

Out-of-School Time Stories

BOOST Grantee Spotlight: Reach For Excellence

Reach for Excellence is a tuition-free academic and leadership program offering youth from families of limited income academic, cultural, and community-based experiences to help prepare middle school students for high school and college preparatory programs. **Students and families make a commitment to attend 16 Saturday classes during the school year, and then six weeks of summer enrichment classes each year for three years.**

Reach for Excellence was founded in 2001 by the Society of Mary and is hosted at Marist School in Atlanta, which provides space, liability coverage, IT, and other support at no cost. The program offers educational enrichment to middle school youth who may not otherwise have access to it. While hosted at Marist School, Reach for Excellence is an independent nonprofit responsible for its own funding and governed by its own board of directors.

Expanding Opportunities

To be eligible, students must come from households earning no more than \$50,000 per year. Admission is selective; only around 36 students are accepted into the cohort of 6th graders each year. Applicants must submit transcripts, have letters of recommendation from their teachers, and write an essay. **The curriculum focuses on developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills in language arts, mathematics, and social studies. The program also teaches etiquette, leadership, and contribution to society.**



Youth Served:

79



Ages Served:

6th – 8th grade

Counties Served:

Dekalb, Fulton, Gwinnett, and Rockdale

Programming Offered:

Weekends and Summer

BOOST Grant Purpose:

Expand access, reduce barriers, and increase quality

OST Government Funding Sources:

BOOST grant and learning loss grant

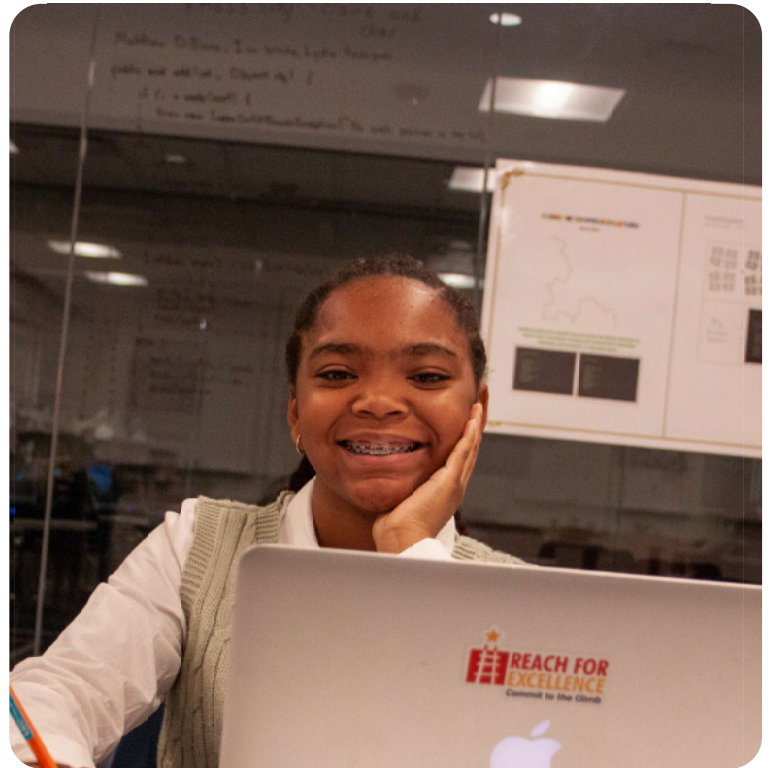
Website:

www.reachforexcellence.org



Nearly all the Reach for Excellence faculty are certified teachers who teach in the public schools of DeKalb, Gwinnett, and Rockdale counties, as well as at independent schools. Seventy percent of Reach for Excellence teachers have worked with the program for five or more years, and a few are retired teachers. Low student-teacher ratios allow teachers to focus on individual students and employ innovative teaching methods. For academic courses, the ratio is 12:1 and for recreational and supplementary courses, the ratio is 20:1.

Dr. Linda Lehmil, the Executive Director at Reach for Excellence, notes that over 90% of current students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. In addition, the program serves a large number of children who are from immigrant households. For the majority of these students, English is not the language spoken at home. Noting that the Latino population has the lowest high school graduation rates in Georgia, Dr. Lehmil says the program specifically and purposefully recruits Latino students.



Preparing for High School and College

Reach for Excellence is dedicated to preparing youth and placing them in college preparatory high school programs. Students go on to independent schools, boarding schools, or public schools. Of the 508 youth who have gone through the program, 506 (99.6%) have graduated from high school. **Over 92% of students also matriculated to college.** Two brothers who went through the program are now students at the University of Chicago and Princeton, and other alumni have gone to Yale, Harvard, MIT, and Stanford.

Teachers at Reach for Excellence provide rich instruction that meets the students where they are with individual and small-group instruction and engaging, interdisciplinary learning. For example, 6th graders do a unit on tiny houses that employs math, art, computer science, and architecture. They use math, technology, measurement, design, and art to computer-generate and then construct three-dimensional models of tiny homes. Then, through a partnership with a company that constructs such homes, they learn how such concepts are brought to scale and visit actual homes on a field trip.

Other hands-on, experiential learning opportunities are numerous. Students also work with drones as part of a computer science lesson. Language arts courses include a unit on mental wellness. Books the students read include stories by and about people they can relate to. One addresses middle school and family trauma and its effects. After reading the book, students each learn about a mental disorder and give a presentation about it to their classmates. Another summer field trip took students to the offices of Black Real Estate Professionals, where they learned not only about the real estate business but also about professional dress and behavior. **Students also visit local institutions of higher education, including Morehouse, Spellman, and Agnes Scott.**

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*– Dr. Linda Lehmil
Executive Director*

Reach for Excellence received a three-year Building Opportunities in Out-of-School-Time (BOOST) grant. Grant funds have helped in several ways including paying teacher salaries for both the Saturday and summer sessions. BOOST funds also provide MARTA cards and transportation assistance for parents of limited means who have to drop off and pick up their children on Saturdays. Funds also pay for supplies—workbooks, games, books, and consumables—that teachers need and sometimes previously paid for out of their own pockets. BOOST funding freed the program to invest in additional enrichment programs and field trips they might not otherwise have been able to do. And while the program receives other grants, those grants typically do not have the flexibility to make these kinds of purchases.

BOOST funding also supports greater community outreach and recruitment, as well as recruitment materials provided to potential students and their families. Reaching out to communities is especially important for recruiting and building trust in Latino communities. Being able to provide gift cards and refreshments—as well as coloring books for young siblings who come to meetings with their parents—helped establish relationships with families and increase the number of Latino students in the program.

Three current students have been nominated for the prestigious Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Young Scholars program, a selective, five-year, pre-college scholarship for high-achieving 7th graders with financial need. It provides academic and college advising, as well as financial support for school college and graduate school, Cooke-sponsored summer programs, internships, and other learning opportunities. Only 40 students are selected each year.

For Dr. Lehmil, this work is more than a job. An immigrant to the U.S. herself and the first in her family to go to college, she sees herself in her young charges. Leading Reach for Excellence, she says, “is where I belong, and my way to give back to the many people who helped me along the way.” She “understands those parents who talk to me and apologize that their English is not great. My friends used to make fun of my dad, who was a shepherd, because of his accent. My mother did not go beyond elementary school, and English is my second language.” But she says, Reach for Excellence is a program where young scholars can dream big:

“**Nobody can tell these kids they cannot do this job or apply to that college. I want to make sure they don’t hear that from us. We are their cheerleaders, and we will fight for them to find the best opportunities.**”





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Building Opportunities in Out-of-School Time (BOOST) is a competitive grant program administered by the Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network (GSAN) and operated in partnership with the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE). BOOST offers \$85 million via three-year grants, renewed annually, with funding made available through the American Rescue Plan. The grants program is aimed at promoting evidence-based practices and whole child supports in afterschool and summer learning programs. BOOST is designed to expand access, reduce barriers to enrollment, and increase programmatic quality to improve outcomes for students and families throughout the state. GSAN provides recommendations for grant awards based on rigorous application criteria and offers technical assistance and training to grantees to ensure successful implementation. All grants are approved by GaDOE, ensuring alignment with statewide priorities and goals.