instruction in science, technology, reading, engineering, art, and math; leadership training; and animal care, knowledge, and safety. It is designed to accelerate learning and offer a boost to those who need a little extra support to get ahead.

Innovating Amid a Pandemic

The pandemic has given rise to some especially creative thinking. For example, Jackson says that, as a result of the pandemic, kids in many lower-income households were asked to do more to help out, which meant less time available for OST programs and school, leading to considerable unfinished learning. At the same time, many kids were eager to get out of their homes and do something.

Jackson and Panther City Artists' Sara Hiatt came up with the idea of engaging middle school students in a project to paint school lockers under the supervision of a local muralist. But

they also brought in math and science teachers who worked with the students on how to figure out how much paint they would need, what the drying time would be, how to deal with noxious fumes, and other important questions.

“These are all things that involve critical thinking,” Jackson says.

Jackson attributes SPARC's success in part to its strong partnerships with a range of groups and influencers—including the American Heart Association, Houston Forensic Science Center, Texas A&M Agricultural Extension Service, the YMCA, TXPOST, numerous foundations and community organizations, and local authors and professional athletes like LaDainian Tomlinson—as well as to a very involved board of directors. For example, the president of SPARC's board, who's also a pediatrician, enlisted her scientist husband and their teenage son to do a “Chemistry Rocks” presentation with her at a middle school in 76105.

The Fort Worth community has also supported SPARC's work, both financially and with donated services and in-kind donations, like books.

Jackson says that SPARC will continue to evolve in response to the changing needs of the young people it serves, especially those in communities with high levels of poverty. “Poverty is layered with so many challenges, and the kids are under a lot of stress all the time because of it,” she says. “We create opportunities for our kids to grow and learn and even have fun.”

AB Christian Learning Center Focuses on Reading to Advance Educational Equity

The AB Christian Learning Center is a faith-based nonprofit that provides high-quality out of school time programming for children in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, involving parents as co-partners in their children's learning. Educational equity, with a focus on reading at grade level, is AB Christian's overarching goal, working to guarantee that children in families with low incomes have a fair and just opportunity to succeed at school and in life.

Although reading is its academic priority, AB Christian takes a holistic approach, addressing not only children's needs, but also those of their families. "Children can't learn if they're hungry or sick," Loretta Burns, Founder and Executive Director of AB Christian, notes. AB Christian serves as a resource hub for families, connecting them with community services if they need assistance with things like food, rent, or healthcare. The Center is also authorized by the state to sign up eligible families for food stamps and enroll them in Medicaid.

"It's important to know what a family needs to support their children's academic success," Burns says. "For a lot of our families, we are a bridge to resources in the community."

AB Christian spends 40 percent of its budget on parent engagement, including regular mandatory parent meetings where food and childcare are provided. Burns says maintaining relationships with families is critical to the organization's success.

Those relationships extend over time and even generations. "We never let a family go," Burns says. "We stay in touch. I had a scholar I served in second grade in a tutoring program who came back as a college student last year to work for our summer program."

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, AB Christian's afterschool program served about 60 children a year, and its Freedom School Summer Learning program served 160 children at four sites. However, Burns says that 310 students are expected to participate in 2021 summer programming.

Importantly, AB Christian's programs are completely free of charge to families.



A Day at AB Christian

Afterschool programming for children in kindergarten through fifth grade takes place five afternoons a week, from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. A typical afternoon begins with a snack and a homework check, followed by scheduled activities focused on reading. Depending on their age group, children may read flash cards, have a book read to them, or read in a circle. Scholars who are already reading beyond grade level may take part in STEM activities.

At the end of the day, before their parents come to pick them up, everyone gets supper. Many of these children, Burns notes, won't have anything else to eat until they come to school the next day.

The Freedom School Summer Learning program, which lasts six weeks and serves children in kindergarten through twelfth grade, starts at 8:30 a.m. with breakfast and a short pep rally, followed by a guest reader from the community who leads a book discussion. Then the learning segment begins, based on an integrated reading curriculum AB Christian developed to engage children in reading by discussing, drawing, and even acting out the stories they've read.

The stories are carefully curated to be relatable to the children, many of whom have experienced situations like living in foster care or not having a home.

Children get to keep the books they've read so that they build up their own libraries.

After lunch, afternoon activities might include a field trip, a guest speaker, STEM projects, or a neighborhood service project. High school students receive college readiness support over the summer, while college students working as summer interns get lessons on workplace behavior. The day ends at 3 p.m.

A Day at AB Christian During COVID-19

During the pandemic, AB Christian, like many programs, pivoted—but not to online learning. Too many families lacked either computers or internet service, so their children couldn't participate that way. Afterschool teachers printed out hard copies of their lessons and learning materials for parents to pick up, along with a meal for their children. Teachers then followed up with families, sometimes even reading stories to children over the phone.

Summer 2020 programming alternated between in-person and online, so that children could learn Zoom etiquette and be prepared for online school learning in the fall. Staff developed an online learning center for program sites where students could connect with their teachers for assistance.

Burns says that, for many children who come to AB Christian, trauma is part of their everyday life. COVID-19 did not seem to exacerbate their trauma. "Our children live in crisis mode all the time," she says.

That's why it's so important, she says, for communities to support children holistically. "It takes the community working together to make real change in children's lives."







“ My family has been part of AB Christian Learning Center for six years. AB Christian has offered several programs that have been a great help to me and families that I know. The summer program, Freedom School, not only helps kids have a safe space for the summer, but also works on extending the development of reading, education, self-esteem, and social skills. All the programs that have been introduced to our community have been helpful for parents and our children. Parent knowledge is power!”

– Meshelle Smith, Parent



The Texas Partnership for Out of School Time (TXPOST) is a statewide intermediary whose mission is to convene, educate, and advocate to improve the quality and increase the availability of out of school time (OST) opportunities for Texas youth. TXPOST works in partnership with vital leaders at local and regional levels, including Fort Worth SPARC, which invest deeply in their own communities to offer professional development opportunities, engage in system building work, advocate for the OST field, and support local programs.

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Fort Worth SPARC is a network of Fort Worth's diverse afterschool and summer programs. SPARC collaborates with the City of Fort Worth, all 19 Fort Worth school districts, and various community organizations to ensure equitable placement of excellent programs. SPARC strives to improve all youth programs by advocating for OST, providing programs and families with the resources they need, and encouraging stakeholder collaboration.

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