

# Building Systems, closing the opportunity gap, and unlocking creative potential so youth can realize their inner greatness.



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 hands-on learning opportunities that help kids develop critical life skills as well as nurturing mentor and peer relationships that accelerate academic learning and prepare youth for their futures.

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 and future.

**Big Thought** is a rare organization. It not only offers creative out of school time programs to Dallas-area youth and their families, but it also serves as an intermediary in the region, coordinating hundreds of partners and creating learning systems that respond to community needs. Their systemic approach to their work means they reach marginalized youth *and their families*, both empowering individuals and changing systems that cause and perpetuate inequities.

Big Thought began in 1987 as a non-profit focused on creating equitable arts education in Dallas-area schools. They worked in and with underserved communities to communicate the value of art and generate greater, more equitable access to it. As their understanding of these communities deepened, they also began to explore and influence systems, breaking down barriers to bring these programs and resources into communities where they did not previously exist.

Youth and families in marginalized communities often believe that greatness is supposed to look, act, and be a certain way, but "...the truth is that greatness is in everyone," says Erin Offord, Big Thought's Chief Program and Learning Systems Officer. "And that belief is foundational in the work we do."

Leaders also recognized OST's potential for expanding these opportunities. "As time went on, it became a focus on the 80%—on the alternative-learning environment, afterschool and summer. And we have been living that way ever since," says Offord.

In 2004, they reorganized, taking the name Big Thought to reflect their broadened scope and vision. They would continue to provide direct delivery of programs and also develop learning systems that could support and be implemented by partner organizations.

Now an integral part of the Dallas educational ecosystem, Big Thought and its partners serve more than 90,000 youth and adults in Dallas with afterschool programs like **Thriving Minds** and citywide initiatives like **Dallas City of Learning**. They work with adjudicated youth in their **Creative Solutions** program and help mentor and guide youth on their journeys to secondary and post-secondary success through their **Learning Pathways** project and **Create Champions Initiative**.



## 2021 Youth Impact & Outcomes

**Youth Served:** 76,445

**Grades Served:** Pre-K – young adults

**Total Service Hours:** 70,398



Still an arts organization at its core, Big Thought centers creativity in all of its programs. To ensure that every program empowers youth to create greatness, Big Thought leaders asked the question, “What are the skills and competencies a young person needs to be able to imagine and create their best lives and world?”

They conducted interviews and focus groups with youth, educators, industry leaders, community organizations, and staff. They reviewed existing literature and frameworks related to youth skill development and learning pathways. From this exploration, they developed [The Creator Archetype](#), a framework that embodies the skills that can empower youth to excel in the 21st century.

The archetype includes five key components: Social & Emotional Foundation, Academics & Artistry, Digital Fluency, Design Thinking, and Civics & Service, which every Big Thought program is built upon.

Innovation and creativity have made Big Thought a national model in arts education, OST systems, summer learning, and juvenile justice intervention. It is one of six community partnerships in the U.S. helping scale national best practices in social and emotional learning (SEL).

Even with the depth and breadth of its well-established programs and partnerships, one of the keys to Big Thought’s success is their willingness and ability to embrace change. “Change—it’s our secret sauce!” says Offord. “We know how to change and we are willing to change. You need to be open and creative. Programs come and go, and OST is the sandbox, the canvas—call it what you want—where you can curate something totally different. Because with summer programs and afterschool, there is no excuse—you just need to go for it!” And Big Thought definitely goes for it!



## Elements of the Creator Archetype

**Social & Emotional**—foundational skills for a person’s wellbeing and ability to connect with the world

**Academics & Artistry**—reading, writing, and math as well as artistic skills.

**Digital Fluency**—a critical skill set to navigate the modern workforce including robotics, coding, and data literacy

**Design Thinking**—focused on specific critical thinking skills and project management—empowers students to look at the full landscape and synthesize data

**Civics & Service**—service projects that give kids the opportunity to flex their civic service muscles

[Learn more](#) about the Creator Archetype.



“I’ve worked hard to make sure my son has what he needs; having him participate in Big Thought programs has helped to fill in so many spaces. Early on, engagement helped him to develop an interest in all things creative. Now that he’s older the guidance, as he prepares for college in a few years, is beyond essential. I’m thankful for the exposure, and the support that has helped fill in the gaps. We can both see it in his development.”  
—Big Thought 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, like those offered by Big Thought and its partners, for Texas youth. TXPOST works in partnership with vital regional and local organizations, 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.



**BIG THOUGHT**

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