

# **Executive Summary** for: Big Thought

## Dallas City of Learning

December 2017



# Executive Summary

In the summer of 2017, Big Thought supported a network of summer learning providers through an initiative called Dallas City of Learning (DCoL). By providing some financial assistance, training, curriculum and supplies, networking, transportation, and other supports, Big Thought sought to increase the likelihood that high quality programming was reaching Dallas youth throughout the summer months.

The Center on Research and Evaluation (CORE) partnered with Big Thought and DCoL partners to first determine whether the aims of the initiative were plausible and evaluable, and second, to collect some initial baseline evidence about the impacts Big Thought had on summer providers and the impacts that summer programming then had for youth.

This evaluation focuses on (1) the supports that Big Thought provided to the network of DCoL sites, (2) characteristics of those sites (namely, access to programming, and the dosage as well as quality of programming), and (3) impacts for participating youth. Multiple data sources and a mixed-methods approach to analyses was utilized to ask and answer 10 orienting evaluation questions.

While all student-level data is not yet available, moderate to strong evidence is emerging about the viability and success of the overall DCoL initiative. First, related to the overall evaluability of the intervention and the feasibility of the data collection plan, this report shows that most data collection strategies were successful and that a large study sample, especially of programs and students was obtained. Throughout the report, reflections on the success of methodologies piloted during this report are offered, and recommendations for planned reductions in ongoing data collection are made.

Notably, the first year of the evaluation shows that support services provided by Big Thought were broad and well-received, and a large group of Dallas youth – primarily in the city’s Southern sector – received engaging programming. Less evident were the direct associations between support services, program characteristics and student outcomes and this was partially due to pending Dallas ISD data.

A summary of the emerging answers to each evaluation question is provided below, or alternatively and update on the status of pending data is provided. Substantive detail about each evaluation question is provided in the body of the report as are findings regarding the integrity of various data sources, which inform recommendations about which data should be collected (and which should not) in summer 2018.

## **1. What support services does Big Thought provide to increase and improve program accessibility, program quality, and student participation (dosage)?**

Big Thought staff provided 87 different training and planning opportunities to 126 partner organizations, representing 842 DCoL staff. This work represented a total of over 3500 hours which focused primarily on targeted content supported, including leadership, social-emotional learning and program quality training. Additionally, Big Thought provided financial support ranging from \$2500 to \$7500+ to 38 sites, invested in Dallas ISD summer learning programs such as Summer Achievers Academy and Thriving Minds Bridge Camp, and over 100 instances of transportation to and from DCoL programs and activities.

## **2. What perceptions do both Big Thought support staff and DCoL program staff have of the support services that Big Thought provides to increase and improve DCoL program accessibility, program quality, and student participation (dosage)?**

Survey data from DCoL staff indicate overall satisfaction and positive regard for the supports that Big Thought staff provided. Interviews with a small group of program staff point to challenges with communicating the precise nature of DCoL to participating sites and logistical challenges related to use of the DCoL platform.

Interview data from Big Thought staff point to bus passes and other transportation support along with sheer proximity to sites as being integral to supporting accessibility to programs. Trainings related to

social-emotional programming seemed to help student-adult rapport as well as generally providing more engaging programming, both of which supported program dosage via motivating students to keep coming back. Finally, art and technology materials helped quality programming overall.

### 3. How accessible are DCoL programs to students?

97% of DCoL programs provided during summer 2017 were free of cost and 87% of students enrolled in a program in a different zip code from their own home address. The majority of programs were provided as intended in the targeted areas of South Dallas.

### 4. What is the rate of and level of engagement with DCoL programs (dosage)?

69,411 participants enrolled in 1,794 scheduled DCoL programs or events. This number represents 38,387 unique individuals who enrolled in 734 programs. Of these, 23,626 had an ID number matching Dallas ISD enrollment rosters. Over 90% of enrolled students attended only one summer program, pointing to opportunities to expand students' exposure to multiple programs in subsequent summers.

Engagement included concepts such as student excitement about coming to the program each day, how hard students tried to learn, how much they perceived students participated in a variety of meaningful activities, and whether students were interested in the things they were learning. Students, caregivers and staff had slightly different perceptions of engagement but all rated programs positively, on average.

### 5. What is the quality of DCoL programs?

Quality was measured using the Six Dimensions of Quality observation tool. On average, quality was basic to proficient. Two strategies were used, and Spot Observations result in systematically higher and more stable estimates of program quality than Running Records. Quality was also measured with survey self-reports. The overall impression of quality was positive; caregivers rated quality more highly than students, and program front-line staff rated program quality more highly than program lead staff.

### 6. What perceived value do students have about (1) their Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and (2) about their attitudes toward school and career related interests (academic growth/achievement)? [Do students perceive the DCoL programs influenced (1) their Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and (2) their attitudes towards school and career related interests (academic growth/achievement)?]

Younger DCoL participants rated their own *social & emotional learning* higher than their older peers; there did not appear to be meaningful differences in social & emotional ratings based on the type of program a student attended (the content focus of the program).

The opposite was true for *career related interests*, where older students rated their programs higher on these concepts than younger students. Older students are more likely to perceive that summer programming is able to help them generate new interests and equip them with skills to succeed in school and career. There was slightly more variation here based on the type of program a student attended, with sites focusing on "storytelling" and "sports and wellness" content being rated the highest in terms of aligning to students' career interests and providing opportunities to explore those interests.

### 7. How do students perform in the first 6 weeks of school following participation in the DCoL summer programming, and in comparison to the previous academic year?

Initial evidence indicates that students who participated in DCoL programming during summer 2017 increased their course performance. Student GPAs, on average, were higher at the beginning of the 2017-18 school year than they were for those same students at the beginning of the previous school year. These findings hold significant limitations, as course grades are assigned to students differently across schools, grade levels, and classrooms. Another limitation to the findings is that we don't yet have a comparison group of students. Comparison groups will be incorporate in later phases.

These GPA increases are small in magnitude but statistically meaningful. Differences are largest for upper elementary students; students who transitioned into 6<sup>th</sup> grade at the beginning of 2017-18 are the only group to see a decrease in average GPA.

Although statistically different, school attendance rates (days attended/days enrolled) between the 2016-17 year and the fall of 2017-18 were not meaningfully different in a practical sense; rates were averaged around 95% for both time periods. Attendance rates are strongest during the upper elementary grades, as high as 97%, and the lowest during middle school, where they dip to an average as low as 91%, which is critically close to chronic absenteeism.

**8. What potentially meaningful associations are there between Big Thought support services and DCoL programs in three areas: (a) program accessibility, (b) program dosage, and (c) program quality?** There is no association between support (the total hours of support per program and the level of in-kind financial support) and perceived access of programs. However, measurement considerations related to the access indicator tools suggest that these findings may not be highly meaningful. There was a positive association between the number of support hours provided and caregivers' ratings of site quality. There was a significant and moderate positive association between the amount of financial support provided a site and program dosage –including the total number of participants a site enrolled and the total number of program hours they provided.

Notably, there was a significant and moderate negative association between the amount of financial support provided and the quality of the site, wherein sites of poorer quality sites received additional funding; this indirectly shows that the sites in most need of support received the most financial backing. This analysis only represents the non-Big Thought NRI partner sites; it does not include Big Thought-coordinated sites nor all programs that Big Thought support financially. Big Thought did provide full support, including financial support reaching nearly \$2 million to other high quality initiatives outside of the NRI stipend support.

Relatively small samples and the point-in-time nature of these data limit our ability to establish robust and meaningful association. Future evaluation work should pay attention to changes in access and changes in quality as an outcome of continued participation in DCoL.

**9. What potentially meaningful associations are there between DCoL programs (accessibility, dosage, and quality) and student outcomes?**

Students of all ages self-reported that their program positively influenced their SEL skills, and students believed that the programs they attended influenced SEL skills more than caregivers held this same belief. Students who perceived their programs more favorable (more access, quality and dosage) also believed that those programs positively impacted their SEL skills and college and career interests. However, there was no association between dosage and student perception of outcomes was observed. Most notably, the program quality score obtained by third-party observers is positively and statistically associated with higher student perceptions of SEL and higher student perceptions of the value of programs on school and career-related ability and interests.

Student perceptions of program quality, self-ratings of program engagement, and program dosage are all positively associated with higher student GPAs at the beginning of the 2017-18 school year<sup>1</sup>. Program dosage, as measured by hours of dosage and number of programs attended, is positively associated with school attendance during the fall semester of 2017-18. These associations do not imply a causal relationship. Rather, these correlations suggest that students who attend more summer programming tend to also have stronger GPAs and attendance rates.

The number of programs attended by a student and the number of hours of summer programming are both positive significant predictors of student GPA at the beginning of the school year *above and beyond these students' typical GPA* prior to summer 2017 programming. Findings indicate that for each program attended by a student, GPA is predicted to increase by 0.56 grade points, and that for every 10 hours of summer programming, GPA is predicted to increase by .06 grade points.

**10. Are potentially meaningful associations in question #9 influenced by student factors, such as current level of academic achievement, ethnicity, or residence location?**

In regards to in-school attendance rates following summer 2017, findings said more about how the groups of students differ in terms of program attendance and school attendance in general than how program factors relate to school attendance. Students in the 8-11 age group are the only group with significant variability in the number of programs attended. Most students in the other age groups attended just 1 or 2 programs. On average, Hispanic students had higher (96%) in-school attendance prior to summer 2017 than their non-Hispanic peers (94.5%), so there is less room for movement. As a group, failing and at-risk students received relatively low amounts of dosage compared to the more varying amounts of dosage of their on-track peers. On-track students averaged 13 more hours (60 vs 47; SDs are 53.4 and 20.2) over the summer compared to their failing peers.

In regards to in-school grade point average at the beginning of the school year following summer 2017, findings indicated that several meaningful associations between program factors and GPA are influenced by student factors. Hours of program dosage is more strongly associated with an improved GPA for Black students as compared to Hispanic students or other non-Black peers. Hispanic students are more likely to improve their school performance if they perceive that the program they are in is helping them achieve higher and if they are more engaged in programming. Program quality, as measured by an independent observer, has a stronger and positive association with GPA for males as compared to females. Whether or not a student is Hispanic moderates the relationship between student engagement and student GPA; Hispanic students may receive more benefit from a program when they feel they are highly engaged compared to their non-Hispanic peers.

<sup>1</sup> While GPA has numerous limitations as a measure of student academic achievement, it is a reasonable estimate of student achievement, particularly when the student population is diverse and representing a relatively large number of schools and classrooms. GPA is positively associated with both standardized assessment outcomes and student attendance rates and negatively associated with rate of behavior referrals. In other words, evidence from a sample of North Texas students suggests that higher GPA is associated with better assessment outcomes, higher attendance rates, and a lower number of behavior referrals. For high school students, GPA has a moderate to strong statistically significant correlation with STAAR End-of-Course scores ( $r=0.46$  to  $0.61$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). For elementary and middle school students, GPA has a moderate to strong statistically significant correlation with STAAR reading and STAAR math outcomes (for STAAR reading,  $r=0.57$  to  $0.72$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; for STAAR math,  $r=0.49$  to  $0.66$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Further, GPA has a negative statistically significant correlation with number of behavior referrals for both elementary ( $r=-0.2$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and secondary students ( $r=-0.25$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and GPA has a positive statistically significant correlation with student attendance rates for both elementary ( $r=0.21$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and secondary students ( $r=0.5$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).