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This brief describes BellXcel's summer learning quality improvement process that:

- Reflects the needs and input of BellXcel practitioners to enable practical, useful monitoring across many BellXcel sites;
- Provides practical quality assessment tools that were created with a "backward design model," identifying what ought to be in place and then selecting research-based indicators that would assess the extent to which those elements were being practiced;
- Is informed by research-based domains of program quality that are applicable to both in-person and remote learning experiences; namely: program administration, youth management, evaluation and assessment, family engagement, culture and climate, and curriculum & instruction.

Quality Can't Wait: Cultivating Continuous Improvement

Introduction

Summer is a brief but powerful opportunity to work with youth and their families to close persistent achievement gaps between lower and higher income families.¹ For over 25 years, BellXcel has been harnessing the power of summer time to empower its partners to bolster the academic and social and emotional skills and competencies of their scholars.

The Sperling Center for Research and Innovation (SCRI) analyzed BellXcel's unique approach to continuous improvement in summer. This brief presents SCRI's review of BellXcel's quality assessment process and its dedication to guiding partners through continuous quality improvement.

BellXcel recognizes that its summer learning providers need tools and processes that will inform immediate improvements in a way that does not disrupt the learning process, but does provide actionable insights to inform both immediate and long-term program improvements.

In partnerships with school districts, community-based organizations and national organizations such as Scholastic Education and the YMCA, BellXcel supports the creation of holistic summer learning programs that combine academics, enrichment, social-emotional learning (SEL), professional development, community and family engagement. In 2019 alone, summer programs delivered by its national network of partners, and powered by the BellXcel model, reached 18,650 scholars across 163 sites nationwide. Scholars gained 2 months of reading skills and 2 months of math skills, and they improved critical social and emotional competencies such as self-confidence, cooperation, and academic motivation.²

¹ Schwartz, H., McCombs, J., Augustine, C. & Leschitz, J. (2018). Getting to work on summer: Recommended practices for success, 2nd Edition. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation
² BellXcel 2019 Summer Impact Report: https://www.bellxcel.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/National%20Summer%20Impact%20Report_2019_final.pdf

Central to BellXcel's approach to summer learning is its commitment to rapid-cycle continuous improvement because quality can't wait. Unlike school year afterschool programming that has an 8-month window of time to make quality improvements, summer programs have, at best, 6-8 weeks to implement a robust quality assurance process that includes: planning, professional development, data collection, coaching and support. BellXcel recognizes that its summer learning providers need tools and processes that will inform immediate improvements in a way that does not disrupt the learning process, but does provide actionable insights to inform both immediate and long-term program improvements. This is accomplished through using research-based indicators of program quality and tools intentionally designed for nimble, rapid-cycle improvements. It also involves comprehensive debriefs across multiple touch points (site level, partner level, national level) to inform immediate and long-term quality improvement.

Getting Started on Continuous Improvement

Developing a process to measure quality is an essential first step on the road to continuous improvement, enabling providers to understand and respond to challenges and successes in implementation. Through nearly three decades

of experience and evidence, BellXcel has identified six research-based quality domains that contribute to educational and enriching experiences for youth, families, and staff.



Program administration: Planning and launching programming and daily operations, including staffing, training, and scheduling.



Curriculum and instruction: Evidence of planning and execution of activities and instruction that addresses the learning, and developmental needs of youth in programs to empower academic success.



Family/caregiver engagement: The systems and activities that provide opportunities for families to engage regularly and ensure families are aware of youth activities and how they can support.



Youth management: The secure, effective systems and policies for youth recruitment, attendance, and retention.



Culture and climate: Evidence of social-emotional learning, positive behavior management, emotional safety, and relationship building, which create a safe and welcoming environment for learning and engagement.



Assessment and evaluation: The systems for collecting and using data to inform instruction and continuous improvement.

These six domains of BellXcel's quality framework form the basis for its summer learning quality improvement process.

Laying the Groundwork for Rapid-Cycle Continuous Improvement

BellXcel's quality improvement process is designed to assess alignment with the six research-based program quality domains previously stated and to provide partners with data that can be leveraged for program improvement. The summer rapid cycle assessment approach consists of a simple formula:



As the formula depicts rapid cycle continuous improvement is more than just assessment; it's a series of supports for early and effective planning, professional development, data collection and analysis, and ongoing coaching at the staff and leadership levels. When combined, these supports lead to improved practices and better youth outcomes.

From the outset of its partnership with providers, BellXcel encourages them to cultivate a growth mindset not only with their scholars, but within themselves and their programming. Early on, BellXcel works with program leaders to help them understand the importance of continuous improvement to the well-being of their scholars. While BellXcel does have a rigorous approach to assessing the impact of its programming on scholars, it is equally, if not more, committed to a continuous improvement approach that helps providers learn what is working, what is not, and make necessary program improvements to enhance the scholar experience—in real time over a short six week window of time. Doing this legwork

before engaging in a quality improvement process avoids the potential for a “gotcha” accountability mindset and helps providers be more open to feedback and the process itself.

Another important piece of laying the groundwork for a smooth summer quality improvement process is effective planning. In the RAND publication, *Getting to Work on Summer Learning*,³ researchers recommend conducting early, robust planning and, in fact, suggest it might be the most important characteristic of a strong summer program. Embracing this 2013 finding, BellXcel begins working with its current providers on summer programming immediately following the close of summer programs, supporting months of planning before programs begin. During this time BellXcel works with program leaders across all six program domains including an early focus on program administration and youth management so that the policies and procedures are in place for effective staff recruitment and training, and to secure effective systems for scholar recruitment, attendance, and retention.

These early planning efforts are essential to ensure that programs are ready for full implementation by the time they open in the summer, and therefore are well aligned to expectations and ready to participate in the quality improvement process.

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Features of the Summer Quality Improvement Process

BellXcel has identified several features of effective quality improvement, all aimed at ensuring that providers understand and feel included as partners in every step of the process. BellXcel provides the tools, professional development, and services to either conduct self-led or BellXcel-led observations. Programs decide which approach best meets their learning needs. In both scenarios, BellXcel collects information and evidence from three sources: interviews, observations, and documentation. If a program is conducting self-led quality assurance, a member of the site's leadership team will lead the evaluation process. If a program is engaged in BellXcel-led quality assurance, a trained quality evaluator will visit a site for one full day.

Quality Improvement Process Features

1. Pre-visit email outreach
2. Pre-observation debrief
3. Practical observation format
4. Post-observation debrief
5. Post-visit email
6. Integration of the quality assessment metrics into the end of program dashboard

1. **Pre-visit email outreach:** This critical first step sets the tone for the quality improvement process, laying out what providers can expect, providing key logistical information, and ensuring that providers are prepared for the observations and interviews.
2. **Pre-observation debrief:** Prior to the observation, program leaders and instructional coaches, if available, are interviewed so that the evaluator can learn more about the program, what they can expect to see, the schedule and layout of the site, and any anomalies that day that might impact the observations (e.g., there are a lot of substitute staff because the district required professional development that pulled many of the regular teachers away from the program). The interview takes place 30-40 minutes prior to the start of the day's program and includes questions such as:

- Overall, how do you feel about how your site is implementing the model?
- How does site leadership collect and provide feedback on instruction and scholar experiences?
- Are teachers using assessment data to inform instruction and adapt to learning needs?
- How satisfied are you with scholar enrichment opportunities and experiences?
- What strategies have you used to engage parents?
- What can BellXcel do better or differently to support your continuous improvement?

Responses to these questions help the evaluator understand practices that may not be easily observable on that day, such as family engagement strategies or events, or staff participation in professional development prior to the start of the summer.

3. **Practical observation format:** After the initial interview, evaluators stay for a full day of programming to observe arrival, community time, instructional and enrichment activities. BellXcel recommends that evaluators observe 20-30 minutes in each class, and try to observe as many classes as possible so they can see multiple forms of instruction and other indicators that speak to quality instructional and enrichment practices. Ideally, evaluators will observe a wide variety of activities, grade levels (when applicable), and instructional styles throughout the day.

BellXcel's Quality Observation Tool Example

Culture & Climate				
Evidence of social-emotional learning, positive behavior management, emotional safety, and relationship building, which together create a safe and welcoming environment for learning and engagement.				
INDICATOR	SCALE			EVIDENCE EXAMPLES
<i>Before reflecting on the next indicators, first consider the social-emotional skills, youth behaviors, and competencies that your program is trying to develop in young people. These should serve as the framework for the next indicators.</i>				
1 Staff members are checking-in regularly with youth to encourage trusting and secure connections.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family communication log Staff/family conferences Feedback from families, staff, and youth
2 Staff members and leaders implement strategies that support positive youth behaviors and engagement in a remote environment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback from families, staff, and youth Observed instruction or communication between youth and staff
3 Staff members consistently implement activities to support	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly lesson plans Observed instruction or

Observation rubrics are utilized to document evidence of the six program domains in action:



Program administration



Family/caregiver engagement



Youth Management



Curriculum and instruction



Culture and climate



Assessment and evaluation

Evaluators also review key documents that support effective implementation (e.g., lesson plans, assessment data). This information includes:

- Compliance information, such as program schedule, food menu, evacuation plans, etc.
 - Site-administration materials to show examples of partner communication, incident/injury reports, etc.
 - Instructional Coach materials to show communication with teachers, assessment data used to inform instruction, etc.
 - Teacher lesson plans (in each classroom)
4. **Post-observation debriefs:** At the end of the full day of observation, the evaluator meets with the program leader to review what was observed and provide some immediate feedback on observed areas of strength as well as opportunities for improvement. The evaluator also offers suggestions to support the leader in making adjustments that could improve program quality for the remainder of the program session, pointing to specific examples of what was observed and probing for greater detail on inconsistencies across classrooms.
5. **Post-visit email:** The post-visit email, prepared by the evaluator, offers more comprehensive details of the site visit, noting the strengths and opportunities for improvement. It is sent to the program leader within 24-48 hours following the visit and provides a more in-depth summary of the observations, the pre- and post-interviews, and the areas of strengths and opportunities for improvement (both immediate and long-term). It does not provide any numerical ratings from the visit (e.g. the program received a 3 out of 4 in curriculum and instruction) as this is calculated later and provided in the end of program data dashboard as an average of all the sites/programs observed within a specific partnership.
6. **Integration of the quality assessment metrics into the end of program dashboard:** Quality assessment metrics

are one aspect of BellXcel's comprehensive approach to evaluation and continuous improvement. Other aspects of evaluation that inform continuous improvement are:

- Academic growth over the summer based on Star Assessments in literacy and mathematics
- Enrollment and average daily attendance
- A survey of family perceptions of BellXcel
- A survey of staff perceptions of BellXcel
- A survey of youth perceptions of BellXcel

At the end of a program cycle, BellXcel provides partners with a summer dashboard which offers a comprehensive view of how the program performed across all of the implementation, quality, and outcomes metrics as listed above. Acknowledging that many factors influence results, BellXcel offers partners a set of questions to guide a reflection session with the site team to help identify potential influences for both positive and not as positive results. It underscores the importance of discussing goals that were not met, and what a site or program might do differently in the following summer to improve. Importantly, BellXcel encourages its providers to look at its quality assurance data alongside of its implementation and outcomes data to get a full picture of summer programming as depicted in the dashboard—what worked, what didn't work, and why?

Sample Questions to Guide Summer Reflections

Scholar Population

- ✓ How was the behavior and attendance of scholars?
- ✓ Did attendance vary on certain weeks/days?
- ✓ How were special education needs met?
- ✓ How was Dual Language Learner needs met?
- ✓ What were the scholars' performance levels in pre-test data? Were curriculum & instruction aligned to academic needs?

Leadership & Support

- ✓ Did the site receive adequate support from local program leadership?
- ✓ How was the support offered to the site by the national BellXcel Partner Success Lead and team?

As the sample reflection questions illustrate, BellXcel also encourages candid reflection on its own supports to sites. As a national organization that is committed to continuous quality improvement, this reflects that BellXcel “walks the talk” of an organization that uses data to reflect on its own systems, processes, and tools thereby driving its own continuous improvement.

Ninety two percent (92%) of partners said using BellXcel’s quality tools (reflection and/or observation) helped improve program quality.⁴

Adapting Quality Assessment & Improvement for Remote Teaching and Learning

As summer 2020 approached and it became clear that BellXcel Summer would be remote, BellXcel and its partners needed to adapt quickly to ensure that scholars had the same quality summer learning experiences as they did prior to the pandemic. Teaming up with Scholastic Education, it developed BellXcel Remote® which provides all of the tools and resources to design, organize, implement, and assess a remote instructional environment with a strong social emotional learning approach. It blends print and optional digital components to address a range of technology scenarios. It defines remote, distance-learning to include virtual/online instruction, learning that is guided by a staff member using printed materials provided to youth and families, and various combinations of both.

At that time, assessing the quality of remote learning experiences was relatively uncharted territory. The limited evidence-base on the quality of remote learning experiences steered BellXcel toward enlisting its research and evaluation arm, the Sperling Center for Research and Innovation (SCRI), to develop quality reflection tool that focuses primarily on program structures and factors that enable quality learning experiences. Grounded in the six domains of quality that guide all of BellXcel’s programming, the Remote Quality Reflection Tool offers indicators, examples, and a simple three-point rating scale.

The tool is an adaptation of BellXcel’s quality assessment rubric. The BellXcel and SCRI teams reviewed the existing rubric through the lens of what data could be captured without

in-person observation. This led them to keep some indicators, eliminate many others, and adapt some to a remote context. Three examples illustrate the ways that the in-person tool was adapted:

- In-person observation indicator states: “site has daily/weekly schedule”; the revised remote indicator recognizes that families will be monitoring their scholar’s participation in BellXcel and so added: “site has daily/weekly schedule for each teacher that is communicated to families and youth.”
- In-person observation indicators states: “lessons showing differentiation.” Given that it is much less feasible to do this in a remote environment, the remote indicator was changed and merged with others to be “adapted lessons based on scholar learning needs and remote learning conditions.”
- Recognizing the many supports families and scholars needed over the summer of 2020, from social and emotional supports, to food security, to wellness checks, BellXcel added a new remote indicator: “The program has systems in place which enable staff to reach out to families/caregivers frequently and consistently through a variety of methods (text, email, etc.)”

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In addition to adapting the tool itself, SCRI also adapted guidance on how to use the quality reflection tool in Summer 2020. First and foremost, the tool needed to be aimed at self-reflection because in-person observation was not possible due to public health conditions. Relatedly, then, a full day of “reflection” was not feasible, nor desirable, so the tool is designed for a 30-60-minute reflection by a program leader, ideally after discussing and engaging with staff and, when feasible, “dropping in” on remote learning sessions. Finally, because reflecting on remote learning is fairly new, the tool offers many concrete examples of evidence related to specific indicators. SCRI developed a series of short videos to provide additional context for the purpose and use of the tool.

The Path Forward

The Remote Quality Reflection Tool was adapted for open-source use and became publicly available in June 2020 to support leaders implementing remote programming to drive improvement through research-based indicators. But that isn't the end of this story. A key feature of the release was a request to help BellXcel and SCRI understand how a provider used the tool. When the tool is downloaded, the user receives a survey about their experiences using and/or reviewing the tool. SCRI intends to use this information to continue to modify the tool to best meet the needs for BellXcel's remote summer learning partners. To better understand point-of-service remote summer learning experiences, SCRI adapted the family, staff, and youth surveys used by BellXcel partners. In keeping with its approach to continuous quality improvement, BellXcel and SCRI will analyze survey responses alongside quality reflections to continue to refine and improve its approach to remote learning.

No one's crystal ball can predict what public education will look like in 2021 and beyond. Summer 2020 and school year 2020-21 will continue to provide invaluable opportunities to innovate and test research-informed strategies to support learning whether it takes place at home, in a classroom, or in a community setting.

As more is learned about the implementation of quality remote distance-learning, SCRI will share actionable insights with the field.

Appendix: [Remote Quality Reflection Tool - www.bellxcel.org/remote-quality](http://www.bellxcel.org/remote-quality)