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July 29, 2021

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

RE: Comments from The Wallace Foundation on Summer Learning and SEL in *Proposed Priorities and Definitions: Secretary's Supplemental Priorities and Definitions for Discretionary Grants Programs*

Dear Secretary Cardona:

On behalf of The Wallace Foundation, I would like to thank you for your thoughtful, ongoing consideration of what a comprehensive post-COVID education agenda for all our students entails. The mission of The Wallace Foundation to foster equity and improvements in learning and enrichment for young people, and in the arts for everyone. We seek to develop and share credible evidence that can help practitioners and policymakers in the fields we work enhance their effectiveness. As the director of the learning and enrichment unit of the foundation – which has a focus on youth development through summer learning, afterschool, and social and emotional learning – we very much appreciate the priorities that you have highlighted. While nearly all of your priorities resonate, we would like to make one recommendation and highlight how research we have funded supports two of your priorities.

Recommendation

Our recommendation that we respectfully make is for the Department to define what it means by “out of school time settings” in Priority 2 (a) (5), and explicitly include all kinds of programs that occur during the summer, before and after school, in the evenings, and on weekends; located in school buildings or community settings; managed or operated by schools, community organizations, parks, camps, faith-based organizations and other entities; and serving children and youth in grades K-12. Otherwise, readers may equate “out of school time” with the common understanding of afterschool as referring to the hours immediately following school, and conclude summer learning and enrichment programs and other approaches are not eligible for funding.

Priority 4: Meeting Student Social, Emotional, and Academic Needs

Social and emotional learning (SEL) experiences can play meaningful and important roles in helping young people recover from the damaging impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and in promoting educational equity. Just this week we released a new guide to social-emotional learning programs that noted “it is more important now than ever to dedicate adequate time and attention to addressing children’s mental health and social-emotional wellbeing – to help them process their pandemic experience, cope with uncertainty and change, rebuild social connections, and readjust to group learning environments.”ⁱ

Much of this starts with attending to the social and emotional needs of adults. A 2020 study by the RAND Corporation we funded found that teachers interviewed saw the development of adults’ abilities

to establish and maintain their own healthy relationships as the fundamental precursor for being able to teach their students how to do the same.ⁱⁱ These findings are particularly aligned with Subpriority 4(a), which focuses on the importance of developing and supporting educator and school capacity to support SEL experiences.

Through our six-community Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative, we have learned (among other things) that a positive climate is a crucial foundation for promoting social and emotional skills; as RAND noted, “conditions that promote students’ feeling of safety and their engagement in learning are fundamental to ensuring that students are able to benefit from instruction and other supports... a positive climate is associated with the development of academic skills and SEL competencies.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Priority 2: Promoting Equity in Student Access to Educational Resources, Opportunities, and Welcoming Environments

A timely example of promoting equity for students is in the opportunity provided by summer as a time for learning and enrichment. Summer programs have been demonstrated to produce a wide range of benefits for young people, including safety, physical and mental health, social and emotional development, and academic learning, according to a National Academies consensus study.^{iv} However, not all summer programs are equal, and not all children have equal or equitable access to summer programs.^v Summer is a time when disparities are perpetuated or exacerbated,^{vi} underscoring the importance of leveraging community assets in planning, development, design, and evaluation of programs. Some, but not all, summer programs are specifically designed to achieve both academic and non-academic outcomes. Research funded by our foundation found that when such programs were targeted to the needs of participants, had programming linked to desired outcomes, were of sufficient duration, and promoted strong attendance, meaningful positive results for children were achieved.^{vii} We know through our own work and that of others that there is research-based guidance into how these kinds of programs, combining academics and non-academics, can be implemented.^{viii}

We would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you very much.



Gigi Antoni
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The Wallace Foundation

ⁱ [Navigating SEL: Looking Inside & Across 33 Leading SEL Programs: A Practical Resource for Schools and OST Providers, 2nd ed.](#), Stephanie M. Jones, Katharine E. Brush, et al., The EASEL Lab, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2021.

ⁱⁱ [Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning](#), Heather L. Schwartz, Laura S. Hamilton, et al., RAND Corporation, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Schwartz, Hamilton, et al., 2020.

^{iv} [Shaping Summertime Experiences: Opportunities to Promote Healthy Development and Well-Being for Children and Youth](#), National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

^v National Academies, 2019.

^{vi} National Academies, 2019.

^{vii} [Every Summer Counts: A Longitudinal Analysis of Outcomes from the National Summer Learning Project](#), Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Catherine Augustine, et. al., RAND Corporation, 2020; National Academies, 2019.

^{viii} [Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success, 2nd ed.](#), Heather L. Schwartz, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Catherine Augustine, RAND Corporation, 2018