Summer of Discovery

2024 Project Summary

Beyond School Bells
nebraskachildren

Summer of Discovery

Beyond School Bells Goal Alignment

Quality Sustain Policy Programming

The Summer of Discovery 2024 grants were designed to support summer programming that piques student interests, explores exciting local careers and partnerships, and discovers new paths for the future of summer learning. The 2024 grant built on the youth voice focus implemented in Summer of Youth 2023 by using a new round of youth brainstorming to identify areas of student interest.

Three high-priority programming categories were developed based on the areas students said they most wanted to explore:

- **Experiential Learning and Local Partnerships:** Engage local organizations, initiatives, and/or projects and provide opportunity for youth to impact local community.
- **Movement and Outdoor Learning:** Programming that allows youth to engage in outdoor, hands-on, experiential activities
- **Think Make Create and STEM:** Engage youth to identify exciting, engaging, and inspiring programs that they want to do with hands-on, minds-on projects and experiences.

SUPPORTED COMMUNITIES

Eleven Nebraska communities received funding for Summer of Discovery 2024

Alliance
Broken Bow
Fremont
Garden County
Humboldt
Kearney
North Platte
Omaha
Red Cloud
Walthill
York

SUMMER OF DISCOVERY GRANTS SUPPORTED:

1043 Total students at grantee sites

51% Female **49%** Male

78% Elementary, grades K-5

12% Middle school, grades 6-8

9% High school, grades 9-12

21 Clubs **8** Camps **59** Field trips

29 Programming strands

16 Family engagement events

Afterschool programs developed **25** new partnerships in Summer 2024!

Note: Less than 1% of participants were graduates from the Class of 2024 whose grade level was reported as "Other"

$162,898

Funds awarded to programs in 2024

Programming

Summer of Discovery funds supported a variety of different programming types and events.

CLUBS

BSB defines a club as a themed learning experience within the larger summer program schedule, offered during part of the program day. Clubs supported by the grant provided hands-on activities such as gardening, cooking, volunteering, disc golf, geocaching, acting, and set building. BSB provides funding for supplies (e.g., tools, curriculum) that enable programs to replicate clubs during the school year or in future summers, extending impact to more students.

- **7** grantee programs provided clubs for students using BSB funds
- **21** total clubs were supported
- **6** programs invested in long-term club supplies (e.g., garden beds)
- **12** clubs were reported as replicable because of BSB-funded purchases

"Without this grant, most of those clubs would not have happened at our summer program because we did not have the financial resources to support all of those activities."

CAMPS

BSB defines camps as one- to two-week programs devoted entirely to a single theme. The most common themes reported were art (3 camps) and outdoor/nature exploration (3 camps)

- **3** grantee programs provided camps to students using BSB funds
- **8** total camps were supported

"Our students got to learn sports with our local high school sports teams because of this grant. Our students were able to go on a regional field trip to Fort Robinson State Park and learn history and explore."

PROGRAMMING STRANDS

A programming strand is defined as a specific theme that regular programming is offered around that was not structured as a club or a camp. (e.g., BSB supplied funds that supported general STEM activities for a STEM programming strand over the summer). The most common themes reported were engineering (6), science and/or technology (6), and gardening (5).

- **7** programs provided programming strands to students using BSB funds
- **29** total programming strands were supported

"STEAM programming has been elevated due to the incorporation of two 3D printers and a laser cutter. Youth will be able to design their own projects using design principles, and then see their project come to life using technology."

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

Family engagement events strengthen the bridge between programs and home, helping parents understand and support what their children are learning beyond the school day (BOSTnet, 2021). These connections build trust, increase participation, and create a shared sense of investment in youth success. The most frequently reported summer event themes were BBQ or outdoor meals (5), STEM (3), and end-of-club family events (3).

- **8** grantee programs held family engagement events using BSB funds
- **16** total events were supported

"[The grant helped fund our] end-of-year BBQ. During this BBQ, we held horseback riding and a color run. We had so much fun, and had lots of great conversations to end the summer camp."

FIELD TRIPS

Beyond School Bells recognizes the powerful educational impact of field trips. Providing students with experiences such as museum and science center visits, live theater performances, and historical or natural landmarks can increase students' knowledge and interest in subjects such as science, the arts, history, and career exploration. In addition, field trips support the development of mindsets and behaviors like curiosity, critical-thinking, and tolerance for different opinions, which can prove valuable in both the classroom and the workforce (Greene et al., 2014; Uppin & Timoštšuk, 2024). Increased benefits have been noted for students living in rural areas, as well as economically disadvantaged or racial minority students (Greene et al., 2014; Stern et al., 2022; Whitesell, 2016).

Common field trip destinations for Summer of Discovery programs included local pools (5), museums (3), and science centers (3).

- **7** grantee programs took students on field trips using BSB funds
- **59** total field trips were supported

"It gave the students an opportunity to visit a museum that they may otherwise never be able to attend due to distance and cost. The Luminarium provided so much knowledge and unique experiences for our students."

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Eight grantees offered **full-day programs** (5+ hours per day), two sites had **half-day programs** (3-4 hours), and one site was **less than half day** (<3 hours per day).

Summer program lengths ranged from 5 weeks to 11 weeks.

Challenges and Future Plans

Grantees reported about summer challenges and future plans. Some noted attendance issues, from unexpectedly high turnout to inconsistent daily participation, but the most common concern was funding—both ongoing gaps and uncertainty tied to ending grants or budget cuts from districts and partners. Many directors emphasized that their ability to expand or diversify programming for Summer 2025 depends on securing additional funds. Several also expressed gratitude for BSB's 2024 support and plan to continue seeking BSB grants.

"We would like to continue the course next year as we have the past two summers with our BSB funding opportunities. Our students have become very interested in the experiential learning opportunities and our parents are so very appreciative of the activities provided."

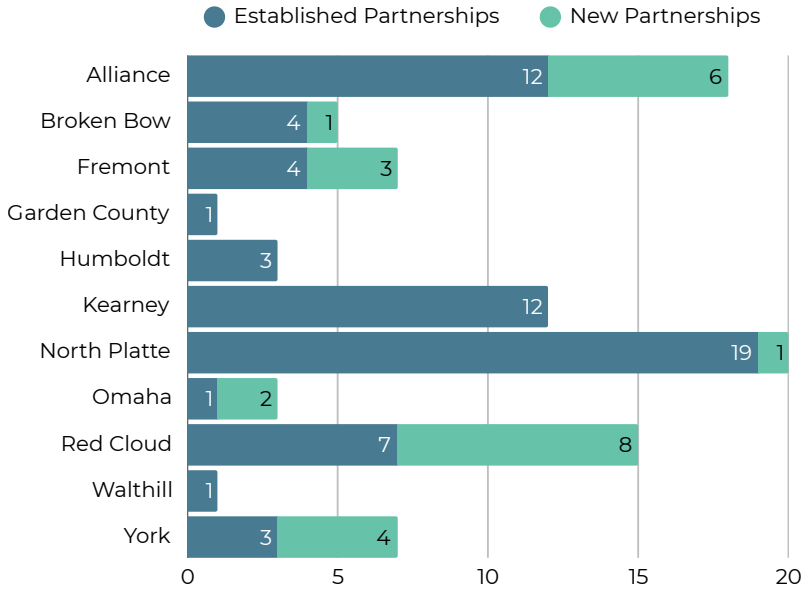
91%: Ten grantees shared plans and/or goals for offering future summer programming.

73%: Eight grantees reported plans to continue programming into the 2024-2025 school year.

"Depending on funding, we will continue our summer program and field trips…With academics paired with fun activities, we keep our students engaged daily and do not want it to end."

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Grantees reported **92 partnerships overall**. Established relationships—those that have been active for more than one summer—accounted for 67 of those reported, and programs developed **25 new partnerships** for the Summer of Discovery.



"These collaborations not only enrich the students' experiences but also allow businesses to make a meaningful impact by providing opportunities that broaden the students' horizons and foster growth in ways they may not have experienced without such support."

"There are lots of students that attend when they come because they really enjoy their activities and learning new things."

~Program Directors

Summary

The Summer of Discovery 2024 supported engagement and learning opportunities for **1043 students** at **11 programs** in Nebraska. Research consistently affirms the value of hands-on, engaging summer programming. High-quality summer learning opportunities improve regular attenders' academic outcomes, especially in reading and math (Augustine et al., 2016). They also foster critical social and intrapersonal skills, such as communication, resilience, and teamwork, that help students succeed at school and in their daily lives (National Academies, 2019).

A hallmark of the Summer of Discovery grant is the requirement that programs gather student input and develop summer programming based on youth interests and suggestions. The focus on youth-identified topics like STEM, experiential learning, and outdoor activities not only enhanced students' skills but also sparked curiosity and a passion for learning beyond the classroom. The variety of programs, including clubs, camps, and family engagement events, provided hands-on activities that motivated students to expand upon their existing knowledge, explore new interests, and learn alongside and share their accomplishments with their families. Field trips to museums, science centers, and local pools further enriched their experiences, allowing students to connect theoretical knowledge with real-world applications.

The evidence of successful programming and growth in established community partnerships indicates lasting positive changes for programs and the students they serve. Despite challenges like funding and attendance issues, program directors expressed optimism for the future, highlighting the potential for revisiting or expanding their Summer of Discovery 2024 activities to reach school-year attenders and participants at future summer sessions. This reflects a commitment to not only sustain programming but also to continuously improve the out-of-school learning experience for Nebraska students.

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Tools that include AI technology were used to edit or improve portions of the narrative text in this report.