



SPERLING CENTER  
FOR RESEARCH  
AND INNOVATION

In developing [BellXcel Remote](#), the organization created a model that aligned with best practices in summer learning and made the best use of each family's technology and availability, with the following elements:

- Six hours of content per day for a five-week program, with various implementation options
- Modular and flexible sample schedules that could be condensed or expanded as needed
- A blend of instructional time from a teacher and independent work by students and families spanning Math, ELA, Reading Corner, social and emotional learning (SEL), physical wellness, and STEAM enrichment
- Extended learning kits enabling students to work independently at home while accessing teacher support
- Focus on one primary lesson per day, alternating between Math and ELA
- Live instruction plus one-on-one check ins with students (by phone or computer)
- SEL, wellness, and STEAM enrichment activities (including virtual field trips) for scholars
- Family engagement opportunities supported by a family guide, family resource portal, and teacher outreach
- Comprehensive teacher and administrator guides and professional development

## Building Bridges During Challenging Times

### How BellXcel Remote Summer Programs Kept Youth, Families and Staff Engaged in Learning During COVID-19

The global COVID-19 pandemic led to one of the most disruptive years in the nation's educational history. In the spring of 2020, over 124,000 school systems closed, many in a matter of a week or less, sending more than 55 million children home for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. While school districts were quick to develop and implement distance and virtual learning models to continue school year instruction, other challenges and disruptions remained such as monitoring attendance, tracking students with limited or no technology at home, cancellations of spring assessments, reduced teacher professional development, reduced after school programs, and disruptions to school meals. After 2-3 months of virtual learning and facing summer with limited-to-no learning opportunities, many educators and families feared youth engagement in learning would dramatically weaken, leading to major learning losses at the start of the new school year.<sup>1</sup>

To confront this new reality of virtual learning, BellXcel, a national non-profit that partners with youth organizations and schools to license its evidence-based learning programs, innovated a remote summer learning product, called BellXcel Remote, in partnership with Scholastic Education. This product could be implemented virtually with youth (called "scholars") and families, including families with limited to no technology in the home. The Spierling Center for Research and Innovation (SCRI) collected and analyzed data on scholar, family, and educator experiences with BellXcel Remote. This brief explores how well and in what ways BellXcel Remote provided opportunities for engagement in learning and enrichment activities.

Research on summer learning has found that high-quality programs that successfully engage youth incorporate several key elements. This includes, but is not limited to, expanded programming beyond academics, fun and engaging enrichment opportunities, supportive learning environments, opportunities for family engagement, and motivated, prepared staff.<sup>2</sup> This research, however, has focused on traditional, in-person programming and not virtual or remote learning programs.

<sup>1</sup> Kuhfeld, M., Tarasawa, B. (2020). The COVID-19 slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on academic achievement. Collaborative for Student Growth, NWEA. Link: [https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/05/Collaborative-Brief\\_Covid19-Slide-APR20.pdf](https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/05/Collaborative-Brief_Covid19-Slide-APR20.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> McCombs, J. S., Augustine, C. H., & Schwartz, H. L. (2011). Making summer count: How summer programs can boost children's learning. RAND Corporation. Link: [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND\\_MG1120.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1120.pdf)

SCRI found evidence that BellXcel Remote did help to bridge the gap between a disrupted 2019-20 school year and the new 2020-21 school year and was able to engage youth in summer distance learning. Analysis of end-of-program stakeholder surveys demonstrates that the program kept scholars, families, and staff engaged in a myriad of academic, enrichment, and SEL activities.

## Learning Activities Produce High Engagement Levels

For BellXcel Remote to be successful and impactful, it was critically important that scholars be actively engaged and focused during the program and see high levels of daily attendance and participation in daily activities. To measure engagement, SCRI asked BellXcel Remote partners to track daily attendance. Engagement was also measured using scaled and open-ended survey questions of scholars, families, and staff asking if they agreed that scholars were focused during the program, if they were highly engaged (overall), engaged in the various daily activities, and a favorite or memorable part of the program (open-ended question).

Families, staff, and scholars agreed that BellXcel Remote Summer was highly engaging. Over 90% of families (95%) and staff (94%) agreed that scholars were highly engaged during the program. Scholars themselves (92%) reported being focused on their activities during the remote program, and attendance data collected by partners found an average daily attendance rate of 71%.

One staff member noted in the post-program survey that a memorable part of the program was: "Their participation, students were highly engaged and participating all the time."

In post-program surveys, one scholar noted, "I participated more than I usually do..." while another responded, "I was a lot more engaged than in school."

Engagement in BellXcel Remote was high across various activities. Staff reported that three-quarters or more of scholars were extremely or moderately engaged in the various components of the program including the literacy curriculum (92%), math curriculum (92%), remote SEL activities (87%), remote enrichment activities (85%), and remote field trips (75%).

Speaking to the power of enrichment programming, one staff member noted: "Our enrichment offerings were a highlight of the program. One of our highlights was the

STEAM class where students completed numerous projects. [Program] teachers staged supplies pickups and deliveries to participant houses in order to foster great real world/virtual experiences. Each student learned about the life cycle of plants and planted their own vegetables."

## Enthusiasm + Supportive Learning Environments = High Engagement

To achieve high levels of active engagement in its Remote program, BellXcel sought to design fun, safe, and supportive learning environments for scholars, families, and staff. To assess and measure change in these domains, SCRI developed scaled and open-ended survey questions that asked about fun during the program, program satisfaction, whether a staff member would recommend the program to a parent or other teacher, if staff found the program rewarding, if the program and staff created a safe and supportive environment, and a favorite or memorable part of the program (open-ended question).

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*One scholar noted in the post-program survey: "My favorite part is working hard on math and reading and my experience is that it's fun talking to our summer teacher."*

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Nearly all families (97%) said their child enjoyed the program. Over 95% of staff would recommend the program to families/caregivers, would recommend it to other teachers, and found working for the program to be rewarding. Over 90% of scholars said they enjoyed the program, the academic activities, and the enrichment activities.

One staff member noted: "One class, I read a book about butterflies to the class, and used my phone as a document camera so they could see the pictures. They were all so interested and engaged, students who I typically had to beg to unmute themselves and engage were willingly talking and asking questions about the butterfly life cycle."

In addition, 90% or more of families agreed the BellXcel Remote learning environment was a trustworthy (97%), supportive (95%), and safe place for their child (96%). Scholars had overwhelmingly positive experiences with their teachers. Large majorities (98%) of scholars felt they got along with their teacher, their teacher cared about them, they could trust their

teacher, and that their teacher helped them. Large majorities also felt their opinions were valued (92%), they could ask their teacher for help (88%), and talk to the teacher about their problems (83%).

One family noted in the post-program survey: *"I thought it was just right for a summer class. It kept him engaged and learning but didn't overwhelm him."*

One scholar noted in the post-program survey: *"My favorite part is working hard on math and reading and my experience is that it's fun talking to our summer teacher."* Another scholar said their favorite part of the program was, *"meeting new friends and having fun with everybody, love doing my work with my teachers."*

One staff member noted in the post program survey that the program was *"the experience of a lifetime."* Another staff member stated that a memorable experience from the summer was *"working with students from all different walks of life, and making sure that they received the technology and resources that they needed."*

## Family and Staff Engagement Leads to High Scholar Engagement

In designing BellXcel Remote for summer programming, additional emphasis was placed on enhancing family engagement strategies to promote and support scholars' learning at home and program engagement. For example, BellXcel Remote developed an online parent portal, a comprehensive family guide, and provided additional professional development to staff to encourage stronger and more consistent communication to families. To measure and assess the frequency and impact of these strategies, SCRI developed scaled and open-ended survey questions that ask about frequency of family engagement in the scholar's daily learning activities, staff engagement and communication with families, and their favorite or memorable part of the program (open-ended question).

This strategy proved successful as majorities of families indicated they helped or participated in their child's learning daily or a few times a week in Math/Reading activities (84%), SEL (77%), physical activities (74%), and science enrichment (62%).

One parent noted in the post-program survey: *"Me and my son were more connected by doing this program together on one table. There was a feeling of achievement every day of this program."*

One staff member noted: *"There were a couple of parents that were so engaged with the staff and in the learning experience that they began to share resources on different books with each other at the end of one of our remote sessions!"*

Another staff member noted: *"There were several times I connected with my parents and the outcome was rewarding. It's always rewarding to help and model to parents how they can become better teachers for their child(ren)."*

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Remote program staff were also encouraged to communicate regularly and build strong relationships with families. These strategies also proved highly effective as majorities of families (73%) noted that staff communicated with them at least once a week via email. Majorities of staff (76%) agreed that their program's family engagement system promoted caring, consistent relationships between families and teachers. Families overwhelmingly said staff created a safe environment for them to speak (96%), they knew who to contact for questions and concerns (97%), they felt their questions and concerns were responded to (97%), and that the program communicated expectations around scholar participation (97%).

One staff member noted in the post-program surveys: *"My favorite part was the communication with parents. I don't get that often in my normal classroom."* Another staff member noted: *"I loved every second of BellXcell Remote. The scholars' passion for learning was infectious!"*

## Conclusion & Recommendations

Research shows that summer learning programs can successfully keep youth engaged in learning, particularly when youth feel supported by staff and families and when program activities are diverse and fun. Given the quick transition to remote learning, the question on the minds of many summer learning providers was: could remote summer learning programs be equally effective as in-person programs? Quantitative and qualitative findings from BellXcel's post-program stakeholder surveys strongly suggest the program was successful in building and maintaining scholar, family, and staff engagement.

### **Recommendations**

BellXcel's experience developing, implementing, and measuring the impact of a remote summer learning model can offer helpful tips to educators looking to keep youth, families, and staff engaged in remote learning.

#### ***Create supportive learning environments for youth and families***

Both youth and families stay engaged in virtual programming when program leadership and staff create a safe, trusting, and supportive environment for both. Youth are more likely to engage when the learning environment allows them to safely make mistakes, ask questions, and feel supported by teachers. Programs can also support families and promote caring relationships by establishing clear feedback channels, setting clear expectations, and responding to questions and concerns. These elements are essential to high-quality programs, particularly in a virtual environment.

#### ***Complement academic programming with engaging and fun enrichment opportunities***

Research on summer learning indicates that providing opportunities for enrichment promotes youth participation and attendance. STEAM enrichments, virtual field trips, take-home science kits, and arts and crafts kits are examples of activities that engage youth in learning, and can also incorporate opportunities for families to participate.

#### ***Break up instructional blocks with age-appropriate small group and independent activity time***

Research on summer learning suggests programs go beyond "drill and kill" instruction and provide youth with innovative and participatory learning experiences. BellXcel Remote was designed to provide an appropriate balance between in-person Zoom classes, small group instruction, and independent work time. For example, break up a math instruction block by including time for small-group or independent activities that allow youth time to collaborate with each other and/or work alone.

#### ***Promote flexibility in how families engage in learning with their scholars***

Remote learning for elementary and middle school students often means a parent or family member is at home with the child. When programs focus on family engagement, it leads to more positive achievement outcomes in youth. Remote summer learning providers should consider offering at-home learning activities that both the child and family can participate in. Remote family engagement strategies should ideally be flexible to accommodate a family or caregivers schedule.

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### **Conclusion**

As of the Fall 2020, many communities across the US are facing surges in COVID-19 infections, forcing many school districts, out-of-school time providers, and youth-serving organizations to consider yet another long stretch of remote learning for millions of America's youth. While we all believe that the country will one day return to full in-person learning, the timeline is uncertain. Remote learning for students is far from ideal, but there are numerous ways educators can design the experience to be fun and engaging for staff, youth, and families to ensure youth stay actively engaged in vital educational opportunities.