

Higher Achievement

Washington, DC; Baltimore, MD; Pittsburgh, PA;
Alexandria and Richmond, VA



Closing the opportunity gap during the pivotal middle school years with rigorous year-round learning, caring role models and a culture of high expectations.



A Snapshot from a Participant's Perspective



At 3:30 pm, Kara arrives with 14 other fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth graders from her school to Higher Achievement, a neighborhood afterschool program for middle school students. Kara and her fellow Higher Achievement “scholars” walk into the school where the program takes place and head into different classrooms for study hall. Kara joins other eighth grade scholars working on their homework and pulls out her assignment for the day—algebra. It’s her second day practicing equations with reciprocals and even though it’s tough at first, she receives help on the challenging problems from another eighth grade student and from Jessica, a study hall volunteer. Throughout study hall, Kara and other students take breaks from their homework and move to the cafeteria for their evening meal—a sandwich with turkey and swiss cheese, a side of fruit and a bottle of apple juice.



By 5:00 pm, most scholars have finished eating and choose an elective class for the next hour. Kara has chosen spoken word, a form of urban poetry, led by a poet and community advocate. The instructor, Jahi, discusses how to pause for dramatic effect and recites a poem to demonstrate the technique. The scholars then practice the technique with different parts of the same poem, then break into small groups and practice using pauses in their own poems.



At 6:00 pm, the volunteer mentors have arrived at the school and, together with the scholars, gather for the daily Community Meeting facilitated by scholars and guided by Higher Achievement staff members. The twenty-minute meeting begins with a conversation about how scholars can encourage their peers to litter less and recycle more, especially in schools. Soon the scholars and mentors broaden the conversations, looking at littering and disparities in trash collection between higher and lower income neighborhoods in their community.



At 6:30 pm, the Community Meeting ends and Kara joins two other scholars and her math mentor, Sally, a young professional who lives near the school. The group starts the lesson on linear equations by discussing city public transit systems, comparing different plans with varying rates and costs to the riding habits of a few different customers. She shows the group a graph of the plans’ costs over 10 rides and asks them to describe what they see. Kara points out that one plan starts off with a higher price but ends up costing the least over 10 rides. Sarah asks the scholars to find a way to determine the cost for any number of rides purchased on each plan and explain their reasoning for which plan they think is the best. She reminds the scholars that there are many methods to answer the question, such as with graphs, tables and equations, and encourages them each to find the way that makes the most sense to them.



At 7:45 pm, the math lesson ends and all the scholars and mentors reconvene for a closing meeting called Gathering Time. A scholar facilitator asks the group for shoutouts from the evening, a program routine that encourages program participants to publically praise each other for going above and beyond according to Higher Achievement core values. Sally raises her hand and says, “I’d like to give a shout out to my entire group. Even though they were faced with a tough math problem today, they stayed positive and eventually found the solution. They even connected the lesson to two of Higher Achievement’s social justice themes: voice and justice.” Kara and the other students smile shyly and, as they leave the program at 8:00 pm, they turn to each other, smile and take turns giving high fives for a job well done.



A Model of High-Quality Expanded Learning

The Higher Achievement program model combines high expectations with continuous support. Scholars complete challenging academic work with three different mentors to develop critical thinking skills, work with program staff to create individual achievement plans and constantly receive personal encouragement. Higher Achievement incorporates the principles of high-quality expanded learning in the following ways:

School-Community Partnerships

Higher Achievement works with teachers and principals to encourage students to apply to the program and maintains robust communication with their partner schools—often with the help of AmeriCorps direct service volunteers on staff—to keep the teachers and the program staff apprised of the student's attitude, behavior and how the program can best support and complement in-school learning. Higher Achievement also relies on community volunteers and mentors to provide guidance, small-group instruction and role modeling for scholars. Lessons and discussions consistently tie back into community issues.

Engaged Learning

Higher Achievement engages scholars by emphasizing project-based learning, encouraging discussion and critical thinking, linking learning to relevant community issues and keeping the class sizes small to promote personalized instruction. Higher Achievement's curriculum guides mentors and summer teachers in teaching content that is based on four social justice themes—freedom, justice, solidarity and voice. Higher Achievement also provides staff, summer teachers and mentors with orientation and ongoing training to guide them in providing personalized and engaging lessons for scholars.

Learning Time after School and during the Summer

Higher Achievement provides 650 hours of learning time to its scholars on top of the 900 hours that students experience in school. Scholars enter the program in fifth grade and graduate in eighth, giving scholars sustained support from the transitions into and out of middle school.

Family Engagement

Higher Achievement staff members work closely with families throughout the duration of the program. Parents receive regular phone calls from staff members to discuss their scholar's academic progress and behavior and participate twice per year in a survey of their child's academic behaviors and attitudes. Parents often volunteer or serve on the parent advisory council that advocates for parent needs within the program. Additionally, program staff members help families with referrals for other services they may need and support them in choosing high school programs that keep the scholar on the college and career readiness track.

Health and Wellness

All students receive an evening meal at the afterschool program and both breakfast and lunch are provided during the summer program. The meals typically consist of a sandwich or entree, a vegetable side dish and a healthy beverage. Many program electives incorporate physical activity, such as dance and basketball.

Affordability and Sustainability

Size: Approximately 1,000 scholars in 12 school-based centers

Annual Operating Cost: Approximately \$4,500 per student (\$7-8 per hour at scale)

Funders and Partners

Higher Achievement is generously funded by foundations, businesses, government and individuals, including a number of key district partners:

District of Columbia Public Schools
Alexandria City Public Schools
Baltimore City Public Schools
Richmond Public Schools
Pittsburgh Public Schools