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Building Youth Resiliency and Aspirations During a Crisis:

Lessons Learned from Maine's Aspirations Incubator During the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Sarah Krichels Goan, Elora Way, Erin Cinelli, and Don Carpenter

Abstract

The Emanuel & Pauline A. Lerner Foundation's Aspirations Incubator (AI) is a six-year pilot initiative invested in strategic capacity building for youth development organizations in rural Maine. The AI programs were halfway through the pilot when COVID-19 disrupted programming. Yet, AI programs remained connected with students throughout the transition to remote learning and COVID-19 quarantine. This paper highlights the innovative responses undertaken by the AI programs and shares critical aspects of the AI model that made these responses successful.

invested in strategic capacity building for six youth development organizations in rural Maine. Funded partners are developing comprehensive mentoring-based programming for youth, focused on raising aspirations, increasing resiliency, and broadening horizons. The Aspirations Incubator model is based on the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, developed by Trekkers, a youth-serving organization based in Rockland, Maine.² The Trekkers' Youth Programming Principles and the

INTRODUCTION

Middle school students are at an important developmental stage, when stable relationships with nonfamily supports can help them overcome challenges in their lives and increase engagement with school (Center for Promise [2015](#)). Programs that offer middle school students structured exploration and peer interaction, and tap into their willingness to try new things, can help them learn more about themselves and how they want to fit into the world around them (Deschenes et al. [2010](#)). While more than half of all school-aged children in Maine live in rural areas, many rural communities lack resources to help students develop resilience skills and foster aspirations for the future (Showalter et al. [2019](#)). Moreover, the 2019 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey shows that only 57 percent of high school students in Maine felt like they mattered to their community. And yet the Maine Resilience Building Network has found that protective factors, such as supportive relationships and caring environments, can help students to feel safe and enhance their resiliency (Tinkham [2020](#)).¹

The Emanuel & Pauline A. Lerner Foundation's Aspirations Incubator (AI) is a six-year pilot initiative

Aspirations Incubator model are unique in their design because they focus on building a continuous, long-term mentoring program that spans six years, starting in seventh grade and continuing through high school graduation. Moreover, the model relies on social-emotional development assessment tools to inform individual and cohort strategies that build balance and growth in young people.³ Table 1 outlines the four pillars of the AI model, which are aligned with the original Trekkers Youth Programming Principles.

The AI programs were halfway through the pilot when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted programming, school partners, students, and their families. And yet, AI programs remained connected with students throughout the transition to remote learning and COVID-19 lockdown, a notable difference compared to traditional afterschool programs. AI programs also served as a critical link between schools, caregivers, and students, buffering against learning loss and maintaining student engagement.

This paper highlights the innovative responses to the pandemic undertaken by the six AI programs (Table 2) and shares the critical aspects of the AI model that made these responses successful. Of particular interest is the role of

Table 1: Four Pillars of the Aspirations Incubator

Mentoring	Experiential learning	Social and emotional learning	College and career readiness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult & peer mentoring • Tutoring • Informal individual support • E-mentoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Travel & camping • Environmental education • Place-based education • Civic engagement • Cultural awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths-based resilience building • Life skill preparation • Community support network • Holistic student assessment & the Clover Model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College and career exploration • Financial literacy • Internships and job shadows • Career skills training

Table 2: Aspirations Incubator Program Sites

Site	Program name	School district	Communities served
Chewonki	Waypoint	RSU #1	Arrowsic, Bath, Woolwich, Phippsburg, and surrounding communities.
Apex Youth Connection	Trek2Connect	Biddeford School Department	Biddeford
Old Town-Orono YMCA	River Runners	RSU #34	Alton, Bradley, Old Town
The EdGE Program of Maine Seacoast Mission	Journey	SAD #37	Addison, Columbia, Columbia Falls, Harrington, Milbridge
The Game Loft	I Know ME	RSU #3	Brooks, Freedom, Jackson, Knox, Liberty, Monroe, Montville, Thorndike, Troy, Unity, Waldo
University of Maine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond	NorthStar	SAD #44	Andover, Bethel, Gilead, Greenwood, Newry, Woodstock

informal relationship building with students, family engagement, community partnerships, and prepandemic shifts in organizational policies, practices, and procedures made to support the AI program model. The observations are gathered from 78 interviews with program and community stakeholders, three youth focus groups, and qualitative student survey responses. Data were collected as part of a multiyear, longitudinal evaluation conducted by the Data

Innovation Project at the University of Southern Maine’s Cutler Institute.

LESSONS LEARNED

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the AI programs, their host organizations, their school partners, and most critically, the AI students and their families. Such an upheaval may have lasting impacts on these programs and their students. Yet the surprise of this unforeseen moment is how it has rendered valuable insights about the program and its model.

Building Relationships with Young People

The experience during the COVID-19 pandemic cemented the importance of relationship building in the AI model. Throughout the course of the first three years, program managers and organizational leadership increasingly observed the efficacy of relationship building. The pandemic solidified the power of the relationships program managers had established with their students and the relationships students had developed with each other.

I think the relationships that were formed prior to the building closures really allowed the students to continue their relationship with [the program manager] during crisis schooling. I think it speaks to the relationships she built prior to the building closures. And by the same token it has facilitated their return to schooling here in the fall.
—School guidance director, 2020

This contrast was particularly visible to sites that had to shutter whole programs within their organizations because their connection to youth was through traditional avenues like afterschool programming and school-sponsored field trips. One organizational leader explained, “Right away we [the organization] figured out ways to

Journey @ The EdGE Program of Maine Seacoast Mission

When COVID-19 spurred a lockdown in Washington County, Journey had to tackle the challenge of student isolation and wellbeing. The Maine Seacoast Mission allocated funds for gas so that Journey's program manager could visit her students in their driveways with masks on and socially distant or go on short walks. From her perspective these moments were important lifelines for her students, "Some of my students were having meltdowns and they really appreciated being able to go on a walk."

NorthStar @ University of Maine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond

Once the COVID-19 pandemic started, NorthStar's program manager noted that her efforts shifted to entirely individual mental health support. Every week she would meet with each student for 30 minutes. This time quickly morphed into family support and connecting them to community resources. Before she knew it, she was also getting added to Google classrooms that enabled her to proactively support students with their academics.

River Runners @ Old Town – Orono YMCA

The River Runners program managers described the beginning of the pandemic as extremely challenging for their students and families. Out of necessity their families had to be open about their struggles, which in turn fostered stronger connection with program staff and the YMCA. The program managers were also particularly struck by the students' resilience and optimism throughout the pandemic. One noted how her students also grew more bonded as a group and were dedicated to helping each other get through the particularly trying time.

Waypoint @ Chewonki

The two Waypoint program managers conducted needs assessment calls with each Waypoint family. The needs assessment helped Chewonki figure out the impact COVID-19 was having on families. With this information, they connected families with community resources or dropped food and supplies off at students' homes. Chewonki leadership believe this approach helped Waypoint "[bolster their] skills in being resource routers to students and families."

I Know ME @ The Game Loft

Like all programs I Know ME had to shift to a virtual format. What is different is they set up a Discord server, an online platform designed for gaming. Much to their surprise this new platform actually increased overall student engagement. For one cohort in particular, remote programming ended up being a more effective way for them to connect and bond. One student shared, "they (the program staff) work to keep things going with zoom...we haven't taken much of a loss throughout this, we still meet regularly which I can't say for most things."

Trek2Connect @ Apex Youth Connection

Trek2Connect was one of the first sites to resume in-person programming. Apex's Executive Director described the rationale behind the decision, "We were concerned about mental health and isolation, spending all of their time on a screen and as a result of those concerns we reopened in-person as soon as we possibly could and we started seeing kids all outside and in-person...I think we were the first ones...that took a very bold move that was pretty scary." Their organizational agility paid off and Trek2Connect was able to safely run an abundance of outdoor and physically distanced activities, at least one or twice a week, all summer long.

pivot and reach youth virtually, but [our AI program] was way out ahead; those relationships aren't dependent on activities or being in-person. So that was one good outcome that forced us to look at our other programming areas and figure out ways to replicate that." As a result, this

organization is trying to weave relationship building into what had predominantly been a focus in outdoor adventure and STEM because they realized "those activities are only as good as the mentorship relationship that results."

Bringing Families into the Circle

The importance of engaging families (parents and caregivers) showed up consistently in the first three years of AI implementation. As one program manager shared, “A learned lesson during my time at [AI program] was the importance of building relationships with the parents. The more they know about the program and myself, the more buy-in they have in communicating to and encouraging their youth.” Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the established relationships with parents, families, and other caregivers enabled program managers to quickly shift gears and become a trusted source of support for whole families, not just the young person enrolled in the program. All the AI sites implemented consistent family outreach and check-ins where program managers called families regularly to discuss emergent family needs. One program manager described how contact with families prior to COVID was more focused on trips or activities but “with COVID we have gotten comfortable having the tougher conversations—are you getting enough food? Do you need the gas card to come to this one trip?”

The deepening of relationships and family trust is, in my mind, my number one accomplishment this year.
—Program Manager, 2020

In response to these family needs, the AI sites quickly reallocated program resources to support emergency family needs in small ways (such as gas and grocery cards) and facilitated connections to other community supports. Many also helped families with transportation to programming throughout the school year. The Lerner Foundation also established a family emergency assistance fund that program managers could access when other support options were not available; this fund supported emergency needs around housing, technology access, and transportation for five families across four different AI sites in 2020.

Forging Community Connections

Since the outset, AI sites have been coached to think proactively, rather than reactively, around connecting with other organizations present in their communities. The substantial disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the power of these community connections to activate and quickly respond to the needs of AI students and their families. In this response, AI sites strengthened existing connections and forged new relationships with

local organizations. The following are some examples of these community support networks in action.

- Strengthening linkages to an existing food pantry and community resource counselor which are part of the host organization
- Establishing monthly check-ins with school leadership and guidance counselors
- Connecting with an outside food pantry and making regular food deliveries to families
- Coordinating with outside organizations to get emergency assistance to families
- Helping to connect families and students to behavioral health services, either through the school or independently
- Ensuring that AI participants had access to internet connectivity or WiFi and the devices needed to support remote learning
- Connecting with city government to get resources to support families experiencing housing and food insecurity or internet issues

Prioritizing Organizational Agility

Prior organizational shifts prepared AI sites for the agility needed to quickly adapt their AI programming when COVID-19 began to spread. In earlier years, the host organizations shifted policies, practice, procedures, and cultures to better support the AI model. Many of the changes were technical and related to risk management, such as changing liability policies to cover students traveling in their program manager’s car, or developing guidelines about how to manage one-to-one activities. Organizations also embraced informal modes of communication with youth and families, such as texting and direct messaging through social media applications, and allowing program managers to be in contact with participants outside of regularly scheduled programming.

I was happy that the [organization] took into consideration that it is an important part of the program [informal relationship building] and they let me see my kids in the driveway with masks and being socially distant.
—Program Manager, 2020

In concert, these shifts meant that program managers maintained connections with students throughout the transition to remote programming. Program managers were able to reach out quickly to ensure the immediate

health and safety of their participants and also to assist their school partners in locating and re-engaging students that fell through the cracks in the schools' contact systems. One site leader described the speed at which their AI program was able to adapt, "We started by going remote, as soon as schools shutdown we were immediately connecting. Doing very regular check-ins, weekly cohort meetings, [the program manager] was supporting them academically—running books from school to their houses, we started up food distribution for the weekend." This example also illustrates how an organizational culture that supports creativity and problem solving allowed staff to innovate and be highly responsive to their participants' needs.

A few students in the eighth grade survey and in the two focus groups that happened after the pandemic lockdown also noted how effectively their programs were able to pivot and continue virtually. One student shared, "This program has done a very good job of continuing to run even while in a quarantine situation." Furthermore, the need to innovate and the imperative to connect with youth also led most AI programs to be the first in their organizations to run in-person programming once lockdowns began to lift. This meant that many of the program managers and their supervisors developed and tested their organization's new COVID-19 guidelines and paved the way for other programs in their organizations.

CONCLUSION

The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic distilled the critical components that enabled a diverse pool of Aspirations Incubator programs to effectively respond and support youth and their families: building informal relationships outside the school setting; engaging families and caretakers as key partners; connecting with local service providers and networks; and fostering innovation through organizational agility and flexibility. Although not discussed in this paper, the interim evaluation results from the AI also showed sustained postsecondary aspirations among program participants, as well as a strong sense of belonging—both of which are integral to navigating the difficult transition to higher education. We are hopeful that in the coming years, AI students have the ability to weather the disruption of the pandemic as they continue on their paths to postsecondary education and career opportunities.

It has affected me in a good way because it has helped me focus on my careers, and we have had a lot of fun.
—Eighth Grader, 2020

More broadly, the adverse effects of the pandemic on long-term youth aspirations are still emerging, although Maine's low rates of postsecondary initiation (57 percent in 2020) may deepen, at least in the short term (MDOE 2021). Indeed, enrollment in the University of Maine System for fall 2021 shows an increase that is largely driven by out-of-state students (Maine Public 2021). Moreover, first generation, economically disadvantaged students living in rural areas will likely face additional hardships and experience more disruptions to their higher education pursuits. And yet, for every one child enrolled in an after-school program in Maine, there are five children waiting for an available program.⁴ Continued investment in long-term youth-mentoring programs such as the AI—with a focus on relationship building, family engagement, community connection, and innovation—will be critical throughout Maine as we strive to bridge the emerging aspirations gap spawned by the COVID-19 pandemic and support the postpandemic recovery.

NOTES

- 1 For more information about the MIYHS, please visit: <https://data.mainepublichealth.gov/miyhs/home>
- 2 More information about Trekkers and the Principles can be found on their website: <https://www.trekkers.org/>
- 3 Specifically, the AI relies on the Clover Model and the Holistic Student Assessment, both developed by the PEAR Institute. More information can be found on their website: <https://www.pearinc.org/>
- 4 More information can be found from the Maine Afterschool Network: <https://www.maineafterschool.org/esser-iii-funding>

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