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The Power of Partnerships: Exploring How a Partnership with BellXcel Influences Systems Changes

In 2021, BellXcel commissioned the Sperling Center for Research and Innovation (SCRI) to study the potential effects of its partnership model on its partners' systems and ways of operating. While this exploratory study was on a small qualitative scale, the ultimate goal is to develop a multi-year research strategy to understand and capture the ways in which a BX partnership influences partners internal systems (e.g. how they plan, how they use data) and the ways in which partners operate within their communities (e.g. relationships, power dynamics, funding opportunities). This longer-term study will include developing a robust logic model and rigorous measurement strategies.

STUDY BACKGROUND

BellXcel is a national nonprofit organization with nearly 30 years' experience empowering its youth development and school partners as they provide high-quality, evidence-based afterschool and summer learning programs. BellXcel and its partners have strengthened the capacity of over 20,000 educators to serve over 300,000 K-8th grade scholars in 36 states and counting.

Over the past few years, BellXcel has transformed its business model from a direct-service approach toward a flexible partnership model. Local youth development and school partners customize and deliver high-quality programming to meet the unique needs of their community by utilizing BellXcel's proven strategies, resources, tools, personalized coaching and content - its technical assistance approach.

This business model transformation shifted how BellXcel thinks about the impact of its work. While BellXcel still measures the impact of partners' afterschool and summer programs on participating youth, families and educators--it is increasingly interested in exploring the potential effect of this shift on the organizational practices, policies, relationships and systems of its partners.

In 2021, BellXcel commissioned the Sperling Center for Research and Innovation (SCRI) to study the potential effects of its partnership model on its partners' internal systems (for example, practices, policies, operations) and external community ecosystems (relationships, power dynamics, funding). While this exploratory study was on a small qualitative scale, the ultimate goal is to develop a multi-year research strategy to understand and capture the impact and influence BellXcel has on its partners. This longer-term study will include developing a robust logic model and rigorous measurement strategies.

SCRI engaged existing BellXcel summer partners to explore the extent to which their partnership with BellXcel influenced their respective organizations. Designed to gather baseline data, the study identified possible mechanics or levers for how the impact happened. Additionally, the insights will inform future research and measurement efforts.

SYSTEMS CHANGE FRAMEWORK

SCRI's study was grounded in an existing theoretical framework to better inform the research design, analysis and next steps. [The Waters of Systems Change](#) by the social impact consulting firm FSG, focuses on the concept of systems change, defined simply as the process of how a large number of community players can work together to identify and solve large social challenges or problems.¹ Utilizing this framework focused the study on better understanding the power and impact of a unique partnership between BellXcel and youth development or school partners to address educational gaps and inequities in their communities.

The study's short-term focus was on how the six components of FSG's systems change framework inform how SCRI measures the impact of a BellXcel partnership.

Within the FSG framework, each of these components is positioned in an inverted pyramid framework using three tiers: Structural Change (explicit); Relational Change (semi-explicit); and Transformative Change (implicit). Each tier focuses on how visible or tangible the condition is to each player in the system.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Starting February 2021, SCRI conducted 30-60 minute interviews with program leaders from nine BellXcel summer youth development partners. All interviewees played an important leadership role in their organization's partnership with BellXcel.

This initial focus on youth development organizations represented a range of partners:

- Serving from less than 100 scholars to over 300 scholars in their program,
- Metropolitan, suburban and rural geographies,
- Length of partnership with BellXcel ranged from 1 to 3+ years, and
- Leaders ranged from executive-level to program management staff.

Leaders were asked how the partnership with BellXcel has impacted and/or influenced their organization's work and if their organization is doing anything differently, more efficiently or better as a result of the partnership. A detailed list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

FSG's framework identifies six interdependent conditions or elements of system change:

1. *Policies: Institutional and/or organizational rules, regulations and priorities that guide the entity's own and others' actions.*
2. *Practices: Espoused activities of institutions, coalitions, networks and other entities targeted to improving social and environmental progress. Also, within the entity, the procedures, guidelines or informal shared habits that comprise their work.*
3. *Resource Flows: How money, people, knowledge, information and other assets, such as infrastructure, are allocated and distributed.*
4. *Relationships & Connections: Quality of connections and communication occurring among actors in the system, especially among those with differing histories and viewpoints.*
5. *Power Dynamics: The distribution of decision-making power, authority and both formal and informal influence among individuals and organizations.*
6. *Mental Models: Habits of thought—deeply held beliefs, assumptions and 'taken-for-granted' ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do and how we talk.*

Potential Impact Categories.

SCRI prepared for the interviews by consulting with BellXcel staff to identify a list of response categories that might surface as organizational impact. The following summarizes that list:

- **Organizational Systems and Infrastructure:** Functional operations areas, such as Human Resources, Payroll and IT.
- **Program Outcomes and Evidence:** Program evaluation, program outcomes and use of data and evidence.

¹ Kania, J., Kramer, M., Senge, P. (2018). The Water of Systems Change. FSG. Can be accessed at: https://www.fsg.org/publications/water_of_systems_change

- **Program Quality:** Quality of program design and components of quality.
- **Staff Professional Development:** Staff training and skill development.
- **Physical Resources and Materials:** Curriculum and other physical resources used during the program.
- **Technology:** Information technology and related systems.
- **Community Relationships:** Relationships with local community partners, such as schools, other youth development organizations, families, retail and industry.
- **Joy, Passion, and Commitment to Serving Youth:** Passion for working with youth and continued desire to serve.
- **Organizational Confidence:** Individual and/or organizational confidence in running new and/or existing youth programs.
- **Organizational Culture:** Workplace culture and attitudes.
- **Philanthropy and Fundraising:** Funder relationships and funding for programming.
- **Program Planning and Operations:** Planning and operations of other youth programming.

Each of these impact categories map either directly or closely to the 6 systems change conditions described in FSG’s model. For example, an organization changing their program planning and operations as a result of the BellXcel partnership maps closely to the FSG framework Practices component. A partner developing a new and/or strengthened partnership with a local school district as a result of the BellXcel partnership maps directly to Relationships & Connections and, in instances where a BellXcel partner replaces the school district as the lead summer learning partner in a community, this aligns with a change in Power Dynamics.

STUDY CONSIDERATIONS

SCRI’s study had a few limitations and constraints. Like many qualitative research studies, interpretation of responses was subjective. Leaders interviewed were not provided with the list of organizational potential impact categories before or during the interviews and their responses were analyzed and categorized post interview. While the SCRI interviewer did not lead the interviewees to answer a certain way and often re-phrased answers to ensure that the correct intent was captured, the analysis and interpretation process is inherently subjective.

Some of the impact categories lacked the necessary specificity to dig deeper into the individual components or elements that may be more impactful or influential to an organization. Because the impact categories were used after the interviews to code the responses, respondents may have been more likely to identify certain categories if used more proactively during the interview. Responses that arose during the interviews were often “top-of-mind”, which can imply confidence in the response; however, respondents may have identified additional impacts if categories were used more deliberately during the interviews.

Finally, interviews were conducted with only one leader in the organization, often a department director or program manager. The impact captured is limited to that individual’s point of view and how they approach or conduct their work versus across an entire department or organization.

STUDY RESULTS

While all leaders interviewed touched on at least one or more of the impact categories, the following five were most frequently mentioned:

1. Program outcomes and evidence
2. Community relationships
3. Organizational confidence
4. Philanthropy and fundraising
5. Program planning and operations

These were perceived as a strength of the partnership and mentioned early on during the interviews. As part of describing these categories below, SCRI has aligned each with the six FSG system change framework components--see each in parentheses.

1-Program Outcomes and Evidence

All leaders interviewed indicated that the BellXcel partnership has strongly affected how their organization views and uses program outcomes and evidence (mental models). Numerous leaders indicated that BellXcel program outcomes give their organization and partnership programs a certain “street cred” and act as power levers in conversions with important community stakeholders like school district and philanthropic partners (relationships & connections, power dynamics).

Additionally, leaders stated they’ve developed a stronger appreciation for the role of program outcomes, program evaluation and evidence in understanding community needs. This increased their ability to use data as a diagnostic tool to better understand youth needs, inform program design and delivery and engage families (policies, practices,

mental models). Lastly, the partnership with BellXcel has led to improved and strengthened staff engagement and participation in data collection as leaders understand that evaluation is not punitive, but can play a powerful role in helping youth and their communities (mental models).

STORY

Collaborating with School Partners to Measure Summer Slide

For one youth development organization in the Pacific Northwest, the BellXcel partnership resulted in stronger relationships with their local school district and collaboration to measure summer slide in scholars. Prior to the BellXcel partnerships, the local school district stopped providing summer learning programming due to limited impact. The school district was very excited to learn the organization was stepping up to fill the summer learning gap in their community. The BellXcel partner and the school district developed data-sharing agreements at the start of the summer partnership, which allowed the district to measure the impact of the BellXcel program using spring and fall school academic achievement data. Results showed the summer program effectively reduced or eliminated the summer slide in participating scholars. Local philanthropic partners also appreciated the evidence generated by the partnership, leading to an increase in support for the program.

2-Community Relationships

All leaders interviewed believed that the BellXcel partnership strongly affected their relationships with important community partners, such as school districts, families, other youth development organizations, local philanthropic organizations and the business community (relationships & connections). Similar to the Program Outcomes and Evidence category, leaders indicated that the BellXcel partnership positively influenced their organization's reputation in their community and increased their credibility (power dynamics). Leaders noted that their partners no longer see their organizations as simply providers of child care and recreation, but also as important providers of educational programming for youth (power dynamics, mental models).

The biggest impact was with local school districts. In some cases, the relationship between the BellXcel partner organization and the school district was non-existent or even tense initially and then developed into a strong, collaborative and supportive relationship (relationships & connections). In some instances, with support from the school district, the BellXcel partner organization became the main summer learning provider in the community (power dynamics, mental models).

STORY

Development of Strong School District Community Relationships

In another Pacific Northwest community, the local youth development organization did not have a relationship with the local school district. Despite no existing relationship, both the organization and school district had a strong desire to offer summer learning programming to the underserved youth in their community. Through the BellXcel partnership, the local youth development organization was able to build a positive relationship with the school district to create strong summer programming for at-risk youth. "The relationship went from seemingly non-existent to getting immediate responses from principals because of how excited they were to partner with us."

3-Organizational Confidence

All leaders interviewed believed that the BellXcel partnership increased organizational confidence to design and implement programs aimed at reducing the achievement gap. Prior to the partnership, many of these organizations self-identified as child care and/or youth recreation organizations. Following the partnership, organizations felt confident showing up to conversations with local stakeholders with ideas, data and solutions to help respond to the academic and social and emotional needs of underserved youth (resource flows, relationships & connections, power dynamics, mental models).

Leaders highlighted the "power of success" that often results from a BellXcel partnership. They believe that the BellXcel model is very easy to implement and comes with strong customer service from BellXcel staff. These factors ultimately lead to strong program implementation and positive outcomes for youth, families and staff. Further, leaders believe this success, particularly after the first year of a partnership, leads to increased organizational confidence which often

spills over into other youth programming and even a desire to expand the BellXcel partnership (policies, practices, resource flows, mental models).

STORY

Developing Confidence to Jump into Achievement Gap Programming

For one midwest youth development organization, the partnership with BellXcel gave them the confidence to jump into the achievement gap space and provide stronger youth programming to underserved and at-risk children. Prior to the partnership, the organization had developed their own signature afterschool programs, however the programs often did not include an academic intervention component. According to one leader in the organization: “[The BellXcel partnership] gave us a vehicle to show up in that academic achievement gap space. The Y is not known for that. YMCAs are strong in enrichment programming and in the social and emotional learning space. However, I was able to position us as having a solution that is proven that we can facilitate. [The partnership] added to our tool belt and I can now confidently have conversations with ideas on implementation and solutions.”

4-Philanthropy and Fundraising

Leaders interviewed indicated that the BellXcel partnership enabled their organization to strengthen relationships with philanthropic partners and shift fundraising efforts to an afterschool and summer educational program focus (policies, resource flows, relationships & connections). Leaders indicated that local philanthropic partners were drawn to the BellXcel partnership and its evidence-based model with consistently strong program outcomes for youth, families and staff. In some cases, it was noted that the BellXcel summer program was the only program in their portfolio with strong evidence and that alone was enough to draw strong funder interest.

Additionally, leaders noted that stronger relationships with school districts and other local youth development organizations led to increased collaboration on grants and other funding opportunities (relationships & connections).

Lastly, the flexibility built into the BellXcel model allows partners to employ unique components like exploring career and workforce interest and development, which attracted interested funding partners to the program and helped establish long-term relationships (policies, practices, resource flows).

STORY

Attracting Philanthropic Support through Flexibility in Program Design

Strong relationships with local philanthropic partners are essential to launching a new program, and for one midwest YMCA, the flexibility and evidence of positive impact from a BellXcel partnership attracted numerous funders to their program. While these philanthropic partners understood the need for academic rigor in the summer program, they were more interested in funding programs with a strong workforce development component. Many youth living in this community and served by the local YMCA are from immigrant families who worked almost exclusively in the agricultural sector. Local funders were interested in funding a summer program that exposed participants to new careers and higher education opportunities that may not have been familiar or accessible to them. The partnership with BellXcel allowed the YMCA to develop a flexible summer program model and framework that fit their community's needs and allowed them to incorporate the needs of philanthropic partners interested in college and career development and readiness.

5-Program Planning and Operations

All leaders interviewed indicated that the BellXcel partnership positively affected how their organization plans and delivers other programming (practices, resource flows). They noted that the BellXcel model and framework has influenced how they are designing and implementing other programs and led to an increased focus on interventions for at-risk and underserved youth (mental models). Additionally, leaders noted that best practices from the BellXcel summer program are being integrated or adopted by their other youth programs in the areas of instructional strategies, staff hiring/management and evaluation.

STORY

Embedding More Intentionality in Program Planning and Implementation

For one New England youth development organization, the partnership with BellXcel led to the organization becoming more intentional in many areas of program planning, implementation and staff management. The Program Director changed their staff management strategy by being more consistent in 1:1 meetings, being more active in mentoring and conducting more consistent monthly staff meetings. Additionally, prior to the BellXcel partnership, the organization utilized a punitive behavior management policy, a red bench, for scholars who staff believed needed to be removed from the classroom due to behavior issues. Once the BellXcel partnership was established, the organization integrated BellXcel program lessons promoting positive behavior management practices and eliminated the red bench. Lastly, the organization worked to embed more lesson planning and intentionality into certain activities to give youth a stronger understanding of the purpose of the activity. For example, the organization worked with youth to create slime. Prior to the partnership, the organization focused on just “doing” the activity without any focus on the “why” or “how” behind the activity. The partnership with BellXcel led to the organization embedding more structure to the activity (such as providing an introduction to the activity, as well as a summary conversation) and focusing on the science lessons in the activity.

One key practice noted by many as positively influencing their organization was the power of intentionality in program design and implementation (practices, mental models). Leaders described becoming more deliberate and intentional about youth programming activities by focusing more energy and time on the instructional purpose and value built into certain youth activities, compared to simply doing the activity as a means of keeping youth busy. For example, if youth were

playing a game of Monopoly, staff would not only focus on the fun of playing the game, but also use the game as a way of emphasizing key math and/or financial literacy concepts.

Additional Areas of Organizational Impact Seven impact categories were mentioned less frequently and/or with less perceived strength compared to the five highlighted above. These categories, however, are still important for SCRI and BellXcel in studying the impact of a partnership.

1. **Organizational Systems and Infrastructure.** The BellXcel partnership positively impacted internal organizational systems, namely staff hiring and management (policies, practices, resource flows). Leaders noted summer teacher hiring influenced how they hire youth development staff with regards to job descriptions, preferred skills and salary needs. Additionally, the partnership positively influenced how they hire youth development staff in general, managed staff in programs, identified staffing needs and priorities, and considered the use of temporary staff.
2. **Program Quality.** The BellXcel partnership positively influenced how organizations think about elements of program quality and the importance of quality in choosing partners and designing youth programs (mental models). Program quality became an important guiding principle in interactions with youth and families, leading to more intentionality in programming, relationships, communication, and the selection of curricula and other partner organizations.
3. **Physical Resources and Materials.** Some leaders felt that many of BellXcel’s summer programming physical resources and materials are high quality and valuable to use in other youth programs (practices, resource flows).
4. **Joy, Passion, and Commitment to Serving Youth.** Some leaders actually increased their passion for serving youth, particularly at-risk and underserved youth, as a result of the BellXcel partnership (mental models). Additionally, the value of a rewarding and empowering program with positive outcomes for youth, families and staff influenced perception of the program’s important value. The program was seen as a “community responsibility” and recognized the importance of serving at-risk and underserved youth.
5. **Organizational Culture.** Some leaders experienced positive changes in their organizational culture as a result of the partnership with BellXcel (policies, practices, relationships & connections, mental models). Positive support from BellXcel staff led to partners gaining more appreciation

and understanding of the power of relationship building and providing strong, positive support in their own youth programs. BellXcel's summer model's emphasis on staff coaching, one-to-one check-ins and modeling of social and emotional learning concepts positively influenced the organizational and staff management practices of partners.

6. **Staff Professional Development.** Leaders indicated that the BellXcel partnership positively impacted and/or influenced their approach to staff professional development (practices, mental models). Leaders felt an increased confidence in implementing other staff professional development opportunities and expect to continue to use their summer professional development resources or themes in organizational staff development throughout the year.
7. **Technology.** The BellXcel partnership positively impacted and/or influenced how a few of the leaders think about or implement technology systems in their organization (practices, resource flows). One area noted was how the 2020 BellXcel Remote summer program gave staff and teachers the opportunity to learn and practice remote learning through Zoom and other similar technologies.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Leaders interviewed overwhelmingly felt that their BellXcel partnership strongly impacted and/or influenced their organization in various ways, including influencing how they think about their work with youth. BellXcel's partnership and technical assistance approach positively changed organizations in a variety of ways beyond the direct impact on youth, families and staff engaged in the actual summer program.

Leader interviews showed the BX partners benefited most in these five impact categories:

1. Program outcome and evidence
2. Community relationships
3. Organizational confidence
4. Philanthropy and fundraising
5. Program planning and operations

These categories have the potential to affect staff throughout an organization, lead to greater community reach, engagement and foster new relationships and opportunities that may not have happened in the absence of the BellXcel partnership.

This initial qualitative study helps to better conceptualize, define and measure the ways that BellXcel may influence its partners. These study results should be considered exploratory and a first step towards improved approaches to capture impact at the organizational level.

Next Steps

BellXcel and SCRI plan to continue this research study beyond 2021. Below are some of the planned next steps:

- **Develop a theory of change to conceptualize change at the organizational or partnership level:** SCRI will collect additional information from interviews with BellXcel staff and will use internal data about usage of BellXcel features to further conceptualize a theory of change and logic model focused on the partnership itself. The theory of change and logic model will inform partnership and technical assistance approach and future measurement strategies.
- **Identify levers of change:** BellXcel staff will be interviewed to identify the possible levers and mechanics of the systems changes identified by partners. These interviews will attempt to clarify the specific components of the partnership and technical assistance model, the nature of the BellXcel staff relationships with partner organizations and the technical resources that may be creating and/or facilitating the change.
- **Identify priority impact outcomes:** While a BellXcel partnership could impact a partner organization in a variety of ways, BellXcel may have a stronger interest and ability to influence some areas over others. Using this interview data, interviews with BellXcel staff, as well as other available internal data, SCRI will help BellXcel determine priority areas of impact.
- **Design and implement additional measurement tools:** Interview results and BellXcel staff feedback will be used to develop a specific partner survey to be implemented in the Fall of 2022 across a broader range of partners. SCRI will use the survey results to further quantify impact into key areas, as well as explore the levers and mechanics of key changes.
- **Continue to explore and incorporate frameworks of systems change:** FSG's framework of the six conditions of systems change will be informative to SCRI's continued research on this topic. SCRI will research and explore other frameworks on systems change and incorporate useful concepts, processes, and approaches to better understand the complex processes and outcomes of a BellXcel partnership.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introduction questions:

1. How many years have you been a BellXcel partner?
2. What is your role in your organization?
3. Did you have a role in deciding to partner with BellXcel during the summer of 2020 and/or 2019?
If yes, what role did you play?

Reasons for Partnering with BellXcel:

4. Why did your organization partner with BellXcel during the summer(s) of 2020 and/or 2019?
 - A. What did your organization explicitly need, want, or were looking for partnering with BellXcel?
 - B. [For partners older than 2 yrs] What did you need when you first partnered? What do you need now after many years of partnership? Have your needs/wants changed?
5. What attracted you to the summer product/program? What did you like about the product (or BellXcel)?

How has the partnership with BellXcel impacted or influenced your organization?

6. BellXcel is interested in learning how our partnership with your organization may have impacted or influenced your organization in certain ways. We're hoping to understand more about how BellXcel has influenced your organization beyond youth, teacher and family outcomes.
 - A. Speaking generally, how has partnering with BellXcel affected your organization?
 - B. Have you gained anything from partnering with BellXcel? Did you notice any unanticipated benefits as a result of the partnership?
 - C. Are you doing anything differently, more efficiently, better as a result of the BellXcel partnership?
7. Outside of programming, what is something about BellXcel you would want or wish your organization did?
What would you like to copy from BellXcel and paste into your organization?