

ESSER III

SUMMARY REPORT



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OVERVIEW OF ESSER III

The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER), administered by the U.S. Department of Education in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, provided emergency financial assistance to public school districts nationwide.

ESSER III funding allowed state and local education agencies to ensure safe in-person instruction, address unfinished learning, and support evidence-based, sustainable programs that mitigated the pandemic's impact on students.

In May 2021, the State Board approved the creation of the ESSER Collaborative ELO in partnership with Beyond School Bells (BSB)—Nebraska's statewide afterschool and summer learning network and a program of Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF). This collaboration supported the distribution and administration of ESSER III funds for summer and expanded learning programs. The Nebraska

Department of Education (NDE) served as the fiscal agent, with NCFF-BSB providing technical assistance, support, and professional learning.

ESSER ELO COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITIES

To identify highly impacted communities and sites, the NDE triangulated school identification (e.g., CSI, TSI, ATSI) and achievement data, COVID-19 impact, and measures of a community's ability to respond to crisis (social vulnerability index). ESSER III dollars were provided to highly impacted districts with pre-existing after-school and summer programs and to start new programs that would help students recover learning loss from the pandemic. Selected communities were categorized into Incubator, Accelerator, or Accelerator with Incubator sites.

- **Incubator sites** were newly developed programs and/or sites that do not receive 21st Century Community Learning Center funds.
- **Accelerator sites** were established programs and/or sites that receive 21st Century Community Learning Center funds in addition to ESSER funding.
- **Accelerator with Incubator sites** were established programs that added additional new programming sites with ESSER funds.



WHO WE SERVED

ESSER COLLABORATIVE ELO COMMUNITIES



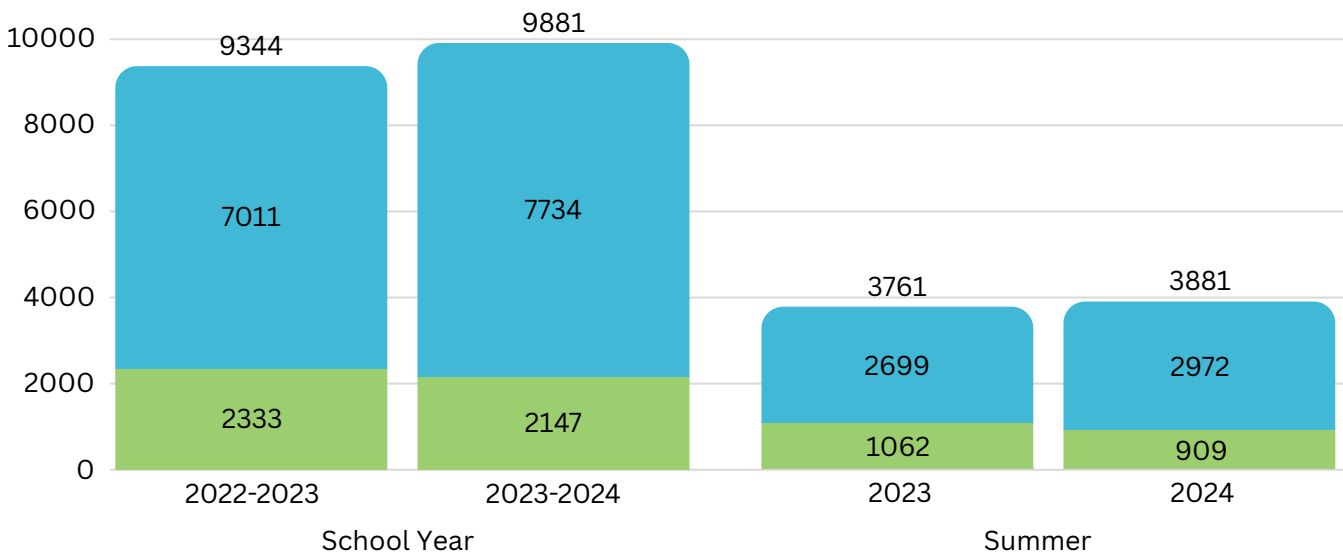
ESSER grant funds supported students from

123 total sites

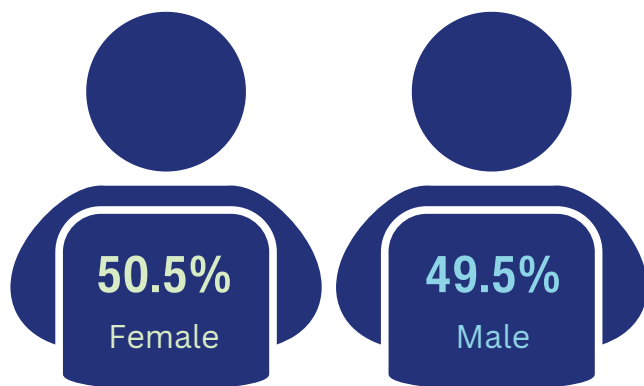
35 districts

28 of Nebraska's 93 counties

From fall 2022 to summer 2024, programs reported overall increases in school year and summer program participation



ESSER-funded afterschool programs served **17,351** unique students

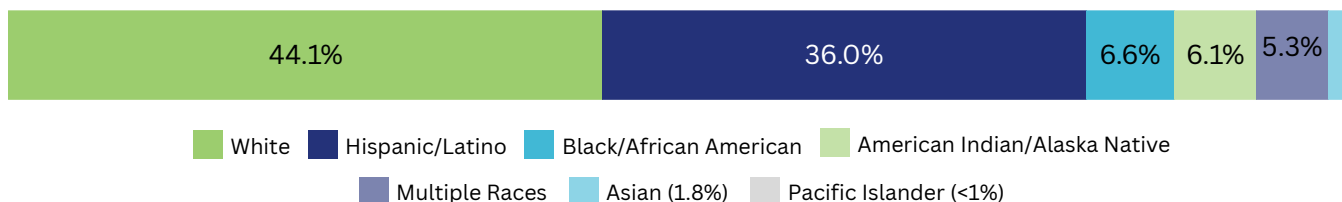


20.5% of participants at ESSER programs qualified for Special Education Services



15.8% of the students served were English Learners

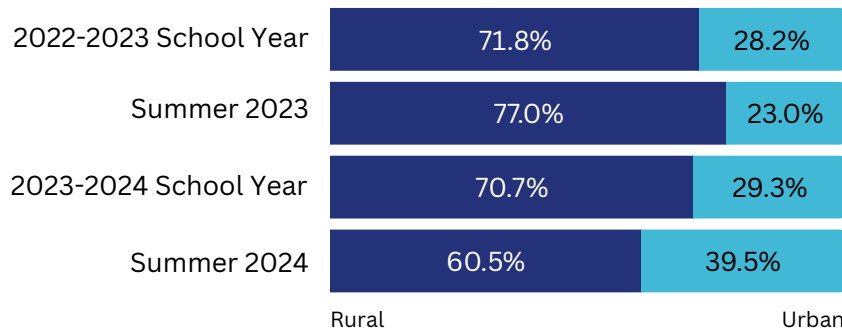
Most participants identified as White or Hispanic/Latino



The majority of students were elementary age, with the highest percentage of secondary students reported in Summer 2023

% of Participants by Grade Level	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
2022-2023 School Year	64.5%	25.0%	10.5%
Summer 2023	61.6%	26.6%	11.7%
2023-2024 School Year	63.4%	26.6%	10.1%
Summer 2024	72.4%	18.1%	9.5%

Programs served a higher percentage of students from rural communities in every reporting period



PROGRAM STRUCTURE

AFTERSCHOOL STAFF

Sufficient staff funding is essential for afterschool and summer programs to provide safe environments and high-quality programming. Site staff responsibilities included supervision, academic support, activity creation and development, and collaboration with other staff, caregivers, teachers, and community members. Growing strong staff-student relationships where students know they are valued helped to create a community where students felt free to develop their confidence with new or challenging enrichment activities and to connect with peers. ESSER III funds enabled many sites to build and support the staffing teams needed to serve their communities.

“We would not have been able to offer the diversity and number of clubs that we did without the ESSER III grant. The **funding paid for the teachers to be able to offer the variety of clubs** that we had this year.”

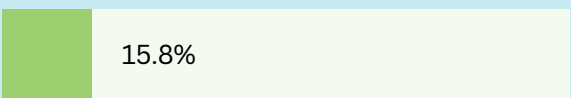
“ESSER III **grant allowed for our program to be fully staffed** and we were able to take on every child who turned in an application.”

Covid-impact

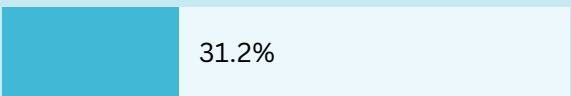
During 2022-2023, staffing shortages were felt everywhere, including afterschool programs. Many programs worked to leverage their youth workforce to help meet staffing needs. This allowed for near-peer role models and provided job experience for high school or college students considering careers in education or working with children.

Youth Work Force

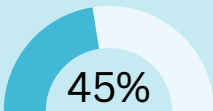
Both in Accelerator and Incubator sites, college students and high school students made up a significant portion of the workforce. Most of the youth work force were paid, but many college students volunteered to work in afterschool programs during the 2023-2024 school year at Accelerator sites.



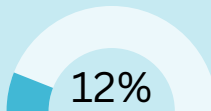
Incubator Youth Staff



Accelerator Youth Staff



Accelerator College Student Volunteers



Accelerator High School Student Volunteers



Staff Make-up

Staffing for programs came from many places in the community. When comparing newly established and experienced sites, Incubator programs often utilized more school staff to fill their staffing needs as they built relationships with their communities. This would include both teaching staff and non-teaching school day staff. Accelerator sites with more established ties would often hire from community members, parents, and subcontractors as well as utilize non-teaching school day staff.



Program Impact

Sites shared how staffing impacted their programs. Many sites praised staff on how they positively impacted student engagement with different enrichment activities and on field trips. Sites reported that their staff demonstrated excellent leadership skills and that their programs ran smoothly.

During programming, staff worked on deepening relationships with students. Staff most often reported connecting with caregivers during pick-up time.

Some sites identified the importance of staff training to help address behavioral issues. Programs also hired specialized staff to help with their community's unique needs, including bilingual staff to work with students and caregivers speaking languages other than English. Other sites hired staff to provide one-on-one support to students with unique academic and social needs.

Staffing Types



- **Administrative**
- **Community members**
- **Non-teaching school day staff:**
custodians, guidance counselors, librarians, paras, and security
- **Parents**
- **School day teachers**
- **Youth staff:** *high school and college students*
- **Subcontractors**

Comparing paid staff to volunteers, most afterschool staff were paid members of their program's teams. The largest number of volunteer staff came from community members in both Incubator and Accelerator sites. High school and college students had the highest percentage of volunteers compared to all other groups. Each of the groups were utilized to help maintain and grow the quality of the programs they served.



ACTIVITIES

Afterschool programs supported by ESSER III funds provided youth in their communities with high-quality, fun, engaging and hands-on programming that facilitated the development of new skills and exposure to different interest areas. Some sites focused on building on core programming options while others changed programming each year.

During the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years, Accelerator and Incubator sites provided approximately 18,000 hours of programming on average. Sites reported on various types such as literacy education, telecommunications and technology education, entrepreneurship, arts and music, community service, and credit recovery and/or attainment. Sites also offered services for students who

have disabilities, extended library hours, and provided training around drug and violence prevention and counseling.

Six key areas of programming were:

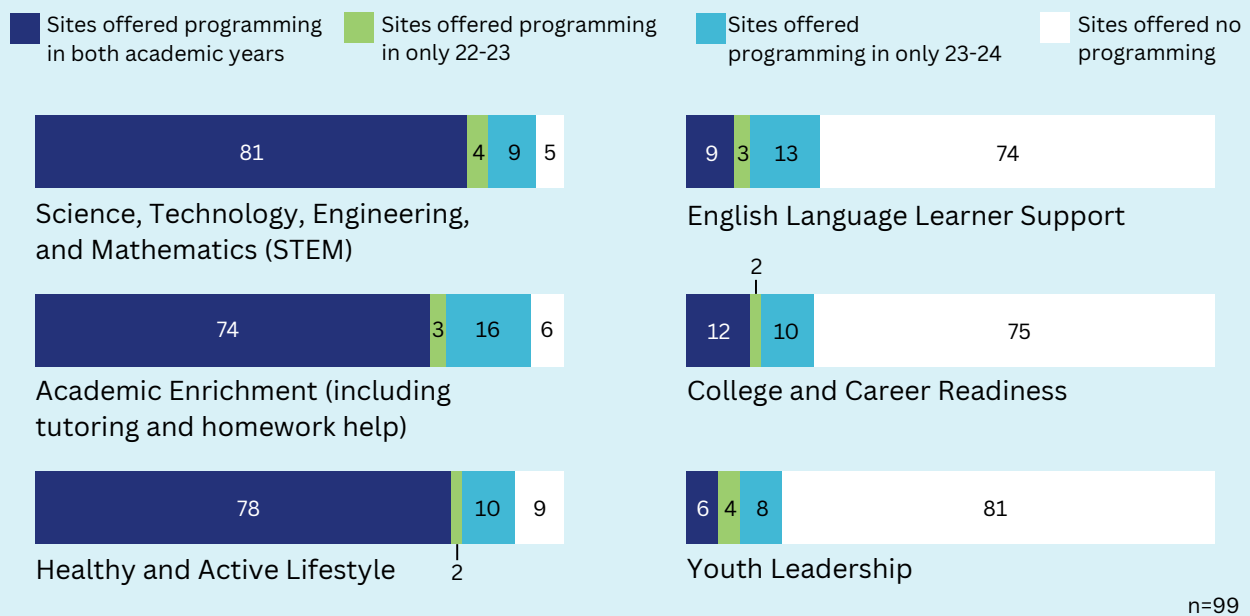
- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)
- Academic Enrichment (including tutoring and homework help)
- Healthy and Active Lifestyle
- English Language learner Support
- College and Career Readiness
- Youth Leadership

The number of sites offering these types of programming increased from the 22-23 school year to the 2023-2024 school year in most areas.



Activity Types Offered by Sites

Many sites were able to maintain and/or grow their programs in the six key activity types. The majority of programming was sustained both years. Many sites were able to introduce these types of programming in the second academic year as the momentum of the grants picked up. A smaller number of programs offered certain activity types in year 1 but not in year 2, often as a result of changing their slate of activities to provide new expanded learning opportunities. Overall, STEM and Healthy and Active Lifestyles programming were offered the most for both academic years. Youth Leadership* was a key activity type for Incubator sites.

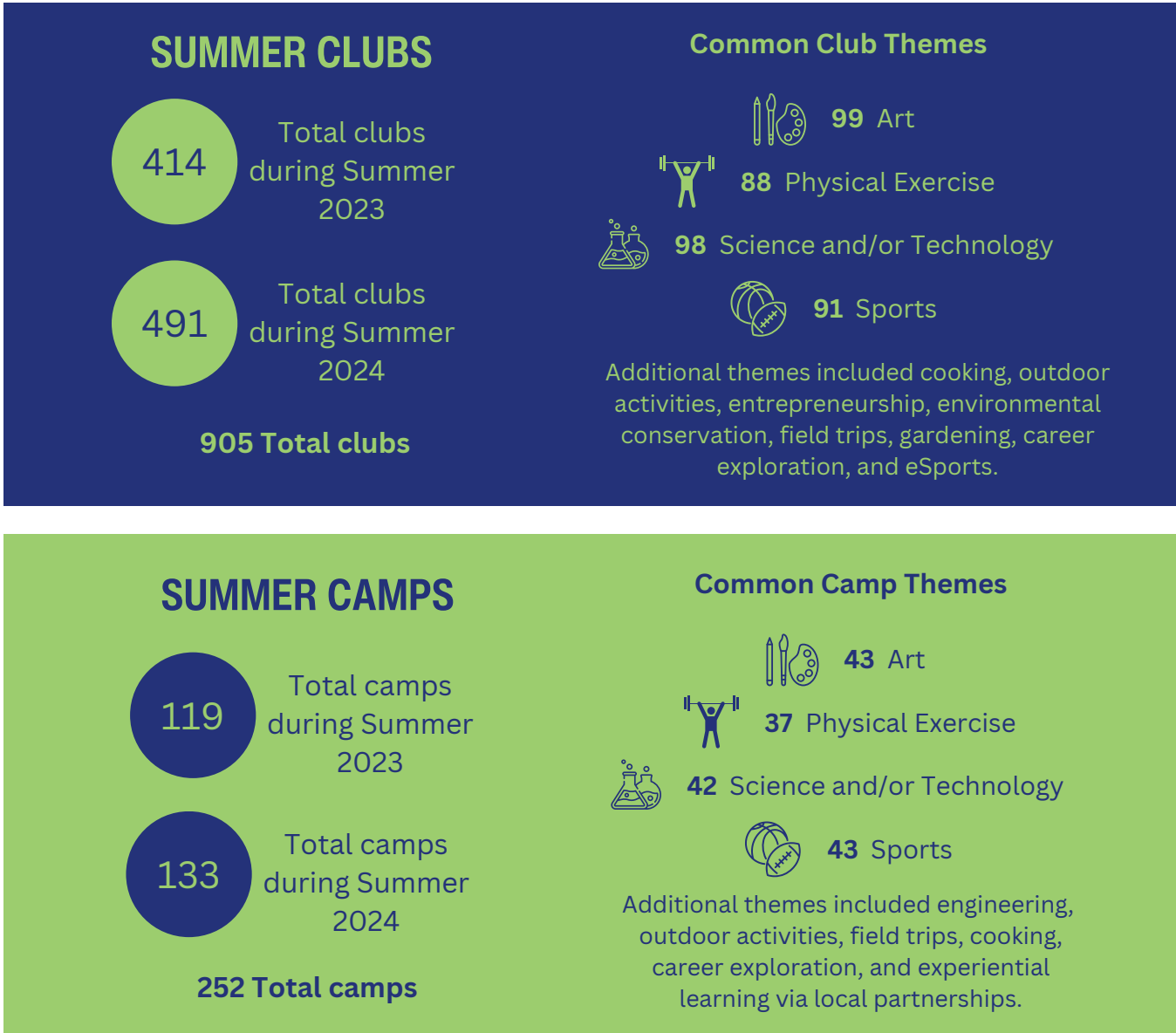


* Note: Due to different data collection methods between Accelerator and Incubator sites, only Incubator sites reported on Youth Leadership programming.



SUMMER ACTIVITIES HIGHLIGHT

During the summers of 2023 and 2024, programs continued to provide students access to engaging learning activities around different topics in the setting of longer days and warmer weather. Many sites used the outdoors to host family engagement activities and enjoyed field trips through community providers. **More than 1,000 clubs and camps ran during the two years that sites received ESSER III funds.** Sites organized dozens of themed programming that allowed for more hands-on learning, skill growth, and connections to be made among peers and staff. Art, sports, and physical exercise were the most common themes for clubs and camps. The number of clubs and camps offered increased from year one to year two, with the number of clubs offered growing by 18.6% and the number of camps offered growing by 11.8%.



Note: For reporting, a club was defined as an activity offered for a portion of the programming time (e.g., one hour per day) with a focused theme or topic. A camp occurred when the entire programming time (usually a week or two) was devoted to one topic.



FIELD TRIPS

267

Total field trips
during Summer
2023

455

Total field trips
during Summer
2024

722 Total Field Trips

Common Field Trips Destinations



55 Museum



64 Pool



43 State park



62 Zoo

Other destinations included bowling, government buildings, local businesses, local libraries, local parks and gardens, movie theatres, municipal buildings, science centers.

Program field trips were often in coordination with community partners. These took place both in the communities they served and in other areas of the state. Students broadened their understanding of different natural resources, specialized museums, industries, and businesses. For some students, these were unique opportunities they would not experience elsewhere.

Many programs deepened their relationships with families through family engagement events, which also increase program visibility in the community. The overall number of family engagement events held by ESSER-funded sites increased by 49.2% from Summer 2023 to Summer 2024. Events showcased the opportunities and growth their students enjoyed and were often supported by community partnerships.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

63

Total events
during Summer
2023

94

Total events
during Summer
2024

157 Total Events

Common Event Themes



22 Arts and Crafts



42 BBQ or outdoor meal



41 STEM



41 Student Showcase and accomplishments

Other events included summer kick-off events, student marketplaces, student theater, a carnival, 5k races, family swimming, and movie nights



COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Many afterschool programs pursued partnerships within the community to enhance the enrichment activities they offer, gain additional supplies, secure volunteers and staff, access additional funding, have more field trip opportunities, and foster program growth. Such collaborations enabled programs to elevate the quality of their offerings and boost sustainability.

Examples of Partnership Support:

- Activity spaces
- Craft supplies
- Family engagement events
- Healthy snacks
- iPads
- Low-cost or free admissions
- Mobile libraries
- Professional training
- Programming curriculum
- Programming opportunities
- Sewing machines
- Staff
- STEM backpacks
- Transportation

Partnerships are often formed with various groups, from local organizations and individuals to state and federal agencies. Nonprofit organizations like the Boys and Girls Club, 4H, YMCA, and educational institutions such as the University of Nebraska campuses represented a significant portion of these partnerships throughout the ESSER III

“The **commitment to the community** is really evident, and these programs and the connection to the school district are powerful.”

Partnership Types

-  **Educational Institution**
-  **Federal/State agency**
-  **Local/City Government**
-  **Non-profit Organization**
-  **Other** (Community members)
-  **Private/Business**

funding period. Additionally, collaborations with local businesses, city governments—including public libraries and local chambers of commerce—and state or federal agencies, such as state parks and natural resource districts, as well as individual community members, further enriched program support.

Incubator sites averaged **2 partners** per site in Summer 2023 and 2024.

From Fall 2022 to Summer 2024, the average number of partners for **Accelerator Sites** increased from **5 to 6 partners**.

Many local partners want to give back to their communities. Through the many ways community partners support programs, one overarching goal is to provide high-quality experiences for all students participating in the local summer expanded learning programs. Students benefit from these partnerships by gaining insight into future career fields, being exposed to the wider community through field trip experiences or building STEM and other tactile skills through engaging in special programming and supplies provided by partners.



INCUBATOR PARTNERSHIP HIGHLIGHTS

In Fall 2024, Beyond School Bells interviewed Incubator sites on numerous topics including lessons learned from their community partnerships. Below is a summary of their shared experiences.

Many Incubator sites praised community partners' impact on their programs in conjunction with ESSER III funds. Citing multiple contributions such as supplies (e.g., snacks for family nights, tools, art supplies), additional staff, and programming (e.g., film club, art club, cooking club, archeology), sites shared the various supports their partners have added.

“Our ESSER III grant increased our community partnerships by providing a paid staff to recruit and manage the partners and their schedules.”

Sites detailed how the unique programming was successful in growing student engagement. Activities allowed students to connect to their community such as one program that provided a cooking camp which led their club to go to cook pizza at a local gas station and serve the community. Another club shared how their kindergarten and first graders were able to learn construction skills working with tools and wood.



“Kids absolutely love the interactive activities [our community partners] provide.”

Program staff also reflected on how their community partnerships' positive feedback helped widen the community awareness of the programs, drawing in more interest. Field trip opportunities were highlighted as they explained how field trips allowed for more connections to what the students were learning throughout programming.

In the Fall 2024 final grant check-in calls conducted by BSB, Incubator sites reported an average of 4 community partners. Of those, Nonprofit organizations (e.g., Future Kids, 4H, Girls Scouts) were the most cited partner types (34%), reflecting the same trend for most ESSERs funded sites over the course of the grant. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of partnerships were with businesses. Additionally, partnerships with educational institutions, city governments, state and federal agencies, and community members were also reported.



EVALUATION PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

NEBRASKA AFTERSCHOOL QUALITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT SYSTEM (NAQCIS)

The Nebraska Afterschool Quality and Continuous Improvement System (NAQCIS) is purposely aligned with quality framework indicators adopted by the Nebraska State Board of Education and includes a self-assessment, external observation tool with a corresponding feedback form, and a monitoring form.

ESSER programs operating during the school year completed Self-Assessments (Johnson, et al., 2019) in the fall. In addition to completing the annual self-assessment, 35 ESSER sites received external observations during the 2023-2024 reporting period. External observations were conducted by the external evaluation team from UNMC. Feedback was provided to sites within 2 weeks of the observation.



EVALUATION OUTCOMES

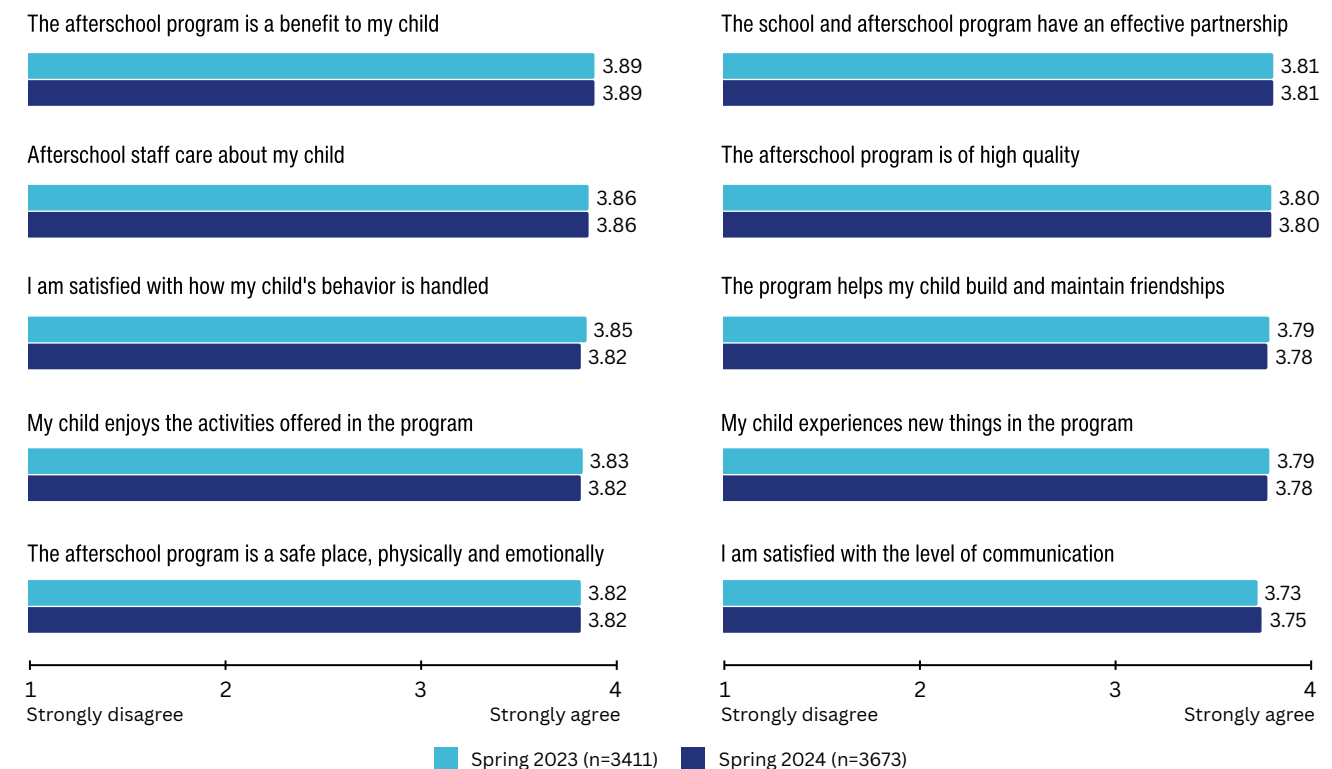
Data to assess program quality and inform continuous improvement was collected during the school year and summer for ESSER grantees operating sites during the reporting period. Program quality was measured through NAQCIS external observations and self-assessment; survey feedback from teachers, parents, students, afterschool staff, and community partners; and demographics of those served by the program.

Rationale: Quality matters in afterschool programs for academic growth, student safety, connectedness and belonging, and engagement with programming.



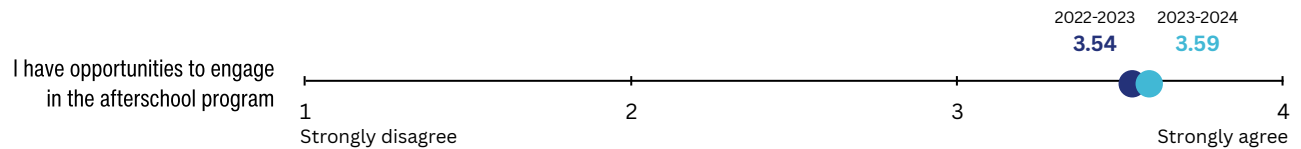
SURVEY OUTCOMES

Caregivers completed surveys in the spring of 2023 and 2024 to provide feedback on ESSER-funded afterschool programs. As part of the surveys, respondents rated their levels of agreement with statements about their children’s programs on a 4-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 4=Strongly Agree). Caregivers consistently gave high ratings to programs, agreeing that the programs were a benefit to their children, and that their children experienced positive relationships with staff and other participants.



“It is a resource that has been highly valued as a working parent. My child gets helps with homework and participates in engaging activities.”
 — Caregiver of ESSER program participant

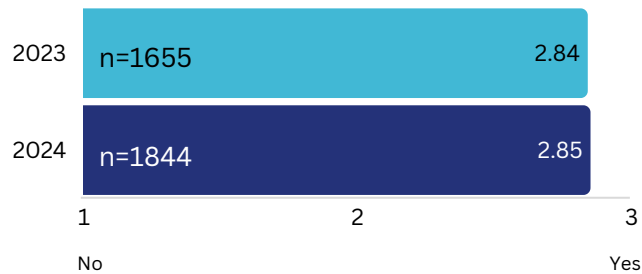
While also rated highly, the item related to caregiver’s opportunities to engage with programs had the lowest average rating in both the 2023 and 2024, indicating a need for further support and training in this area. With the support of the ESSER III grant, many grantees developed new opportunities for families to engage with programs, such as themed family nights, showcases, summer kickoff events, family swim nights, and inviting caregivers to attend clubs. An independent sample t-test found a significant increase in the caregiver agreement score for opportunities to engage with programs from 2023 to 2024 (p<.05).



Through the ESSER grant period, Beyond School Bells and the NE Department of Education worked together to provide professional development opportunities that focused on fostering students' sense of connectedness and self-management skills as foundational aspects for positive youth development. Students of all ages completed surveys in the spring of 2023 and spring of 2024 and reported high levels of peer connections (having friends and/or fitting in) and self-management (being able to calm oneself down when excited or upset) in both years. Open-ended comments from school day teachers also included evidence of student growth in connectedness and self-regulation in an academic context.

Connectedness

K-2: I have friends in this program

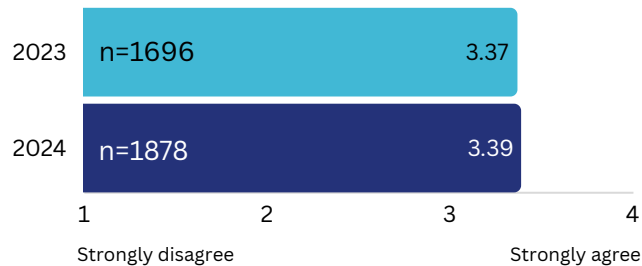


“[He] has improved a lot in terms of regulating his emotions and maintaining friendships as compared to the beginning of the year.”

— Teacher of ESSER program participant

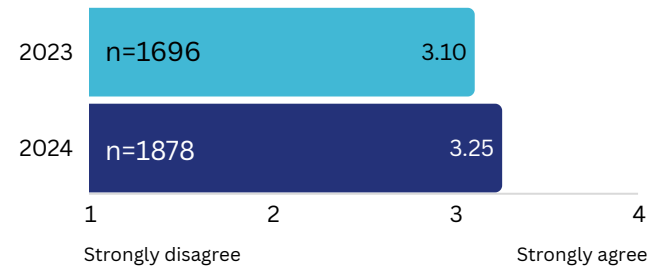
3-5: Program Belonging and Engagement Domain Overall

Domain items included, “I have friends in this program,” and “I enjoy coming to this program most of the time.”



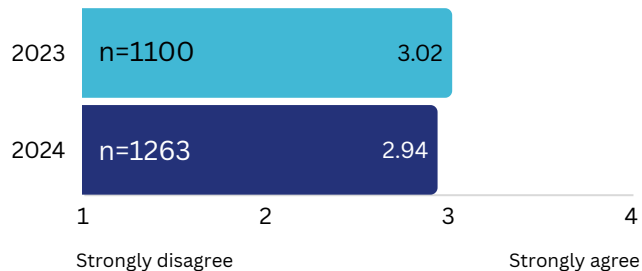
3-5: Self-Control Domain Overall

Domain items included, “I can easily calm down when excited,” and “I can wait in line patiently.”



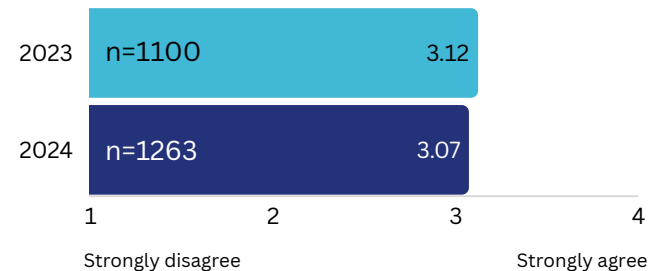
6-12: Belonging and Engagement Domain Overall

Items in this domain included, “I fit in at this program,” “There are things happening in this program that I feel excited about,” and “I feel proud to be part of my program.”



6-12: Self-Management Domain Overall

Items in this domain included, “This program has helped me to handle stress,” and “This program has helped me learn how to calm myself down when I’m excited or upset.”

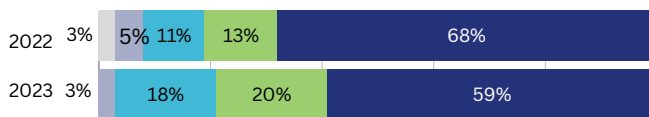


PROGRAM QUALITY

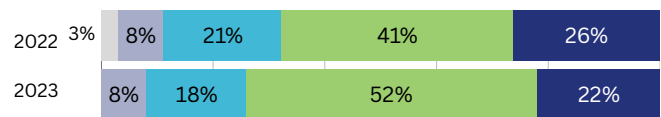
NAQCIS SELF-ASSESSMENT

The **NAQCIS Self-Assessment** (Johnson, et al., 2019) was completed by the site-level management teams with team members reaching consensus on the items and agreeing to a rating. Annual ratings are based on a rubric that helps sites determine if program components (domains) should be scored as Emerging (1), Emerging Plus (2), Maturing (3), Maturing Plus (4), or Excelling (5). The ESSER goal is for sites to score Maturing or higher on all overall domain scores. The tool is designed to assess the program's own evaluation of its performance on domains deemed necessary for a high-quality afterschool program. Eighty-eight sites completed the self-assessment in the fall of 2022, and 100 completed it in the fall of 2023. The **percentage of programs meeting the ESSER goal increased in 9 of 10 domains from 2022 to 2023**, and the percentage of programs scoring as Emerging decreased in all domains.

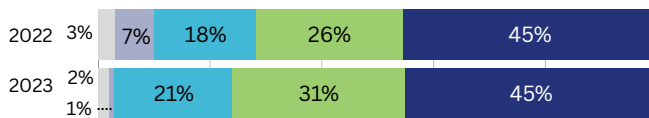
Administration with Sound Management & Well-developed Systems



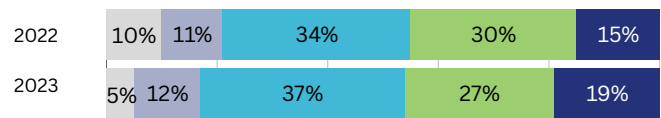
Behavior Management



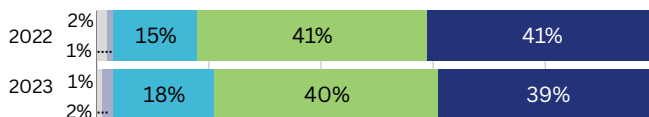
Diverse, Prepared Staff including Certificated Educators



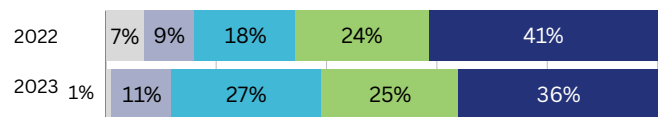
Family Engagement



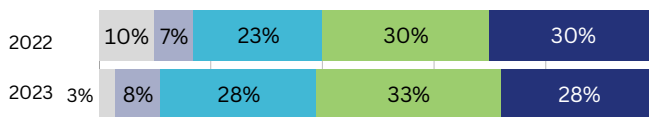
Relationships & Interactions



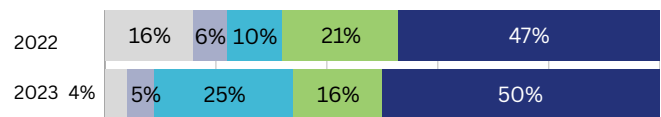
Community-School Partnerships & Resource Sharing



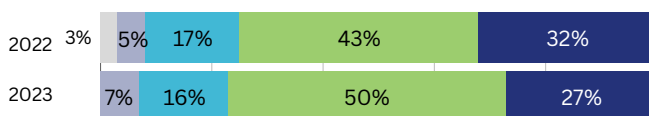
Professional Development



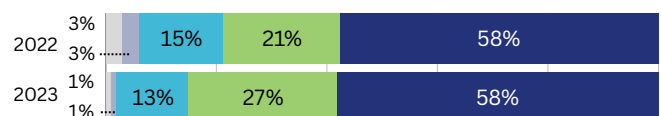
Ongoing Assessment & Improvement



Intentional Programming Aligned with School Day & Engaged Learning



Safety, Health & Wellness

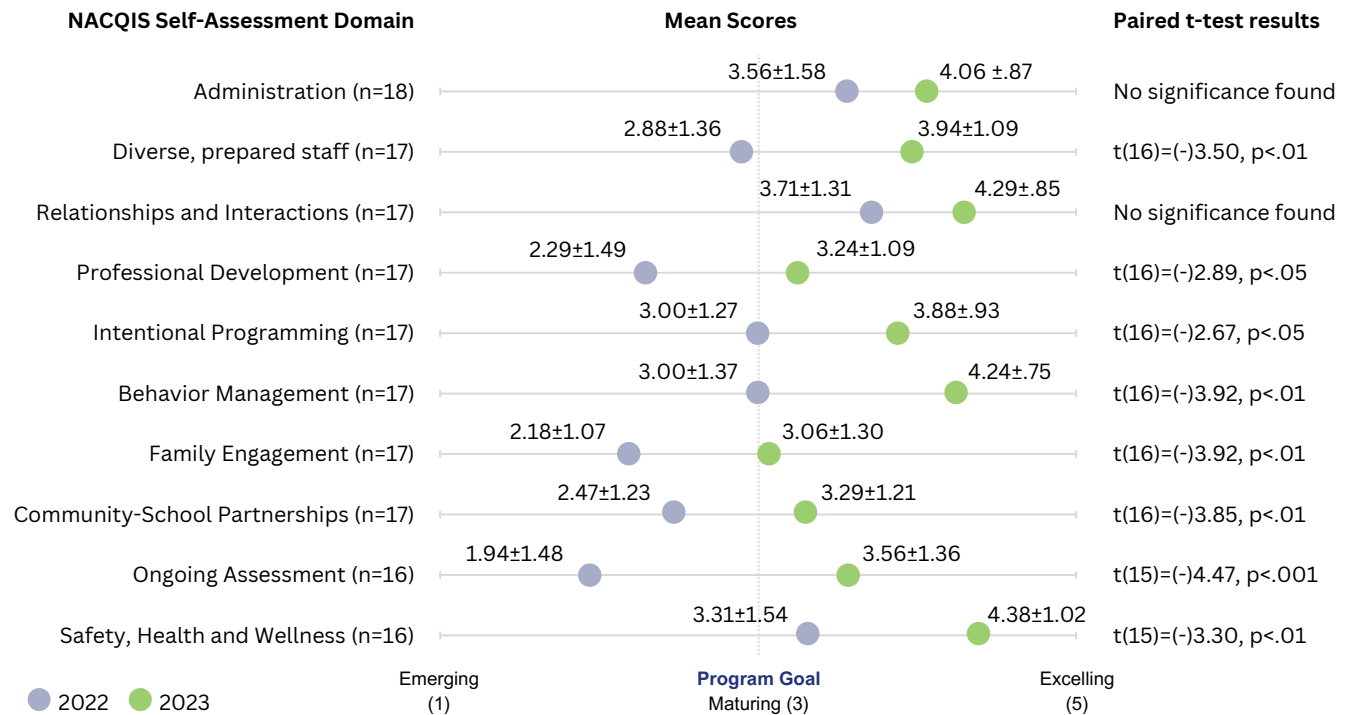


Emerging Emerging Plus Maturing Maturing Plus Excelling



Incubator Growth

Many Incubator sites were started in response to ESSER fund availability and are in the early stages of program development. Growth in NAQCIS self-assessment scores illustrates the impact of providing new programs with ongoing, responsive, and tailored support for continuous improvement. Paired t-tests were conducted on the Incubator programs (n=18) that completed full or partial self-assessments in fall of 2022 and 2023. **Statistically significant increases were found in most domains**, indicating significant positive growth from year one to year two.



EXTERNAL OBSERVATIONS

The Nebraska Afterschool Quality and Continuous Improvement System (NAQCIS) external observations conducted on ESSER sites during the 2023-2024 school year reviewed interactions of attendees and staff, routines and transitions, behavior management strategies, academic support, and evidence of community and belonging. One to three activities and clubs at each site were reviewed for evidence of preparation, student response, and instructional and engagement practices. Each site received feedback for continual program improvement.

Observations showed specific areas of high quality. In site observations, the *Staff Interaction with Other Staff* dimension was rated as Excelling at forty-nine percent of sites. In activity and club observations, both *Students Demonstrate Interest in Activity* and *Students Interact with Leader, Materials, and Each Other* were rated as Excelling in over forty percent of programs. All programs observed met the goal of Maturing or greater in nineteen of twenty dimensions in the activity and club observation.

The observation dimensions highlighted important quality markers in after-school programming. **The majority of sites met the ESSER goal of Maturing or above in all dimensions of overall site observation and activities**, showcasing programs' quality during the second school year of receiving ESSER funds.

Site Observation Results

Of the thirty-five external ESSER site observations completed in the 2023-2024 school year, the majority of programs met or exceeded the program goal of Maturing in six out of the seven dimensions for the Site Observation section of the NAQCIS.

97.2%	Staff Interaction with Other Staff
80%	Staff Interaction with Students
80%	Student Interactions and Behavior
77.1%	Program Climate
77.1%	Staff Interaction with Caregivers
74.3%	Routines and Transitions
48.6%	Academic Supports

% of observed clubs or activities meeting or exceeding the goal of Maturing

Activity Results

Sixty-five ESSER programs or clubs were observed in 2023-2024. As with site observations, most programs met the goal of Maturing or higher in the majority of dimensions. Seven of the dimensions had 89% or higher for meeting the goal.

Evidence of Preparation

95%	Space is ready for use
94%	Size of the group is manageable
92%	Leader appears to follow a plan

Student Response

89%	Students respond to leader prompts
89%	Students demonstrate interest in the activity

Instructional and Engagement Practices

95%	Activity was suitable for age group
94%	Accommodations were made for diverse learners

% of observed clubs or activities meeting or exceeding the goal of Maturing



INCUBATOR SITE REFLECTIONS

In Fall 2024, Beyond School Bells contacted Incubator sites to gain their perspectives on how the ESSER III grant had impacted their program over different areas, lessons they've learned, and the sustainability of their programs moving forward from the grant. A total of seventeen sites shared their insights in the development and growth of their programs.

USE OF FUNDING

Programs shared their most impactful purchases for their programs over the grant period. Multiple sites used ESSER III funds directly to support hiring or maintaining staff, including student workers. Most supplies purchases were for STEM, coding, arts or skill development, and technology.



Highlighted purchased supplies

- 3d doodler pens
- Books
- Cameras
- Codable robots
- Consoles
- Controllers
- Drones
- Games
- Grow towers
- iPads
- Laser engraver
- Legos
- Screens
- Sensory garden
- Sewing machines
- Specialized printer
- STEM stations

Sites detailed programming they could add to yearly and summer programs that provided additional enrichment activities (e.g., e-sports, engineering club, nursing club, cooking chemistry class, entrepreneurship, technology, and design).

Extended program hours, family engagement events, and additional field trips allowed for more connections between staff, students, caregivers, and community partners and increased participation and enjoyment.



ESSER IMPACT

The Incubator afterschool programs were started with ESSER III funds in communities across Nebraska that were identified by the Department of Education. This provided a rare opportunity to collect information about the impact of new afterschool programs in communities during acute times of social challenges, such as the COVID pandemic presented. Each program detailed how participation in the grant impacted the lives of students, their families, staff, and the community. Most sites recognized that their afterschool and summer school programs would not exist without the grant's assistance.

"We've seen such a **positive impact**, a decrease in chronic absenteeism, because of this program. This has **provided a rich experience** for our kids."

Some sites noted that behaviors and attendance improved during the program and during the school day. Students grew in their engagement and enjoyment of the activities and developed leadership skills.

Caregivers shared how proud they were of their students. Families in difficult circumstances committed to keeping their child or children involved in the program because they saw the program's benefits and how staff cared for their children. The grant eased the financial



burden for some families. Having great staff that care about families often helped change the culture of the program.

Sites acknowledged that the grant process was challenging. They noted difficulties with managing funding, finding limitations in what was provided, meeting deadlines, and using technology to share or access information. Despite these challenges, programs still recognized the benefit of the grant.

"...starting and developing this program is something the district could have never pulled off on their own....**families have support they need** in the community."



Many sites shared the importance of relationship-building between staff, students, caregivers, and community members. It was noted that well-run programs help retain staff and many shared that they were thankful for being a part of their program's creation. One site also noted how the existence of the program not only impacted the school it is housed in, but also the quality of life within the community, indicating that engaging programs like theirs will help keep families in their district.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT BASED ON STUDENT, PARENT, AND STAFF FEEDBACK

Sites were asked to reflect on lessons they learned from various sources connected to their programs including surveys completed by teachers, staff, students, and caregivers.

Many sites shared that low return rates for some surveys and/or some language barrier issues for certain groups prevented them from collecting more

“Morale and quality of programming has greatly increased due to funding because of high quality staffing... They have seen [difficult] behaviors go down significantly. Instead of trying to put out fires, staff can engage kids in extensions and clubs. **Retention of staff** has been very high.”



information to help them plan for the future of their program.

Drawing from the information shared by teachers, sites saw that their students exceeded in many areas during the school day. They found students generally enjoyed the programming provided. One site shared that from the information collected, they sought out more innovative programming and hands-on learning activities based on student feedback.

Parent feedback helped sites consider more involvement opportunities during programming and help with homework.

Sites learned from workforce surveys that most staff had enjoyed programming and how it helped students. One site acknowledged its need for more professional development as a means to better support staff and provide more leadership training.





LESSONS LEARNED

As Incubator programs developed over the life of the grant, they navigated many challenges. Finding **consistent quality staff** was a continual issue. Some sites would work within schools, building relationships with teachers and non-teaching staff to help add to their program. After recruiting staff, some sites recognized the need for more professional development to best navigate through behavior, language, and engagement issues with students and leadership in enrichment activities. Other sites decided to hire specialized staff to meet the current needs of their program.

Building relationships was another area of growth for many programs. These relationships aided in increasing student enrollment and attendance and developing new programming. Reviewing

student surveys or discussing with student leaders for more programming ideas, hosting additional family engagement events to increase information about the program, and reaching out to new community partners were part of the process to deepen connections within the communities.

These experiences created lessons that helped inform sites about their future plans and best practices for maintaining a high-quality program.

“It has been huge for relationships with families [and with] teachers to students....Academic data is on the upswing, which shows some impact of programming! Kids are excited about clubs—itching to get started this year!”



PROGRAM SUSTAINABILITY

Throughout the grant, sites were surveyed about their plans for sustainability. In preparation for the end of the ESSER III grant funding, many sites had to evaluate the costs for sustaining their program, current enrollment, and the level of support from the district and their community partners to determine whether they could sustain programming. Some districts began planning on focusing on specific grade levels or reduced staff to decrease costs. Other sites started their search for additional grants or funding sources, including engaging with school boards and community partners to see where and how different funding sources could be used into the future.

Of the seventeen sites surveyed in fall 2024, twelve planned to continue their

programs past the end of the ESSER III project. Some of the solutions to continuing programs with reduced funding included combining multiple sites across a city, strategic programming options, or reducing grades served and programming sessions offered. The sites that pared down their programming, often cited the decrease in budget for staffing as the reason. Programs that were unable to continue cited not knowing how to gain funding sources such as grants or the school district not having funding available or the will to sustain the program.

Though Incubator sites had challenges in continuing their programs, **many were able to find creative ways to sustain and continue to make an impact**, including six Incubator programs that received post-ESSER III sustainability-focused grants from Beyond School Bells.



RECOMMENDATIONS

NAQCIS observations highlight an opportunity to strengthen academic support and support spaces across programs. Observation data indicated that 26% of sites were rated as “emerging” or “emerging plus” on the indicator related to dedicated time and space for academic support. Reaching the “maturing” level involves establishing consistent structures that allow for targeted academic interventions and stronger alignment with school-day needs. To support continued growth in this area, technical assistance efforts could focus on sharing effective scheduling strategies and examples from programs that have successfully integrated dedicated academic support time and developed working relationships with school day teachers.

Observation data also showed that 69% of programs were rated as “emerging” or “emerging plus” in the quality of academic support spaces. Progress toward

“maturing” includes minimizing distractions to create more focused learning environments. Programs may benefit from technical assistance focused on space advocacy (e.g., access to quieter areas like libraries or classrooms), engaging enrichment options for students who complete homework early, and practical behavior management strategies, such as setting clear expectations and using positive reinforcement.

Opportunities to enhance family engagement are emerging across programs. Encouragingly, caregiver survey results and Incubator self-assessment scores point to growth in family engagement efforts. To build on this momentum, continued support could include creative event planning ideas, effective communication strategies, building and maintaining caregiver advisory groups, and guidance on developing activities that actively involve caregivers.

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KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ On average, the ESSER III funds served over 9,000 students during the school year and 3,000 students during the summer in Nebraska during the two-year grant period.
- ◆ Students were able to enjoy various enrichment activities to gain new skills and connect with community- or state-managed sites and programs (e.g., community organizations running programming, field trips to local businesses, state parks, and museums). Programming often focused on activities to support a healthy and active lifestyle, academic enrichment, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM).
- ◆ Most programs were able to develop and maintain community partnerships that provided additional programming and resources. Most program partnerships were from non-profit organizations, educational institutions, and private businesses. The average number of community partners for ESSER-funded sites was more than three.
- ◆ Stakeholders shared how they felt about the program and its impact in surveys after the conclusion of each program year:
 - Staff reported they valued the impact of the program on students. The majority also felt prepared for the demands of their role.
 - Caregivers valued the supervision and academic support the programs provided. They saw their children were safe and benefited from programming.
 - Students reported overall positive relationships with adult staff and their ability to make meaningful peer connections.
 - Teachers shared they saw growth in how the students persevered through challenges and creating and maintaining friendships.
- ◆ Most sites were able to complete the NAQCIS Self-Assessment and many sites received an external observation. The most common rating for both self-assessment and external observations was a “maturing” level, meeting the program’s goal for quality.
- ◆ Looking forward, many Accelerator sites have established funding from other organizations and grants such as 21st Century and Beyond School Bells (BSB) to continue their programs. Many Incubator sites were able to commit to continue through finding alternate funding sources, including BSB grants, and modifying their programs to fit their new budgets.
- ◆ Over the two summers, the ESSER III grants supported a total of 722 total field trips, 905 clubs, and 252 camps, providing a rich variety of engaging learning experiences for NE youth.
- ◆ In just two short years, programs grew their community partnerships, increased the number of events that engaged and fed families, significantly increased self-assessment scores on the NAQCIS indicators, and learned many valuable lessons such as how to work within schools to solve staffing issues.



