

SPOTLIGHT ON...

# Building Educated Leaders for Life



BY KENDRA BISCHOFF

**T**he accountability movement among educational policymakers has primarily focused on raising student achievement within the confines of the traditional school day and the nine-month school year. The movement is about recruiting and training better teachers, upgrading standards in the classroom, and otherwise improving education during the school year. But what about the more than two months students spend out of school on summer vacation? Shouldn't we worry about whether learning is occurring then too? Shouldn't we be concerned that richer children get to attend high-quality camps and learn from resource-rich parents while less fortunate children are left to stagnate?

Indeed, we should. There's a growing body of research showing that while high-income children continue to learn during the summer, their low-income counterparts progress more slowly and sometimes even regress academically during the summer months. Thus, the gap between rich and poor children worsens,

often quite dramatically, while school is not in session.

At the same time, such evidence also presents an opportunity to make lasting change, as it highlights where (and to some extent even how) inequality is generated. The Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL) program has seized this opportunity.

Founded in 1992 by Harvard Law School students, BELL runs a structured, academically focused summer learning program for low-income and largely minority students in kindergarten through the eighth grade. In addition, they operate after-school tutoring programs in public schools, largely funded by Supplemental Education Services available for underperforming schools through the No Child Left Behind legislation. The organization, which began in Boston and served only a few hundred students in its first year, has served over 35,000 participants to date and has expanded to 70 different sites in New York, Baltimore, Detroit, Charlotte, NC, and Springfield, MA.

Tiffany Cooper Gueye, the CEO of BELL since 2008, recently spoke to us about the organization's philosophy, goals, and future plans. As a college student in Boston in 1998, Gueye was drawn to a simple BELL advertisement in a local newspaper asking potential hires, "Do you believe all children can excel?" This question piqued her interest; she signed up immediately as a teaching assistant and has worked for BELL in various capacities ever since.

What makes BELL different? There are, after all, a great many out-of-school-time (OST) programs that aim to raise academic achievement. The BELL programs differ from the run-of-the-mill OST program in three simple ways:

**Research-based.** Gueye, who holds a Ph.D. in Education Research, Measurement, and Evaluation, brings with her a commitment to high academic standards and strong accountability. The BELL program stands or falls on the results it generates. In deciding how to formulate its programs, BELL thus looks to high-quality research on what works and what doesn't, and the program is also fine-tuned every year based on BELL's internal data collection.

**Comprehensive.** The results coming out of the Harlem Children's Zone and elsewhere make it clear that progress is most reliably made when academic achievement is not addressed in isolation from other problems a child may be facing. The goals, then, of the BELL program are not just to raise academic achievement in math and reading, but also to improve self-esteem, to develop social skills, to increase parental involvement in school, and more generally to treat students not just as students but as whole persons.

**Taking control.** Embedded in BELL's philosophy is a belief that children are agents of change, responsible for their own actions and behavior. For example, students are referred to as scholars, a label that treats them from the start as autonomous, independent, and in control. As Gueye stated, BELL teaches children that "smart is not something you are, it's something you get."

A typical day for a BELL summer scholar begins with breakfast at 8:30 a.m. and is followed by community time when the students share their goals for the day. The remainder of the morning is filled with three hours of instruction in literacy and math. The curriculum is tailored for each child and is differentiated within classrooms using teaching assistants. In the



ABOVE: BELL scholars pose for a group photo

FACING PAGE: A BELL staff member reads with a young BELL scholar

afternoons, scholars rotate through three hours of structured enrichment activities in art, science, or physical education. They end the day with 30 minutes to gather and organize their homework materials. Fridays are reserved for guest speakers from the local community, as well as afternoon field trips.

In concert with the program's goals, scholars' parents are encouraged to be heavily involved and to attend BELL-sponsored life skills workshops. BELL realizes that they may only see any given child for one summer or one school year, so they try to give parents and children the opportunity to develop skills that they can take with them as they move forward through life.

But what about results? Does being a BELL scholar indeed help close the achievement gap? In the early 2000s, Gueye teamed up with the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan policy group in Washington, D.C., to conduct a study of the effects of their six-week summer program. Because the summer program was oversubscribed and did not have the capacity or funding to serve all applicants, they were able to randomly select participants in 2005. This allowed them to convincingly isolate the true causal effects of their program, net of family background or other unobserved characteristics that may also affect a student's academic achievement or self-concept. The results of the study showed that BELL participants gained about a month more of reading comprehension than similar students who did not participate in the program.

As a follow-up to the Urban Institute study, Gueye is now planning a corollary study of BELL's after-school program. While middle- and upper-income families often fill their children's summer and weekend time with enriching activities, low-income children are less likely to be exposed to out-of-school complements to their education. Will BELL's after-school program prove as successful as its summer program in helping close the achievement gap? We'll soon find out.

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