

# Meeting the Demand for High-Quality Out of School Time Opportunities

Out of School Time in Houston



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.

## Addressing OST Deserts in Greater Houston

In 2016, a study commissioned by the Houston Endowment identified numerous OST “deserts” in Harris County where OST programs were scarce, despite high need and demand. That report prompted a collaboration of the Houston Endowment, United Way of Greater Houston, the Houston Mayor’s Office, and the Harris County Department of Education to address the issue.

The result: Out 2 Learn launched in 2018 to address the critical shortage of OST programming in Greater Houston.

Out 2 Learn’s mission is to ensure that all families in Greater Houston have access to high-quality out of school time services. According to Tiffany Echevarria, former Senior Program Manager at United Way of Greater Houston, families are eager to find good OST opportunities for their kids.

“There’s this belief that somehow parents who don’t have a lot of financial resources don’t care what happens with their children after school or with their education,” Echevarria says. “It’s very much the opposite. These are highly engaged parents who ask questions.”

One way to give them what they want is to make information on OST easily available to them. Out 2 Learn’s web-based [Program Finder](#) is a free, comprehensive, and searchable database that parents and families can use to locate OST programs near them.

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.

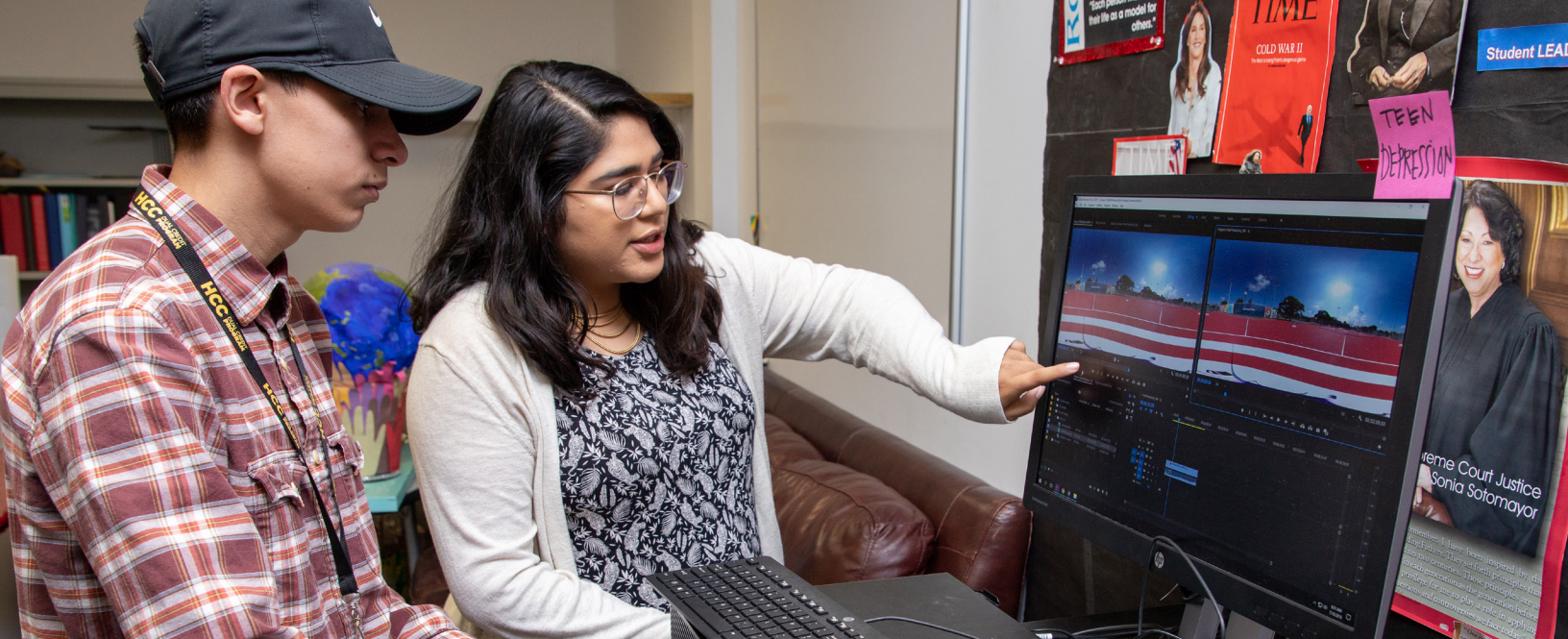
Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Out 2 Learn served about 350 partner programs in their network; that number has dropped to about 250 programs who are able to continue their commitment to Out 2 Learn’s quality component.

Out 2 Learn’s network members represent a mix of national and local groups, large and small, with focuses ranging from girl empowerment to STEM to music production to college and career readiness. They enroll kids from under-resourced families in grades K–12. Prior to the pandemic, these programs collectively served about 4,110 young people.

## A Focus on Quality

Quality assessment, planning, and improvement support are critical to ensuring that network members provide engaging, interactive programming for kids in safe and supportive environments. Out 2 Learn’s Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI) involves both internal assessments conducted by the programs once a year and external assessments. “Time and time again, the programs are harder on themselves with their self-assessments [than the external assessors are], which really demonstrates their commitment to continuous quality improvement,” Echevarria says.

Out 2 Learn also offers both small-group and one-on-one coaching to members seeking its quality certification.



Convening is another strategic focus area. Out 2 Learn hosts quarterly meetings for OST professionals to discuss quality, trends, and best practices and network and collaborate with each other. This function took on ever greater importance during the pandemic. The quarterly meetings turned into weekly Zoom sessions where members shared their challenges and experiences.

“Not every organization was prepared to deal with the emotional uncertainty and anxiety that people were experiencing,” Echevarria says. “We did more listening than I feel we’ve ever done. We never had an in-person meeting where people would stay for 90 minutes and say, ‘we’re going to be here for each other.’ That didn’t happen [before the pandemic], so this was a big shift.”

The pandemic caused many other shifts as well. Out 2 Learn paused normal activities right before spring break through the summer in 2020. “I talked with every program partner to see where they were, what they were doing, how they were going virtual or doing programming in person and what that looked like,” Echevarria says.

Out 2 Learn had to pivot its resources to provide barrier-removing grants to 14 network partners, serving 800 youth, “which was great, considering that literally every week another tragedy was occurring,” Echevarria says. “No one could even fathom the grief.”

Community organizations rallied to help families with food distribution, rent assistance, technology, and other needs. “Our community partners really stepped up, [even though] it was not enough to meet the demand,” Echevarria says.

## Gearing Up for a Return to In-Person Programming

For the first time since the pandemic began, Out 2 Learn is supporting its network members for full time in-person learning over the 2021-22 school year. Echevarria anticipates there will be challenges, including transportation, a major barrier to kids participating in OST and one that Out 2 Learn was working to address before the pandemic.

Delayed learning experienced during the pandemic is another big challenge—one that Echevarria believes should be reframed. Kids, she says, are being held to an unfair standard academically, due to circumstances beyond their control. “We should have the grace to see that these kids weren’t failing school; they were surviving,” Echevarria says.

Innovation is what’s needed. “How can we look at this from a strength-based approach?” she asks. “How can we change the timeline? Kids shouldn’t have to sit through extended school days to do two school years in one. That’s not realistic, it’s not feasible, and it’s not fair. We need to hit reset.”

OST programs, she believes, can play an important role because of their focus on social and emotional learning. “I think there should be as much time dedicated to play as to academics,” Echevarria says. “OST is emotional support; it’s socialization; it’s play; it’s exploration. And it can get you just as far as academics will.”

There’s also the value that OST provides families: knowing that their kids are in a safe space with caring and supportive adults who want them to do well in life.

“Not everyone grows up to be a mathematician or a literary best-seller,” Echevarria notes. “We need to give our young people [more] opportunities and show them everything that life has to offer. Out of school time does that beautifully.”

## Houston's Urban Enrichment Institute Works to Create Better Futures for Young Men from Disadvantaged Communities

The Urban Enrichment Institute (UEI) serves young men growing up in some of Houston's most disadvantaged neighborhoods, empowering them to overcome challenges in their communities like poverty, gang violence, drug use, and teen pregnancy.

Boys ages 12 to 19 participate in free out of school time youth development and enrichment programming that includes graphic arts, financial literacy, music, photography and film, chess, running, robotics, and virtual reality, as well as college and career readiness and entrepreneurship.

Perhaps most importantly, they develop important social and leadership skills through male role models and mentors, academic support, and therapeutic activities. They learn to value education, delay gratification, respect themselves and others, set responsible priorities, and build positive relationships, especially with women.

"We want our boys to grow up from being strong boys to being stronger men, so that they can have even stronger families," says UEI Executive Director Keith E. Cornelius.

Founded in 1984 as the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program of Houston, the organization launched as a place where young boys of color could have positive, routine interaction with men.

### A Holistic Approach to Developing Young Men

Today, UEI's core program, "The School-Based Projects," reflects the organization's holistic approach to youth development. Housed in seven Fifth Ward public schools, the program provides site coordinators, on-campus staff who work to determine each boy's needs and interests and are responsible for the delivery of the life skills curriculum, home visits, and individual and group counseling. The site coordinators also monitor school activities, interact with teachers and administrators, and coordinate daily afterschool activities.

UEI's central office is located at the Fifth Ward Multi-Service Center, a hub for health, education, and social services organizations in the community. In addition to its OST programming, UEI provides family and child supportive services, agency referrals, educational workshops, teacher and school staff support, peer leadership development, recreational activities, and community service projects.



Typically, UEI serves approximately 150 Black and Latino youth. About 95% of the young men are in families living at or below the federal poverty level. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, participation has dropped to between 50 and 60. However, Cornelius is optimistic that enrollment will return to full strength when schools reopen in fall 2021.

When the pandemic struck, UEI, like many, had to shut down.

"We quickly realized that these kids were going home with no laptops, and that a large segment had no or insufficient connectivity at home," Cornelius says. He notes that, regardless of technology access, boys enrolled with UEI typically did not respond well to virtual programming.

After a hiatus of a couple of months, UEI resumed in-person activities with young men whose families were comfortable with them participating in an abbreviated summer program that followed COVID-19 safety protocols. In between, site coordinators and volunteer mentors kept in touch with the boys via email, phone, and text, and connected their families with services they needed during the pandemic, like food banks or rent assistance programs.

UEI continued in-person programming during the 2020-21 school year at the Fifth Ward Multi-Service Center.

### A Typical Day at UEI

Normally, afterschool programs operate from August to May, according to the school calendar. Summer programming begins in mid-June and runs through late July.

On a typical school day, the boys arrive by bus around 3:30 p.m. and remain until 6 p.m. They participate in their chosen activities and have a meal while they are at the program.

For many activities, UEI brings in men from the community—like a chess master from the neighborhood chess club or someone from a local technology firm to lead a project on 3D-printing. Recently, a former UEI participant who is now the basketball coach at a partner high school agreed to come in and do an activity with the boys.

During the summer, a bus picks up the young men at a central location and brings them to the Fifth Ward Multi-Service Center, where they have breakfast. Mondays through Thursdays, they have a set program, with a break for lunch. On Fridays, they have a field trip.

“A lot of these boys have never been outside their neighborhoods,” Cornelius says. “We try to expose them to new experiences and broaden their minds and interests.”

That may involve seeing a play, attending a symphony, or visiting a zoo. A recent excursion featured go-kart racing. “There has to be some fun in the summer,” Cornelius says.

## Looking Ahead

Cornelius, who joined UEI in April 2021, says that parents are enthusiastic about the organization and that he hopes to engage some of them in a volunteer support group. “It’s good when a kid sees his parents working to support the program and support him.”

He also plans to expand UEI beyond the Fifth Ward so that it is available to more boys and is truly an “urban” enterprise.

Finally, Cornelius is considering creating a two-tiered model for boys who know they want to pursue college and boys who aren’t certain of what they want to do, so that they can explore opportunities like entrepreneurship, trade unions, and the military.



UEI graduate Pedro Granados (left) and UEI Board Chair Kenneth Lavergne (right) at the South Asian Bar Association Award Luncheon

“It is critical that young men of color, and more specifically African American young men, understand who they are and find their purpose, with support from mentors and positive role models,” Cornelius says. “They need to find out what’s possible and what they can be, instead of simply what they see around them.”





“ Thank you for making a TREMENDOUS difference in a short amount of time. Once you made it quite clear the passion as well as compassion that you have, to do your best in “giving your all” to each young man, I then felt comfortable in allowing you and your staff to be a part of my baby’s ‘world.’”

– UEI 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 Dallas Afterschool, 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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Out 2 Learn is a public-private partnership committed to expanding access to high-quality out-of-school programming for all Houston-area youth. Students and families need access to quality programs, and they need to be able to connect easily with the organizations providing these opportunities. Too often, quality programs have been concentrated in certain limited areas and not available to all.

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