

Report to the Human Services and Veterans Committee
from the City of Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs

DHSP Community Schools 2021-2022

Program Changes, Data and Outcomes, and Key Learnings

October 2021



Department of
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Introduction

The Department of Human Service Programs made major changes to our Community Schools registration, enrollment, and fee structure for the 2021-2022 academic year, which significantly impacted families. Our department strives to make our programs as equitable and accessible as possible, especially to low-income families. Our goal was to provide equitable access to the Community School programs, to make them more affordable to low- and moderate-income families, and to continue to provide high quality programs for families across the income spectrum.

We needed to make changes to our enrollment process in order to make access to Community Schools programs more equitable. Over the years, we tried several strategies to encourage more participation from low-income families, including increasing scholarship opportunities and offering supervised bus pickup. Despite these efforts, in many Community Schools, low-income families were not easily accessing our programs, applying for scholarship opportunities, or enrolling.

A system that relies on first-come, first-served enrollment and requires families to apply for scholarship does not support equitable access for the families most often marginalized. The following report provides detailed information about why we made changes to our Community Schools registration, enrollment, and tuition. It explains the lottery process, the challenges we faced, and our key learnings in order to improve our process and our communications with families.

In the 2021–2022 academic year, our new process resulted in a 200% increase in participation by low-income families, compared to the 2019-2020 academic year. While there are areas where we can and must improve our process and communications, we are proud of how our changes moved the needle in making our programs more accessible to low-income families.

The Community Schools' Transitioning Program Model

The Community Schools Program has undergone many changes over the years. Traditionally, many families signed up for a few classes a couple of days per week. Registration for activities was in-person and did not begin until after the start of the school year. Families were notified in mid-September of their child's enrollment in activities. Pre-pandemic, most of the Community Schools programs modified their schedules to begin some programming at the start of the school year, with full registration often a week later and (in some cases) additional registration in the late winter if there were openings. Most Community Schools did not have waitlists for their programs, as the families who did not apply in person or were unable to afford the program fees were not in the applicant pool. In recent years, we noticed a changing trend that most families being served in most of the Community School Programs were looking for programming 4 or 5 days per week and were advocating for the programs to begin at the beginning of the school year. The Community School Directors tried very hard to meet the needs of the families who applied.

In an effort to increase our service to low-income families, this summer we changed the model of some of our Community Schools camp programs to focus specifically on high needs children. During the summer of 2021, four of our nine Community School Summer programs operated in partnership with Cambridge Public Schools, serving students the School Department had determined were most in need of summer programs with an afternoon camp experience linked to a morning academic program. As a result of this partnership, we served almost 300 low-income students. Without these extended day summer programs, many families would not have been able to have their children attend the half-day, school-run programs. Our experience running 2021 Community School Summer programs reinforced the need for us to formalize our commitment to serving more low-income families year-round.

2021–2022 Community Schools Program Changes

After a year of reimagined afterschool programming in order to follow the State and City public health protocols related to the Covid-19 pandemic, we knew we would be able to operate the Community Schools Programs in Fall 2021. We did not want to restart programs with the past inequities embedded in them. For the 2021-2022 academic year, we implemented the following changes in our Community Schools Program:

- **Moved from a first-come, first-served registration process to a lottery process for enrollment**
 - As we learned when we modified the DHSP Preschool registration process, a first-come, first-served system privileges those who are more connected in the community and have access to information about programs.
- **Reserved 30% of seats in each program for children from low-income families**
 - Internally, we created a General Lottery and a Priority Lottery to ensure that the 30% of seats reserved for low-income children were filled.
- **Implemented sliding scale tuition fees based on household income**
 - We set the tuition rates as a daily rate instead of cost per class, which matched how most families engaged with our programs. These rates replaced scholarships, which put the onus on low-income families to request an application and complete paperwork, resulting in few low-income families applying.
 - We deeply subsidized tuition rates for low and moderate-income families (up to 80% of HUD Area Medium Income (AMI)) and subsidized tuition rates for middle-income families earning up to 120% of HUD AMI.
 - We standardized tuition fees across all Community Schools sites. In previous years, there was no standard tuition or cost for Community Schools classes.
 - We standardized tuition fees across all youth-serving Out of School Time programs at DHSP. This will make it easier for families to understand and plan for costs for all DHSP programs.
- **Opened online registration for Community Schools in early August, 4-6 weeks before registration historically opened for Community Schools activities**
 - Prior to this year, registration happened in-person in September.
 - By opening registration early in August and increasing the registration period from 2 days to 3 weeks, we hoped to broaden the applicant pool and increase our outreach to traditionally underserved communities.
- **Introduced an online system for families who were offered seats to complete the enrollment process**
 - This replaced the in-person process for Community Schools, with the goal of giving families more flexibility to complete their child's enrollment. Staff were available to assist families in online registration.

Community Schools Lottery Process

We aimed to keep the Lottery registration process as simple as possible for families. In our lottery registration form, we asked families to provide:

- The days of the week they wanted to enroll their child
- Their household income bracket (low, middle, and high-income ranges) based on HUD AMI rates
- Their first choice Community Schools program and whether there were other Community Schools programs to which they would be willing to send their child
- Parent / Guardian email address

To support families in understanding the changes, we created a Frequently Asked Questions document, posted on DHSP's website, that addressed questions families sent us and included information about the sliding scale tuition fee rates. As families started to apply, we adjusted some programmatic elements to reflect their feedback. This included modifying the tuition rates for the two Community Schools that operate for fewer hours than others because they are based in schools with extended hours.

Registration for the Community Schools Lottery was open August 2 through August 22, 2021. After the registration period closed, we held a Priority Lottery and a General Lottery for each school and allocated seats in each program based on the program's daily enrollment capacity. We reserved 30% of spots in each program for children from low-income households. Each applicant received a number generated from a program that automates numbers. DHSP staff placed children into available spots for their age group according to their lottery number. When possible, we placed siblings together. Once all available spots were filled, the remaining applicants were moved to our waiting pool in the order of their original lottery number.

In line with our goal of notifying families of their child's placement before the start of the school year, the majority of families were sent one of the following email notifications on August 31, 2021: their child had a seat at a Community School and could start when the program began on September 13; their child had a seat at a Community School pending the hiring of additional staff; their child had a seat at a Community School pending follow up from DHSP's Inclusion Initiative staff; or their child was added to a Community School waiting pool.

We still have five classrooms, one in each of five Community Schools programs, that have not opened yet because of our staffing shortage. The hiring and retention crisis for afterschool and childcare programs is affecting many communities, including Cambridge. Since the summer, we have been actively recruiting for our afterschool positions; an effort that has included increasing the pay rate for these positions and offering retention bonuses. When we are fully staffed in the remaining five classrooms, we will open these classrooms and notify families that their children can finalize their enrollment and begin at their Community School.

The children who were not offered a seat were placed in our waiting pool in the order of the number they received in the initial lottery process. As families declined seats that were offered to them, we offered the child next in line who met the age and income criteria for the vacated seat a placement. Sometimes the next number on the waitlist did not align with the criteria of the declined seat because of the child's age group, which days of the week were available, and whether the seat that opened up was from the Priority or General Lottery. For this reason, we have not been able to report on the specific number a child held in the waiting pool, as it did not always correspond with when a matching seat opened up.

As of late October 2021, the only movement out of the waiting pool happens when a child who is enrolled in a Community School withdraws from the program. We do not anticipate that there will be many more children withdrawing. It is likely that most children who are currently in the waiting pool will remain there through the 2021-2022 academic year.

Data and Outcomes

Our goal was to provide equitable access to the Community School Programs, to make them more affordable to low and moderate-income families, and to continue to provide high quality programs for families across the income spectrum. While our data from the years prior to the 2021–2022 registration cycle is imperfect (previously, we did not have a uniform data collection system), about 12% of the children in the Community Schools Programs pre-pandemic were from low-income households, compared with 36% of children from low-income households enrolled in Community Schools programs this year.

We are in the process of collecting additional demographic data from families enrolled in our programs and will share this information when available.

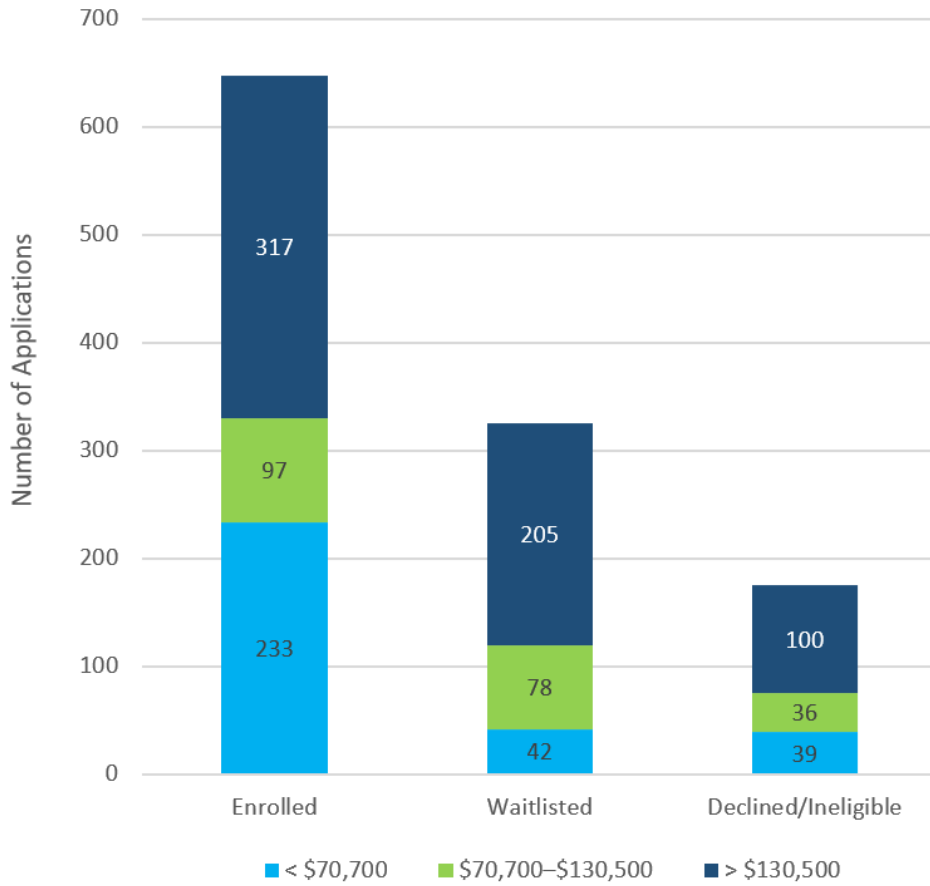
1147 children applied to the 2021-2022 Community Schools Lottery. Of these applicants:

- Approximately 27% were low-income (families with income below \$70,000), 19% were moderate-income (families with income between \$70,000 and \$130,000), and 54% had income above \$130,000.
- Families who did not get a seat through the Priority Lottery were also included in the General Lottery, which resulted in 36% of the children served in our programs being from low-income households.
- We were able to provide enrollment to 80% of the low-income children that applied and to just over 50% of the children from higher income families.

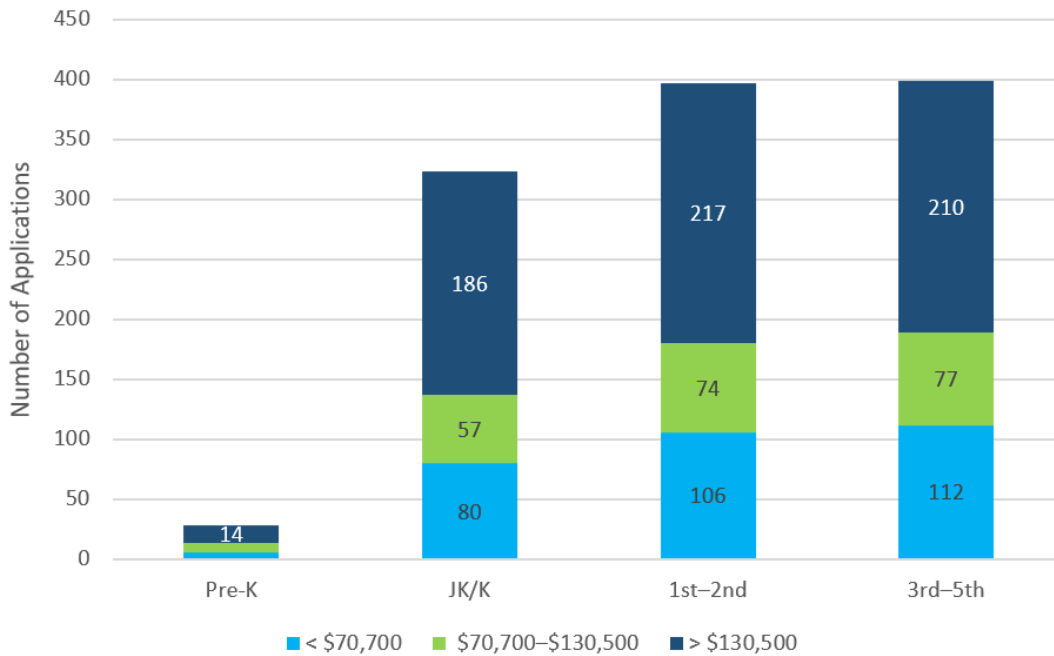
Our overall daily capacity in the Community Schools for 2019-2020 was 691 (based on actual numbers of daily seats). Our current overall daily capacity is 688.

- In most Community Schools Programs, the 2019-2020 daily capacity is similar to the 2021-2022 daily capacity.
- Three sites (King Open, Kennedy-Longfellow and Peabody) have a greater daily capacity this year than in 2019-2020.
- Three sites (Amigos, ML King and Morse) have a lower capacity this year than in 2019-2020.
- We will be exploring possible program expansion at the three sites where our capacity does not meet the 2019-2020 capacity level. This will require our ability to hire additional staff for three sites and working with the School Department on expansion of space.

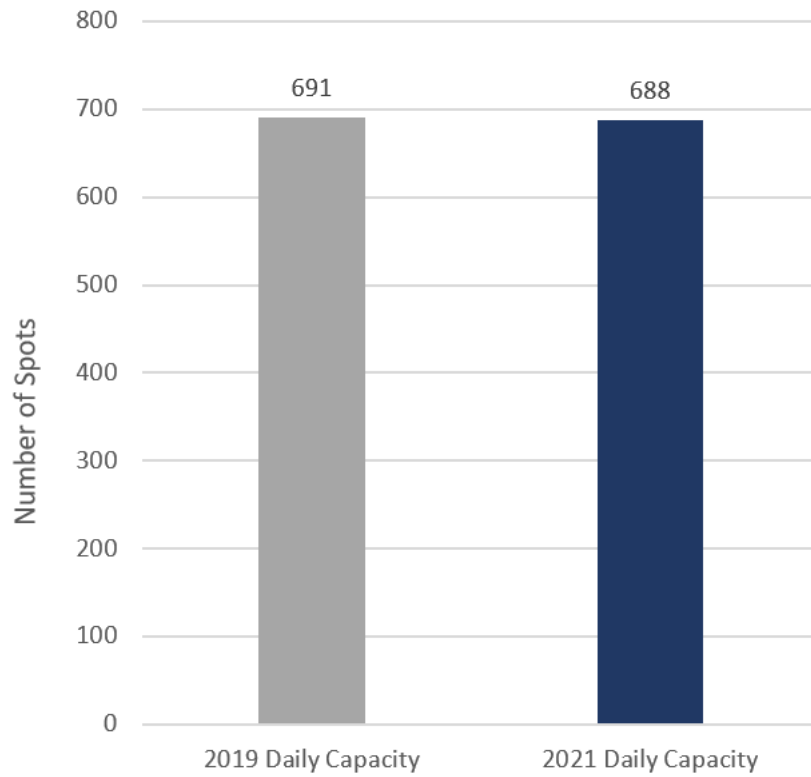
Split of Income Groups for each Application Status



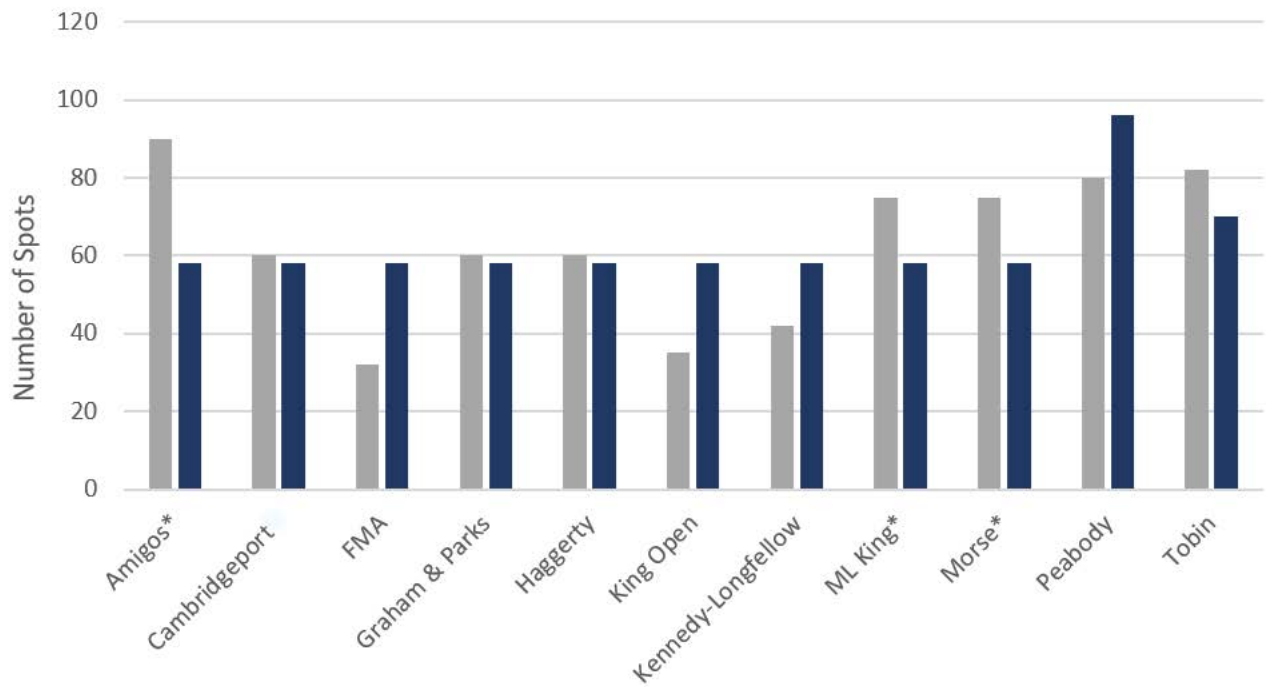
Split of Income Groups for Applications Received for each Grade Level



Total Capacity



Daily Capacity by Site



* Potential growth sites

■ 2019 Daily Capacity

■ 2021 Daily Capacity

The Challenges

Covid-19 Impacts on Working Families and the Childcare / Afterschool Sector

When we opened registration for Community Schools Programs in August 2021, our entire community was facing unprecedented changes and challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic created increased demand for afterschool programs from families whose children were in greater need of socialization and from the families whose lives had been disrupted by working from home. These factors, compounded by regional hiring challenges in the afterschool / childcare sector, put more demand on programs across Cambridge. Many community afterschool programs had long waitlists and at least one program closed its doors.

This created higher interest and demand for our Community Schools programs, and we saw a significant increase in applicants – an increase we did not anticipate. Likely also related to the pandemic, there was an increase in children from 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade seeking to enroll where previously there had been a bigger drop off in children in that age group. Having the increase of applicants from low-income families also contributed to the high numbers. This demand for programs was significantly greater without any increase in program capacity.

As we opened the Community Schools registration process, our youth-serving staff were operating our Summer Camp programs. This required adapting to evolving public health protocols to protect the health and safety of children and our staff. Covid-19 exposure protocols often disrupted our planning process for fall.

We are also facing a staffing challenge. Throughout the state and country, the afterschool/ childcare sector was experiencing (and continues to experience) a hiring and retention crisis, and we experienced this impact in our programs. For a variety of reasons, we lost part-time staff as well as some of our full-time staff who did not want to return to program sites. The college students who were a mainstay of many programs were not available or interested in returning. We actively recruited for our afterschool positions throughout the summer and fall, increasing our rates of pay and offering retention bonuses to make positions more appealing. Despite these recruitment efforts, we were not able to open some of our Community Schools programs at full capacity until they were fully staffed.

Logistical and Communication Challenges

We did not realize how challenging and time consuming it would be to review and organize the data submitted to us through the registration process, run the General and Priority Lotteries for each program, and communicate the results to families by August 31, the notification deadline we had set. All of this work had to be done in just over a week. Prior to the lottery, we also lost two key staff people who had done tremendous work in setting up the lottery and communication system.

When we were ready to communicate Lottery decisions to families, we ran into a roadblock with our communications approach, and needed to quickly pivot to learn new software in order to notify families by our deadline. While we were sending enrollment status notification to families, we realized that the new software caused the information concerning siblings who applied for Community Schools to become merged, which resulted in some families receiving duplicate emails, at times with contradictory information pertaining to the same child. We know this was very confusing for families and we tried our best to explain the situation and provide accurate information for each child as soon as possible.

We were able to send enrollment notifications to the majority of families who applied to Community Schools before September 1. While this was the deadline we had shared since opening

registration and weeks earlier than Community Schools traditionally confirmed enrollment, for most families this was too late and too close to the start of the school year, especially after more than a year of immense disruption to work and family life.

Many families wrote us to clarify the notifications they received or, in some cases, share that they had applied but had not received any update about enrollment. We devoted our resources to confirming enrollment status for families. As we focused on these details, families who inquired about their status in the waiting pool or wrote with concerns and questions about the lottery process sometimes went unanswered, and we know that this lack of communication compounded families' distress and frustration.

For those who were waitlisted for a program, families were extremely frustrated by our inability to let people know an exact number on the waitlist because the position on the waitlist was dependent on which age group a child was in, what days of the week were available, and whether the seat that opened up was from the Priority or General Lottery.

Providing Additional Afterschool Programming

We have a systemic problem that is not unique to Cambridge: there is not an adequate number of slots to serve all children whose families want to send them to Out-of-School Time (OST) programs. In Massachusetts, data suggests that only 25% of families state-wide are able to access OST programs that meet their needs. In Cambridge, our city-run and community-run OST programs have capacity for approximately 40% of the JK-5th grade Cambridge Public Schools population. There are roughly 3600 elementary school children in the Cambridge Public Schools. Prior to the 2021-2022 academic year, there were about 1100 slots in City programs and approximately 350 in community-based programs operating daily in the schools or in community non-profit programs.

The pandemic increased the demand for afterschool programs and heightened the racial and income disparities that have often left lower-income families with fewer opportunities. The cost of programming and knowledge of programming options are often barriers to access for these families. As mentioned earlier in this report, our changes to a lottery system and sliding scale tuition fees were deliberately made to the Community Schools program to address these inequities.

To provide additional afterschool programming in Cambridge, we have work to do as a community with the Cambridge Agenda for Children, with our community partners, with the School Department and with families. This year, the Agenda for Children funded a new position through the School Department in the elementary school network as part of this process. There is a deep commitment to hearing the voices of families, especially those who have not had full access to OST programs previously.

Staffing and space for programming are two major challenges that need to be solved through community conversations and process. We look forward to engaging in a robust process to determine ways to equitably expand access to OST programs across our community. We know that OST programs are a critical place to support children's social emotional well-being and foster deep connections between children and the adults. Additionally, OST programs are an essential support to working families and contribute to the well-being of our community.

Key Learnings

- Had we not moved away from the first-come, first-served model to a lottery, we would have been choosing to go back to a system that failed to provide equitable access to our programs.
- Most families are in favor of our prioritizing low-income children as long as we make space for all children who need a program.
- Holding 30% of program seats for low-income families was viewed by many as too low.
- We need to include more family input and we need to hear especially from families of color and low-income families.
- The disruption caused by our switch to a Lottery deeply impacted families at a time when they were already overwhelmed by the pandemic.
- Families need to know DHSP afterschool decisions at the beginning of the summer. If we decide to guarantee slots in the Community School from year to year, which would meet parent need, we need to make sure that we are building off equitable access first.
- The timing of our recruitment of families meant that although we were able to use our internal networks, like the Community Engagement Team, some of the outreach to low-income families that needed to happen did not happen in a timely manner.
- Our ability to move the planning earlier would have allowed for additional communication and consultation, both internally and with the community, which would have been important. However, our shift to prioritize more low-income families combined with an increase in family demand would have meant a significant number of families would still have been without programming.
- There is still confusion in the community about the difference between the status of children in the waiting pool and those that were offered a seat at a Community School, pending the hiring of additional staff. We will be communicating with both groups to provide clarifying information.
- The speed with which we operated meant that even our own staff who were busy running programs all spring and all summer were sometimes not certain of what was happening in the moment. We need to improve our internal communications systems.
- The distinctions between DHSP's Afterschool programs, Community School Programs and King Open Extended Day programs are unclear to many families, which led to some families misunderstanding that they were guaranteed spaces in a program. We need to do a better job of communicating about our afterschool programs and registration processes.
- Although we talked at the June 30 City Council Human Services and Veterans Committee meeting about there not being enough capacity in the system for all the families who want programs and about the need to engage a broader community process to look at program expansion, many families did not assume that this would impact them.

Looking Forward

- We are continuing to recruit more part-time staff in order to be able to operate the classrooms that have not yet opened and enroll the children who received a Community Schools seat pending our hiring of more staff.
- We are hiring an additional full-time staff person for each Community School program, which will support program operations and provide additional support for safer staff/student ratios and coverage for potential staff outages. This will not immediately impact our ability to expand our daily capacity but will strengthen our program infrastructure as we look to the future.
- We will continue to work with the School Department on possible small program expansions where our capacity is not at the 2019-2020 level.
- We intend to expand our criteria for our Priority Seats beyond income-eligibility to include other factors that contribute to groups being marginalized. We will work with families and other partners to identify the most appropriate criteria.
- We are working with caregivers to explore the development of a Caregiver Advisory Group for DHSP.
- We expect to partner with other stakeholders to initiate a community-wide planning process for the expansion of capacity in community and City programs to meet more of the demand for Out-of-School Time programming.