

What is the community challenge?

OnTrack Greenville middle schools located in the White Horse Community of Greenville County, South Carolina serve a higher proportion of low-income and minority students than other middle schools in the district. Overall, students attending these four schools have placed behind their peers in key academic measures of attendance, behavior, and course performance. These early warning indicators of disengagement in middle school are connected to increased risks of high school dropout (Balfanz & Fox, 2011).

Program At-a-Glance

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund

Intervention: Summer Program

Subgrantee: BellXcel (formerly Building Educated Leaders for Life)

Grantee: United Way of Greenville County

Focus Area: Youth Development

Focus Population: Rising 6th Grade students

Community Served: White Horse Community of Greenville County, South Carolina

What is the promising solution?

In order to combat summer learning loss and support the transition between elementary and middle school among low-income students, BellXcel operated a rigorous and stimulating six-week summer program for approximately 240 rising sixth-grade students (80 at each of three schools) who were identified as academically and/or behaviorally at-risk. The primary intended outcome of the BellXcel Summer Program was to improve student course performance in math and ELA. The exploratory outcomes included measures of student behavioral incidences and attendance, along with secondary outcomes related to improving student self-confidence and attitudes toward learning, among others.

What was the purpose of evaluation?

The evaluation of the BellXcel Summer Program by the Riley Institute at Furman University began in 2016 and finished reporting in 2019. An implementation evaluation examined model fidelity and provided feedback for quality improvement. To assess if students who participated in the Summer Program demonstrated improved academic outcomes, the impact study utilized a single-site, non-randomized group design with groups formed by propensity score matching. Treatment students were matched to: (1) other students in the treatment schools who did not participate in the intervention; (2) other students in the same school district; and (3) to other students attending Title I schools across the state of South Carolina.

What did the evaluation find?

As a grantee of the Social Innovation Fund, United Way of Greenville County engaged an independent evaluator to conduct an evaluation of the BellXcel Summer Program. Key findings include:

- There was a relatively high degree of alignment between the intended and actual implementation of the BellXcel Summer Program at each of the three OnTrack Greenville middle schools.
- Researchers were not able to confirm the hypothesis that BellXcel scholars would have improved course performance in ELA or math as measured by the MAP assessment when compared to matched students.
- The evaluation did yield promising findings for exploratory outcomes, indicating BellXcel scholars had significantly higher attendance rates and fewer behavioral incidences than comparison students.

Notes on the evaluation

The absence of MAP assessment data for treatment and comparison students in academic year 2017-18 was a significant barrier to the evaluation, preventing it from assessing its confirmatory impact question during the second year of implementation – the year during which the implementation evaluation indicated the program was delivered with a higher degree of fidelity. In addition, the treatment schools were simultaneously implementing formal and informal school-wide initiatives to improve student attendance, behavior, and course performance. This increased the likelihood that positive significant effects of the program identified when examining district school matches might not be fully attributable to the BellXcel Summer Program. Likewise, the district comparison schools were not Title I schools – and although the district schools shared the same community context as treatment schools, the learning environment at these schools was likely different, suggesting results for the district school matched comparison students should be interpreted with some caution. Finally, it is possible that some of the in-school matches selected for the present study participated in other OnTrack Greenville support programs that influenced student behavior. This study originally intended to control for participation in other OnTrack Greenville support programs to address this concern, but due to data limitations, researchers were unable to do so.

How is BellXcel using the evaluation findings to improve?

While this is the final report to satisfy Social Innovation Fund grant requirements, local leaders have committed to funding the initiative and evaluation for the final two years of the project in the absence of Social Innovation Fund continuation funding. Given the findings presented in this report, stakeholders and researchers have several possible next steps for implementation and research, including continuing to place a focus on earlier participant recruitment, with stronger collaboration with district and feeder elementary schools; selecting enrichment courses for which there are appropriate facilities and resources; and seeking new measures for course performance.

Evaluation At-a-Glance

Evaluation Design: A single-site non-randomized group design with groups formed by propensity score matching

Study Population: Rising 6th grade students

Independent Evaluators: The Riley Institute at Furman University and RTI International

This Evaluation's Level of Evidence*:
Moderate

*SIF and AmeriCorps currently use different definitions of levels of evidence.



The content of this brief was drawn from the full evaluation report submitted to CNCS by the grantee/subgrantee. The section of the brief that discusses evaluation use includes contribution of the grantee/subgrantee. All original content from the report is attributable to its authors.

To access the full evaluation report and learn more about CNCS, please visit <http://www.nationalservice.gov/research>.

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), combines public and private resources to grow the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the U.S. The SIF invests in three priority areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.