

# Ensuring Quality Programs Where Kids Can Thrive

## Out of School Time in the Paso del Norte Region



Classrooms are not the only places that kids learn, and academic learning is not the only learning that students have lost because of the pandemic. More than 80% of Texas students' time is spent learning **outside of school**. High-quality out of school time (OST), which includes afterschool, summer, and enrichment programs, provides applied learning opportunities that help kids develop critical social and emotional skills as well as nurturing peer and mentor relationships that accelerate academic learning and prepare youth for postsecondary success.

OST is a critical component of the functioning ecosystem of support necessary for whole child development and whole communities. Community-based providers have been essential during the pandemic, standing up additional health and safety measures to continue offering in-person care and learning while also connecting families to critical services and resources, such as food, technology, and healthcare. Strong partnerships between schools and these community-based organizations are vital to our state's successful recovery.

The Paso del Norte Health Foundation launched the BOOST Network in 2015 with the vision of creating a cooperative community that supports quality OST experiences where youth can thrive. The network acts as a coordinating hub for OST providers across the region and is a resource for parents seeking quality OST programs for their children.

Based on a network analysis conducted prior to the pandemic, BOOST Network members serve approximately 36,000 children throughout the region. Programs range from afterschool dance and arts workshops to soccer camps and STEM labs where kids can explore science and watch their innovations come to life.

The BOOST Network serves communities throughout Paso del Norte, the region on the U.S.-Mexico border encompassing El Paso County, Southern New Mexico, and Ciudad Juarez in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. The region's 2.4 million residents are predominantly Hispanic, and the median annual income in El Paso County is almost \$47,000, compared to almost \$63,000 nationally.

### Sharing Experiences and Solutions

The BOOST Network convenes its member organizations at quarterly meetings for capacity building and training opportunities where members can exchange best practices and connect with each other. During the COVID-19 pandemic, meetings continued virtually and proved particularly valuable, as OST leaders shared experiences and lessons learned about how and where to recruit kids into their programs, how to best support families, how to transition to online programming, and other challenges. For example, some programs noted that they had success recruiting kids by engaging more closely with community food banks, where families turned for food assistance.

Housed at the United Way of El Paso County, the BOOST Network is part of the Paso del Norte Health Foundation's Healthy Kids Initiative, which aims to improve a range of health outcomes by engaging disconnected youth in quality OST programs. Ten of the 35 OST providers in the BOOST Network are grantees of the Foundation; their focus is on serving young people ages 5 to 17 who are not involved in OST or working and who lack access to a trusted adult. Other OST providers within the BOOST Network include Boys and Girls Clubs, Girl Scouts, and YMCAs as well as smaller, local nonprofit organizations.

"None of us had all the answers, so we tried to find best practices from within the group, from each other," says Enrique García Peralta, Healthy Kids Manager for the BOOST Network.

Additionally, the BOOST Network maintains an online resource library for OST professionals, for whom it provides access to journal articles, webinar recordings, data, toolkits, and other materials. It also offers technical assistance and training to member organizations on recruitment, quality improvement, youth health, and positive youth development approaches.



The BOOST Network conducts an annual quality evaluation with member programs. Members complete a self-assessment on seven criteria: appropriate structure, community involvement, opportunities for skill-building, physical and psychological safety, positive norms, supportive relationships, and youth involvement. If a member falls short somewhere, García explains that the BOOST Network works with the program to improve performance and quality.

### **Strengthening the OST Provider Network**

Currently, the BOOST Network is working to increase its membership and create a more robust network so that families have more quality choices for their kids. “Our goal is to provide families with the most comprehensive resources possible,” García says.

The network is also conducting more outreach than it has in the past, especially to parents and kids, raising awareness about the network and OST programming. “We want parents to know that if they sign their kids up for one of these programs, it’s a safe place, with quality programming, where kids will learn and have fun.”

When the pandemic began, most OST programs in the BOOST Network shut down temporarily, although García knows of at least one organization that closed permanently. Now, most programs operate under a hybrid model, serving children both online and in person, which can be difficult.

2020 was also challenging for the BOOST Network coordinators as they tried to keep programs in three states with three governments and different populations on the same page. But the quarterly meetings and sharing lessons helped. Flexibility has been key, García says. “We learned through our members.”

Looking ahead, García believes the need for quality OST programming is greater than ever because of the delayed learning that so many kids have experienced. “Families in our communities are all struggling—even more now,” he says. “There’s always a need for funding to support and create more programs, especially in rural areas.”

Yet García says there is cause for optimism. The OST field, he observes, “is pretty resilient, and everyone is always aiming for the better, for the good, of the kids and their families.”

## Creative Kids Enriches Youths' Lives and Strengthens Their Development Through Art

Creative Kids is a nationally recognized nonprofit organization that cultivates the best in youth by immersing them in the visual arts. Its hands-on out of school time arts programs reach targeted populations of kids, including underserved youth, children battling cancer, kids in migrant families, children with disabilities, and children and families directly affected by the 2019 mass shooting in El Paso.

At its 16,000-square-foot art gallery in downtown El Paso, Creative Kids displays the youth participants' artwork and offers Saturday classes to youth ages 8 to 18, plus a "Little Picassos" class for children ages 4 to 8.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Creative Kids served about 1,200 children a year; and as of summer 2021, it reaches 600.

### Changing the World Through Art

Stephen and Andrea Ingle co-founded Creative Kids in 1998 when they were just college students; he was majoring in art and graphic design, and she in special education. They got the idea to create a nonprofit to serve kids who lacked access to art programming after Stephen came to teach one of Andrea's special education classes. Andrea says she was amazed by the beautiful mural that the kids created and how engaged they were in the effort. She and Stephen felt that every kid deserved the opportunity to have that kind of experience.

"We were young and full of energy and wanted to change the world," Andrea says. "We started different programs in the community. Our first program, Project AIM, was at the hospital, serving pediatric oncology patients, and it is now a nationally recognized program."

The couple worked with different groups, like local housing authorities and Boys and Girls Clubs. Over the years, they have launched new programs to meet specific youth needs.

For example, when they visited Fabens, a community of about 8,000 people 30 miles outside the city of El Paso, they found that it had no OST programming at all. Fabens is a migrant farming community, where more than 96% of the population is Latino and the median annual household income is less than \$18,500. Resources are strained, and it can be difficult for families to meet their kids' basic needs.



"That's why out of school programming is so important, especially in the Fabens community," Stephen says. "If you don't have that, you're not creating a different vision for these kids. Our program serves kids who otherwise would have no exposure to any arts or out of school programming."

### A Typical Day at Creative Kids: Not So Typical

Because Creative Kids' programs operate in different environments with different age groups, there's not really a typical day. "From 4 to 6:30 p.m., the kids are doing something fun, and they're learning," Stephen says. "They get excited, and they feel uplifted."

There's more to it than that, though. The Ingles have embedded a strong social-emotional learning component in their curricula so that in addition to making art, kids are learning leadership and problem-solving skills, strengthening their self-esteem, working in teams, and developing a sense of purpose and discipline.

Another exciting opportunity comes in the form of public arts commissions that Creative Kids gets every two years to work on with a team of kids. Most recently, in January 2020, the El Paso Museums and Cultural Affairs Department unveiled "Woven Culture," a colorful sculpture atop the Carolina Bridge made by a team of about 20 Creative Kids participants.

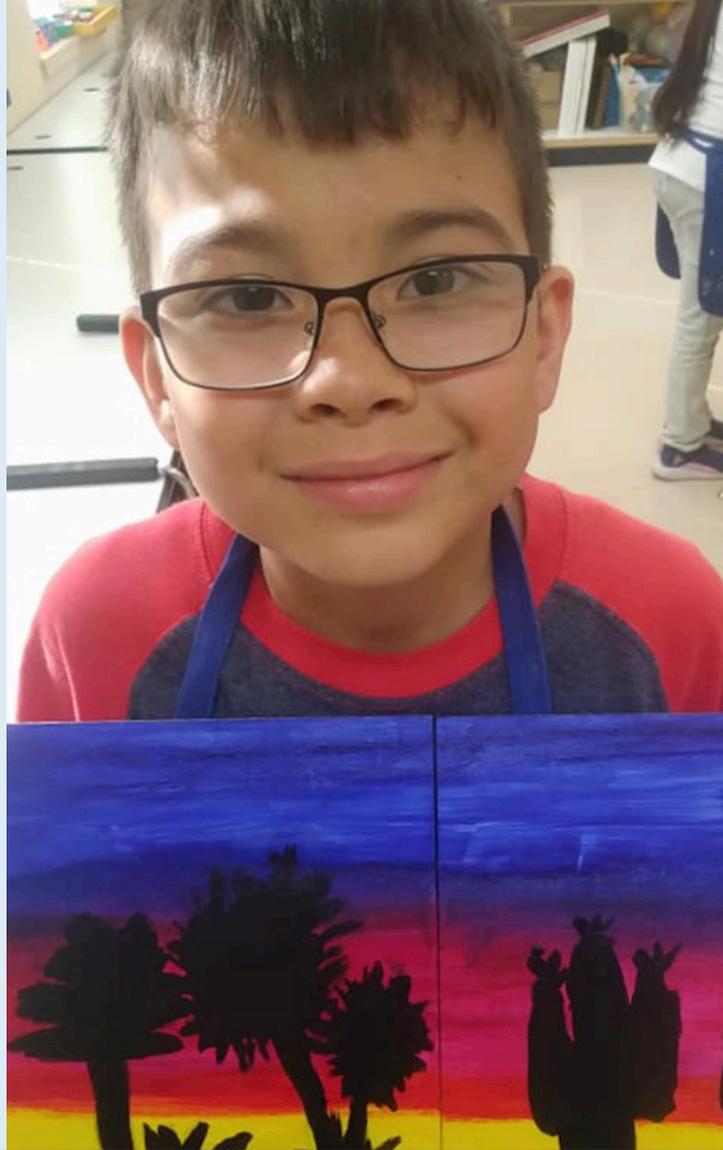
## Innovating Amid COVID-19

When the pandemic started, Creative Kids quickly pivoted its programs to virtual. The Ingles and their team of artist-teachers formed an assembly line at the downtown gallery to put together monthly art kits that they delivered to families in partnership with the local Boys and Girls Clubs. They also produced weekly instructional YouTube videos for the kids. Artist-teachers started having individual Zoom sessions with kids once a week. The team posted frequently on Instagram and Facebook to promote awareness and maintain connectivity with kids and their families.

The Ingles say they initially weren't sure how the kids were going to take to virtual art programming, but it turned out they loved it. Parents have gotten involved in doing some of the activities at home with their children, too. They also enjoyed the private, virtual gallery tour that Creative Kids organized during the pandemic to showcase the children's work.

The Ingles say it's sometimes hard to convince adults of the value of arts programming for kids, but it's something they firmly believe in.

"We're not trying to create great artists," Stephen says. "This is about trying to develop great people. It's about purpose, it's about vision, it's about mentorship, it's about grit and resilience and all those things that need to be passed on to young people."



“ Ms. Lara is one amazing art teacher! It takes a big heart to shape little minds. The Creative Kids program has been very helpful for my child during this pandemic. She looks forward to her scheduled art classes. I was able to discover that my child had an amazing art talent — I was unaware! Thank you for thinking about our kids!”

– Karina Salvio-Ortiz, Parent



The Texas Partnership for Out of School Time (TXPOST) is a statewide intermediary whose mission is to convene, educate, and advocate to improve the quality and increase the availability of out of school time (OST) opportunities for Texas youth. TXPOST works in partnership with vital leaders at local and regional levels, including the BOOST Network, which invest deeply in their own communities to offer professional development opportunities, engage in system building work, advocate for the OST field, and support local programs.

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The goal of the BOOST Network is to increase the quality and knowledge of Out-of-School Time (OST) programs across the region and to expand the number of youth enrolled in these programs.

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