BRIEF

The Learning Ecosystem Effect: A Decade of Innovation Through **Dallas City of Learning**

January 2026

Summary

What if a city could transform summer learning into a year-round engine for creative learning? Over the past decade, Big Thought and hundreds of partners have built and nurtured Dallas City of Learning (DCoL) to do exactly that – leveraging a community-wide network of free and low-cost experiences to expand access, elevate youth voice, and drive measurable outcomes.

Launched in 2014, DCoL is a citywide initiative designed to ensure that all young people in Dallas have access to high-quality, engaging learning experiences outside of traditional school settings – especially during the summer and after school. Powered by Big Thought, in partnership with the City of Dallas, Dallas ISD, and hundreds of community organizations, the ecosystem connects youth to enriching programs that build academic, social and emotional, and creative skills.

Across multiple longitudinal studies conducted with The Addy Foundation Center for Research & Evaluation at Southern Methodist University (CORE), DCoL participation is associated with higher standardized test mastery, improved GPA, and stronger attendance – especially for middle and high school students.

BIG THOUGHT

Impact Highlights (2014–2024)

- Engaged **480,000+** youth participants across **15,000+** learning experiences powered by a network of **1,400+** community partners.
- Students in DCoL had up to **2.2x higher odds of passing standardized STAAR** exams in some years[1]
- Strongest gains observed with approximately **30 days** of cumulative participation and sustained, multi-summer engagement[2]

WHY IT MATTERS:
DCoL serves as a strong proof point that dosage can be distributed across a citywide ecosystem – and still deliver impact. This BRIEF outlines the model, evidence, and policy implications so other communities can replicate and scale equitable, creative learning systems.

Where We Began

In 2011, Big Thought and Dallas ISD co-designed and implemented **Thriving Minds Summer Camp** as one of five communities participating in the Wallace Foundation's **National Summer Learning Project (NSLP)**. RAND's multi-city evaluation showed a clear lesson: ***dosage matters*** – students who consistently attended five or more weeks of high-quality summer learning realized stronger gains in reading and math.[3,4,5] The challenge in Dallas was scale. A centralized, multi-week camp, such as Thriving Minds, could not feasibly scale to every neighborhood and meet all the varied interests and needs of youth and families across the entire City of Dallas.

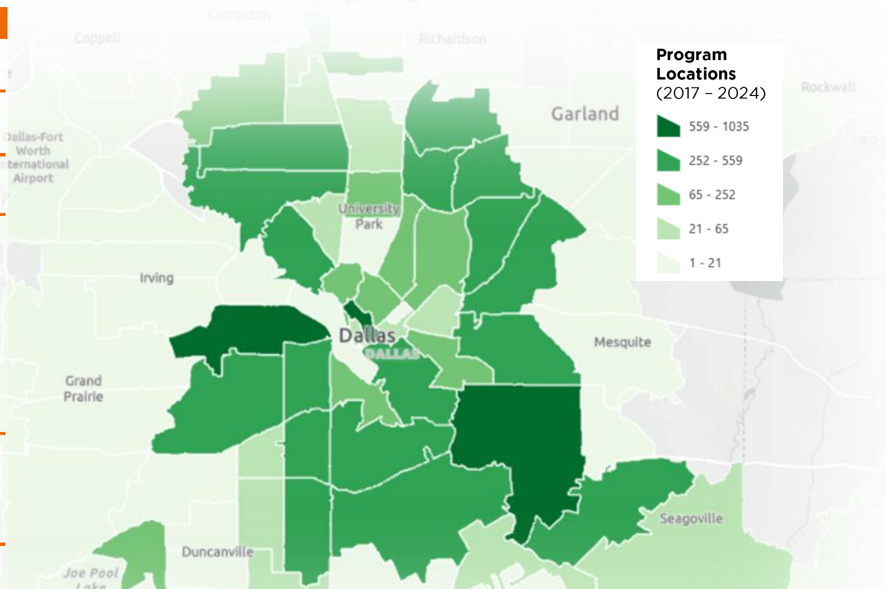
DCoL ultimately reframed the question: ***could a distributed network of community-based experiences deliver the cumulative engagement needed to achieve similar outcomes?*** The city embraced an ecosystem approach - activating libraries, cultural institutions, museums, parks, nonprofits, and schools to offer flexible, interest-driven learning across Dallas.

What We Did

DCoL operates as a distributed learning ecosystem rather than a single program. Youth and families select from diverse offerings that fit their interests and schedules; participation is tracked via a citywide platform that captures dosage and diversity of experiences. The model prioritizes:

- **Access** – free/low-cost access across neighborhoods, transportation, and schedule-friendly options.
- **Flexibility** – short-format experiences that add up to meaningful time-on-task across providers.
- **Collaboration** – a network of 100+ partners delivering coding, arts, STEM, theater, and more.
- **Data** – infrastructure that enables real-time tracking and longitudinal evaluation with CORE.

	Timeline 2011 – 2025
2011-2014	Participate in National Summer Learning Project (NSLP)
2014	DCoL launches a citywide distributed ecosystem and digital platform
2017	Big Thought & CORE launch evaluation relationship
2017-2018	CORE releases annual formative and descriptive reports ➢ Summer 2017 showed us that this "big idea" was **FEASIBLE** ➢ Summer 2018 showed us that the big idea was **REPLICABLE** ➢ Summer 2019 showed us that the ecosystem is **SUSTAINABLE**
2020	CORE Outcomes Report #1 *(data from 2017-2019; summers '17 & '18)* ➢ Showed us that the ecosystem is **IMPACTFUL**
2022	CORE Outcomes Report #2 *(data from 2018-2022; summers '18, '19 & '20 and the bookended academic years)*
2024	DCoL celebrates 10-years of collective impact
2025	CORE Outcomes Report #3 *(data from 2017-2024; summers '17 through '24)*



43.6K Avg. Total Participants Annually (2014-2024)

149K Unique Youth (2017-2024)

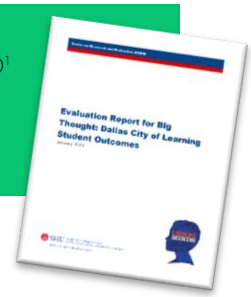
13M+ Learning Hours Received (2014-2024)

What We Have Learned

Across three major analyses, CORE consistently finds positive associations between DCoL engagement and student outcomes.[1,2,6]

CONSISTENCY OF IMPACT	Participation correlates with better academic performance - standardized tests (STAAR & MAP), GPA, and EOC results - despite variations by grade band and year.
DOSAGE & SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT	Around 30 cumulative days of participation is a practical tipping point; multi-summer engagement amplifies effects.
EQUITY GAINS:	Because the majority of participants are from historically underserved communities, DCoL functions as an equity lever to close opportunity gaps.
ADAPTABILITY ACROSS AGES	Younger students show test mastery gains; older students see GPA, EOC, and attendance benefits - suggesting developmentally responsive impact.

OUTCOMES REPORT #1
Evaluation Report for Big Thought: Dallas City of Learning Student Outcomes (released Jan 2020)[1]


Evaluation Report for Big Thought: Dallas City of Learning Student Outcomes

TIMEFRAME	METHODOLOGY	SCOPE
Summers 2017-2019 (academic years 2017-18 to 2019-20)	Matched Comparison	Participating DCoL students versus non-DCoL students

Key Findings:

Summer Learning Matters.

- ✓ Attending summer programs positively impacts students' attendance and academic achievement
- ✓ Impacts really show up after about 30 cumulative days of programming
- ✓ One summer is good; two summers is better
- ✓ Summer matters most for kids who need it most

With every 10 days of DCoL Programming:

- ✓ Elementary students were 25% more likely to pass standardized state STAAR Math & Reading tests
- ✓ High school students were 40% more likely to pass EOC English 1

OUTCOMES REPORT #2
Follow Up Report: Analysis of Dallas City of Learning Student Outcomes (released Jan 2022)[2]

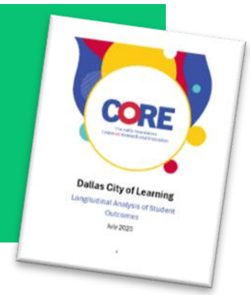
TIMEFRAME	METHODOLOGY	SCOPE
Summers 2018-2020 and book-ended academic years (2017-18 to 2020-21)	Propensity Score Analysis + Descriptive	Participating DCoL students versus non-DCoL students

Key Findings:

At face-value, students engaging in summer are doing better post-pandemic.

- ✓ Since 2020-21, DCoL participants have started year with higher GPA than non-DCoL participants
- ✓ Students engaging in DCoL are scoring higher on standardized state STAAR reading and math tests
- ✓ Summer 2020 participants of all grade bands were found to be 1.2 to 2.2 more likely to pass standardized state STAAR tests (effects vary by subject and grade)
- ✓ Summer 2019 and 2020 participants of all grade bands were found to be more likely to pass standardized state STAAR tests (except Algebra 1, which was not statistically significant)
- ✓ Summer 2018, 2019 and 2020 participants in middle school grades were found to be 1.9 times more likely to pass standardized state STAAR Reading test

OUTCOMES REPORT #3
Dallas City of Learning Longitudinal Analysis of Student Outcomes (released Nov 2025)[6]



TIMEFRAME	METHODOLOGY	SCOPE
Summers 2018–2024 (7 academic years: 2017-18 to 2023-24)	ANCOVA + trends	Multi-cohort (K-6, 2-8, 6-12 grade spans); Subgroupings (9 levels of engagement, highest to lowest)

Key Findings:

Program participation is linked to meaningful, age-specific benefits across academic and engagement outcomes.

- ✓ The more diverse, consistent, and high-dosage the summer engagement, the stronger the outcomes
- ✓ Higher summer engagement correlates with better reading and math standardized test scores – STAAR & MAP (K-6 & 2-8 cohorts)
- ✓ The most engaged students consistently improved and had higher mastery rates on standardized state STAAR tests (K-6 & 2-8 cohorts)
- ✓ Higher GPAs and better performance on standardized state STAAR EOC exams - Algebra I, Biology, English I, US History (6-12 cohort)
- ✓ Highly engaged students in 6-12 cohort had fewer absences and tardies than their peers

Implications for Practice & Policy

There are numerous practice and policy considerations that can be drawn from the work and learning of DCoL, including:

- **Invest in flexible, decentralized models:** dosage can be distributed across providers and still drive outcomes.
- **Fund data infrastructure:** citywide platforms enable dosage tracking, quality improvement, and rigorous evaluation.
- **Resource community ecosystems:** libraries, museums, and nonprofits expand access beyond school walls.
- **Focus on engagement and dosage:** consider structures for promoting sustained multi-year and multi-experience participation.
- **Support holistic data collection:** prioritize the tracking of non-academic outcomes such as creativity, belonging, and skill-based credentials to capture the full impact of learning experiences.

National Relevance

Similar communities can adapt this framework by mapping partners, aligning to academic and creative competencies, building a lightweight badging and data backbone, and funding distributed dosage rather than single-site duration. Policy can legitimize badges and out-of-school learning credentials as recognized demonstrations of skill.

Looking Ahead

The DCoL ecosystem provides a powerful foundation to further advance learning in the years to come. Looking forward, Big Thought is focused on three key strategies to build on the impact to date.

Elevating Youth Voice & Agency

Co-design and feedback loops ensure systems and offerings reflect youth interests, cultures, and aspirations – advancing Big Thought's Creator Archetype framework.

Building Creative Skills & Recognizing Growth

Digital badges make skills visible – collaboration, problem-solving, digital production, etc. - and help youth build identity and pathways.

One Door, All Access

Big Thought is reimagining its learning ecosystem under the One Door, All Access platform, which leverages the same ecosystem architecture, looking beyond just summer and out-of-school time settings to support continuous learning opportunities year-round and across many contexts (such as Opportunity Youth).

Contributions & Citations

This BRIEF was compiled by **Big Thought Institute**. Artificial intelligence tools were used, in part, for initial analysis and drafting, with review, revisions and synthesis conducted by staff.

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[1] Center on Research and Evaluation. (2022). Follow Up Report: Analysis of Dallas City of Learning Student Outcomes (2020–2021). Southern Methodist University. Retrieved from https://dallascityoflearning.org/info/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CORE-Report-on-City-of-Learning-Outcomes-2020-2021.pdf

[2] Center on Research and Evaluation. (2020). Evaluation Report for Big Thought: Dallas City of Learning Student Outcomes (January 2020). Southern Methodist University. Retrieved from https://bigthought.org/research/evaluation-report-dallas-city-of-learning-student-outcomes-january-2020/

[3] Wallace Foundation. National Summer Learning Project (NSLP). https://www.wallacefoundation.org/focus-areas-and-initiatives/youth-development/national-summer-learning-project

[4] Augustine, C.H., McCombs, J.S., Pane, J.F., et al. (2016). Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success. RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1557.html

[5] McCombs, J.S., Augustine, C.H., Schwartz, H.L., et al. (2014). Learning from Summer: Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Urban Youth. RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR815.html

[6] Center on Research and Evaluation. (2025). Dallas City of Learning Longitudinal Analysis of Student Outcomes. Southern Methodist University. Retrieved from https://www.smu.edu/-/media/site/simmons/research/core/pdfs/big-thought/btdcol_studentoutcomes_2025_finaldraft.pdf