

Increasing Developmental Relationships for Young People Through High-Quality Programs

Out of School Time in San Antonio



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.

A Focus on Youth Development, Data, and Advocacy

Young people need adults in their lives who support and empower them, teach them how to set goals and boundaries, and help them thrive. Too often, though, they do not have the opportunity to build those kinds of relationships.

[Excel Beyond the Bell](#) works to ensure that all young people in San Antonio and surrounding Bexar County have access to strong, nurturing adult relationships through high-quality youth development and OST programs.

Operated by the UP Partnership, a collaboration of 175 organizations that create equitable opportunities for San Antonio youth, Excel Beyond the Bell San Antonio launched in 2012 as a professional network to develop and ensure quality standards for youth development programs. It embraces a youth development framework created by the [Search Institute](#), a commitment to collecting and sharing data for advancing equity among young people, and a focus on local advocacy on behalf of youth development programs.

Key to supporting its 43 partner programs is the Excel Academy, which provides workshops and training, including a 10-month curriculum based on the Search Institute framework for building developmental relationships that support young people. Excel also convenes an annual youth development summit that

typically brings together about 300 professionals from the San Antonio area to exchange ideas and explore ways for strengthening youth support.

"We want San Antonio to become a city known for youth development where everyone speaks the language of developmental relationships," says Shelby Drayton, Social Emotional Learning Network Manager.

Creating Data-Driven Resources and Advocating with Evidence

All partner programs have signed data-sharing agreements to help improve the quality and cost of programs and identify areas lacking access to programs. Excel Beyond the Bell uses these and other data to inform work on eliminating racial and ethnic inequities in systems that serve young people and to develop web-based resources and tools for youth development practitioners, young people and their families, community members, and researchers.

For example, a college and career readiness dashboard shows how high school students in Bexar County perform with respect to postsecondary readiness, access, and attainment. The data are broken down by year, school district, and by student race or ethnicity, making it easy to identify disparities.



A fiscal resource dashboard developed in partnership with the Children's Funding Project and the City of San Antonio Department of Human Services analyzes the community's investments in young people to help city leaders and stakeholders better align their resources and address funding needs. By mapping publicly available data, the tool addresses six areas of youth outcomes: safety and stability, health, connection, career focus, academic preparedness, and college success.

Just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Excel Beyond the Bell mapped out many of the nonprofit agencies serving San Antonio youth and children, including OST, workforce training, and college test prep programs. The online map reflects information from more than 80 agencies and 500 programs to help users find services for young people.

The data from partner programs also support Excel's advocacy work by showing the impact these programs have on young people's lives. For example, the 80,000 youth served by Excel partner programs have an 80% school attendance rate, compared to a 65% attendance rate of their peers who aren't in programs. And 86% of partner program students pass Algebra II, versus 68% of their peers.

"We know that our OST and youth development organizations have a huge impact on the academic success of every student because of their social and emotional learning work," says Lisa Marie Gomez, Senior Director of Collaborative Action. The strong emphasis on social and emotional learning "ensures that the whole child is taken care of so that they can grow up comfortably in their own identity, with access to whatever resources they need to be safe and successful."

Stepping Up Amid A Crisis

When the pandemic struck, few—if any—Excel partner programs shut down. They stepped up—delivering food to families, tutoring kids, helping families experiencing homelessness get support and services, and, later, connecting people with vaccine appointments through text trees. They also got creative with programming. For example, a sports program for girls designed an online 5K running course.

"They did their best to keep in touch with the young people because they didn't want to lose that connection," Gomez says.

Throughout the crisis, Excel Beyond the Bell served as an information hub and advocated for Excel partners to be at the table when education agencies decided how to allocate Elementary and Secondary School Relief (ESSER) funds provided under the American Rescue Plan.

With schools reopening in fall 2021, Gomez says that Excel's youth development partner programs stand ready to help accelerate learning and address the stress and upheaval that so many young people are still experiencing. They have been working with school officials to determine how they can expand their services, provide trauma-informed care, and improve support for young people and their families.

"High-quality youth development programs can unlock the talent of young people in this city, state, and country," Gomez says. "I truly believe this could be game-changing. With public education and workforce preparation, youth development is the solid third leg of support that cultivates young people who know who they are, what gifts they have, and how to develop those gifts."

SAY SÍ Engages San Antonio Youth in Creative Thinking and Real-World Learning

SAY SÍ is a nationally recognized creative youth development program that primarily serves middle school and high school students from all over San Antonio and Bexar County, prioritizing young people from families with low income or under-served communities.

Its mission is to provide equitable opportunities for all young people to develop their creative potential while gaining the leadership and creative thinking skills that will be critical to their futures. SAY SÍ is a past recipient of the [National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award](#) from the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities.

"When students join SAY SÍ, they experience a community of belonging, support, and mentorship, as well as access to state-of-the-art equipment and supplies for whatever their creative interest is," says SAY SÍ Co-Executive Director Nicole Amri, who is also a SAY SÍ alumna.

Launched in 1994 as an umbrella program under the King William Neighborhood Association, SAY SÍ started with 12 students at a single high school. Over the years, it has grown organically to serve nearly 200 students annually from over 70 schools, with studio programs five days a week.

In addition, roughly 3,000 youth across Bexar County participate in its Artists Building Communities (ABC) program, which is primarily operated by SAY SÍ alumni who have been trained as teaching artists. These programs operate across community settings—from schools to libraries to hospitals to juvenile detention centers—with the goal of broadening young people's understanding of what art is and can be and how they can engage with art in their everyday lives.

Today, SAY SÍ offers young people opportunities ranging from visual arts to photography to theatre arts to interactive virtual reality and video game design. It fosters skills like collaborative teamwork and problem-solving while also engaging students in college preparedness.

"By the time students graduate high school with us, they will have a clear next step," says SAY SÍ Co-Executive Director Stephen Garza-Guzman. "We understand that college may not be the next step for every one of our students, but they will have a plan for what is next, whether it's going to a vocational school, joining the military, or going to a fine arts school."



A Day at SAY SÍ

SAY SÍ's year-round middle school program engages young people in visual arts, theater, media arts, and new media in weekly classes supported by junior and senior high school students. This peer-to-peer mentoring gives middle school students an opportunity to learn from advanced high school students while providing high school students with real-world job skills and experience.

Before the pandemic, students showed up at SAY SÍ every Saturday to explore one of four studio disciplines in the morning. Then, after a quick lunch break, they would work in a different studio for the afternoon. Students work on creative projects that develop cognitive skills like problem-solving, reasoning, and decision-making, as well as interpersonal skills such as communication and teamwork.

The high school program is more advanced. Students are asked to choose one studio discipline to pursue throughout their high school careers, building a portfolio and taking on new challenges as they progress. They work in an open-studio environment, where they come two days a week after school to make art.

Installations, performances, exhibits, and events are part of the SAY SÍ experience—as is selling student art from some of these shows. SAY SÍ uses sales to teach students about finance, budgeting, and commissions. Fifty percent of sales of middle school students' art goes directly to the student, while 50% goes to the student's SAY SÍ program. For high school students, 50% of a sale goes to the student up front, 20% goes to SAY SÍ, and 30% goes into a special savings account that the student receives upon proof of college enrollment.

Each year, students from a mix of studios curate a themed show called Stories Seldom Told that gives them an “opportunity to flirt with controversy,” Amri says. For example, a recent installation on death involved extensive research into different cultural beliefs and practices around death, such as burying and honoring the dead. For this interactive installation, visitors met with avatars playing the roles of gods and mythical figures from different cultures who help the soul transition to the afterlife. At the end of their conversations, visitors picked a “door” to the afterlife they preferred.

Responding to the Pandemic

When COVID-19 struck, SAY Sí surveyed its student body, asking young people what they needed, including basic needs like food, computers, or broadband access. Based on their responses, SAY Sí’s board worked with the local Goodwill to purchase and distribute low-cost computers and art supplies. It also developed a list of resources for families to access food and services they needed.

Programming moved online and was compressed in recognition of all the time students were spending in Zoom classes. Staff worked to find ways of providing virtual creative learning that incorporated aspects of trauma-informed care. Events shifted online too, including SAY Sí’s first virtual showcase of student work. As the COVID-19 positivity rates dropped in San Antonio, SAY Sí began organizing field trips to parks and museums.



SAY Sí just moved into a brand-new, 98,000-square-foot facility on San Antonio’s west side where young people are now gradually returning to their in-person studios to create art together once again. For students who are high-risk or whose parents are not yet ready to support their child’s in-person participation, SAY Sí is continuing to provide programming online.

Garza-Guzman notes that young people who participate in SAY Sí perform better on tests, have better attendance and fewer behavioral referrals, and are more likely to go to college. Although some students pursue careers in art, others go on to become teachers, scientists, engineers, or architects, he says. “They take the magic and the fundamentals of what our community shared with them to wherever they go in college and their careers.”

Amri says that SAY Sí is about providing a community of support and a place where young people can be themselves without being judged. “They leave us empowered, knowing they already have whatever they need in life inside of them. It’s about self-esteem, self-worth, and having the confidence to go on to the next level and make a community for yourself wherever you go.”

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– SAY Sí Co-Executive Director and SAY Sí alumna Nicole Amri



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 Excel Beyond the Bell, 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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Excel Beyond the Bell uses data to advocate for increased access to first-rate developmental programs. When something works for one part of the city, Excel thinks it’s critical to expand that throughout San Antonio so every child has access to high-quality programs.

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