

April 2021

Two Covid-Necessitated Learning Programs Likely To Exceed Their \$150 Million Budget

Last summer, the de Blasio Administration released a Request for Information (RFI) for the Learning Bridges program. This initiative provides in-person, out-of-home child care and supervision for pre-school and school-aged children enrolled in hybrid in-person/remote learning models at Department of Education (DOE) schools. As of January 2021, the program was expanded to include services for students participating in 100 percent remote learning as well. The program is referred to as Learning Bridges for pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) participants who are ages 3 and 4, and Learning Labs for students in kindergarten through 8th grade (K-8). Learning Bridges sites are run by community-based organizations (CBOs) under contract with DOE and include some DOE staff; Learning Labs are operated by CBOs under contract with the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD).

Like the Regional Enrichment Centers (RECs) that provided care for children of essential workers in the first months of the pandemic, Learning Bridges/Labs sites prioritize enrollment for:

- children of essential workers (or previous REC enrollees);
- children of DOE teachers and staff;
- students in temporary housing, including shelters and hotels;
- public housing residents;
- children in foster care or other child welfare services; and
- students with disabilities.

Participants are admitted on a rolling basis. DOE states that it places children at the closest site possible with available seats. No transportation is provided.

Programming is run through CBOs such as human services agencies, after-school providers, and child care centers and family child care programs, under contracts with DOE

and DYCD. Most are providers who already hold contracts with DOE and DYCD through other programming, such as pre-K, Early Learn, Family Child Care, COMPASS/SONYC, Beacons, and Cornerstones. Among all providers, 119 (almost 70 percent) already held contracts for some programming with DYCD or DOE, while 55 were newly contracted providers under the Learning Bridges/Labs RFI. The payment per participant is \$13,500 for DOE programming and \$7,812 for DYCD programming. According to the RFI, reimbursement is based on classroom capacity, rather than attendance.

Learning Bridges/Labs programs are expected to provide support for and facilitate the remote learning content provided by DOE, as well as offer other opportunities for age appropriate enrichment activities and programming. The programs are also required to adhere to the same strict health and safety protocols followed in DOE schools, including space requirements for physical distancing, staffing ratio requirements, personal protective equipment usage, frequent hand washing, and maintaining small and stable cohort groups. Providers pick up pre-packaged food/snacks from various DOE Grab & Go sites, and may get bulk supplies of personal protective equipment from DYCD at a centralized location.

Initial Offers and Funding. The RFI stated a goal of capacity for 100,000 children. As of November 2020, a total of about 42,400 students had been offered slots in the program: 4,400 children for pre-K slots, and 38,000 children for K-8 program slots. There were 447 sites: 164 sites for pre-K and 283 sites for K-8.

Learning Bridges/Labs first appeared in the city's financial plan in November 2020. Just over \$91 million was budgeted for the program in fiscal year 2021. This included almost \$46 million for DYCD's Learning Labs in federal



Community Services Block Grant funds as provided under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, an early Covid-19 response bill. For Learning Bridges, the November plan included \$45 million in city-funded new needs under DOE. An additional \$412,000 in city funds was added to the Mayor's contracting office.

In addition to the programmatic funding, money was moved from elsewhere within the agencies' budgets on a temporary basis to complete contract registration and ensure cash flow for providers. In the case of DYCD, this adjustment totaled \$24.6 million. For DOE, \$20.3 million was moved to Learning Bridges for this purpose. However, the de Blasio Administration has stated that they expect the \$20.3 million under DOE and potentially the \$24.6 million under DYCD will be removed in a future plan.

Preliminary Budget Offers and Enrollment. As of late January, the number of children that had received offers increased to 54,000: about 7,000 children for pre-K programs and 47,000 students for K-8 programs. The program added three more sites since the November 2020 Financial Plan, for a total of 450. According to DOE data, just under half (217) are located in the 28 neighborhoods hardest hit by Covid-19, a group prioritized for support through Learning Bridges/Labs. However, 433 (96 percent) of sites reported having space available. CBOs and advocates indicated that in the beginning of the program, matches to sites were not always conveniently located for parents, and that the program has since changed to offer three potential match sites to parents, which may increase enrollment going forward. Additionally, in late January, the DOE expanded eligibility to students who are learning remotely full time in hopes of increasing participation.

As of early March, however, enrollment remained significantly below the number of slots offered, despite efforts by the city to target locations in high-need communities, altering policies that were deterring enrollment, and expanding eligibility. Actual enrollment in early March was only about 15,000 students across both

programs. Both offers and enrollment are ongoing and the de Blasio Administration expects enrollment to grow as offers can still be accepted at a later date.

More than three-quarters of staff across the two programs are dedicated to Learning Labs. Staffing for Learning Labs programs totaled 1,870. For Learning Bridges sites, staff totaled 580, which includes teachers, paraprofessionals, and site leadership; 94 of these were DOE staff, and 486 were CBO staff.

Preliminary Budget Funding. Under the city's January 2021 Financial Plan, funding for Learning Bridges/Labs totals \$196 million in 2021: an increase of \$57 million in city funds to DYCD's budget for Learning Labs, and \$8 million to the Department of Citywide Administrative Services' budget to fund the rental of programmatic spaces. The plan also included a technical change in DOE's Learning Bridges program budget to reflect spending on air purification initiatives under centralized school facilities rather than within Learning Bridges; this moved \$5.6 million out of the budget for Learning Bridges.

Taking these changes into account, the total amount budgeted for Learning Labs and Learning Bridges, including the almost \$45 million in temporary technical adjustments to support contract cash flow as previously discussed, was just under \$196 million as of January's financial plan. Since the \$45 million in temporary funds are likely to be moved back into their original program areas, available funding is actually around \$151 million.

There may be more adjustments to the budget before the fiscal year ends. IBO estimates that actual spending is likely to exceed \$151 million and additional funds may be needed. For its part, DOE has estimated that the Learning Bridges portion of the program will cost around \$93 million, more than double the amount currently budgeted for 2021. The Mayor's office and the two agencies administering the program have indicated that they will continue to monitor program needs and adjust the budget as necessary. Less

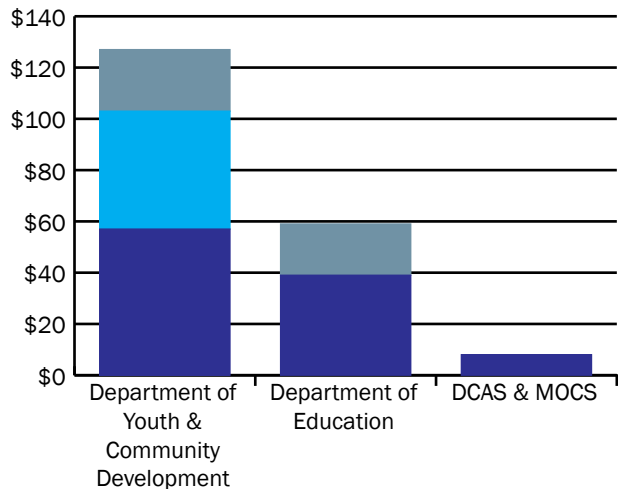
Learning Labs and Learning Bridges as of Preliminary Budget				
Age Group	Number of Students Offered Slots¹	Enrollment²	Sites³	Staff⁴
Learning Bridges, Preschool	6,972	(not available broken out by age group)	158	580
Learning Labs, K-8	47,025		292	1,870
TOTAL	53,997	~15,000	450	2,450
SOURCES: ¹ Mayor's Office of Management and Budget 1/28/21; ² Mayor's Office of Management and Budget 3/9/21; ³ Department of Education Learning Bridges, accessed 2/2/21; ⁴ Department of Education 2/26/21				

New York City Independent Budget Office

Excluding Technical Adjustments Expected to Be Reversed, Almost 70 Percent of Funding For Learning Labs/Bridges Is City Funded

■ City ■ Noncity ■ Technical Adjustments

Dollars in millions



SOURCE: Financial Management System
New York City Independent Budget Office

than \$300,000 has been added for 2022, and this for the administrative services department. Whether the program will still be needed in 2022 depends on the course of vaccination and reopening efforts and—especially—the future of remote learning options under DOE.

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