

Engaging Creative Minds (ECM)

Impact Evaluation

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Executive Summary

The Research, Evaluation, and Measurement (REM) Center conducted an impact evaluation of Engaging Creative Minds (ECM) summer and afterschool camps across 13 school districts in South Carolina. The aim of this evaluation was to understand the impact of ECM camps on teachers and students as well as how the camps have addressed some of the persistent challenges faced by schools and districts. Data collection included site visits to five purposefully selected school sites, interviews with 7 teachers and 5 administrators, a student survey, and a teacher survey. Following are the evaluation findings synthesized across all data sources.

Findings

ECM's programming and its infusion of the "woohoo spirit" led to vital changes during the school day.

- Teachers reported that the ECM transformed how they taught and how they interacted with students.
- ECM strongly impacted teachers' reported ability to engage their students.
- ECM had a notable impact on how students collaborate with each other as well as their desire to participate in the arts.
- ECM made students more excited about learning.

ECM provided safe spaces and resources that enhanced communities.

- ECM's afterschool camps were physically and emotionally safe spaces for students that provided a sense of belonging for all.
- The resources provided by ECM served as a jumpstart for creative work and made arts-based experiences accessible in communities where such experiences may otherwise be out of reach.

Involvement in ECM had a large impact on teachers' affect, including their job satisfaction.

- Teachers reported that ECM participation had a large impact on their creativity in the classroom as well as their excitement about teaching.
- ECM was noted to have had an impact on teachers' satisfaction with the teaching profession as well as their confidence in their teaching.

Evaluation Overview

The Research, Evaluation, and Measurement (REM) Center conducted an impact evaluation of Engaging Creative Minds (ECM) summer and afterschool camps across 13 school districts in South Carolina. The aim of this evaluation was to understand the impact of ECM camps on teachers and students as well as how the camps have addressed some of the persistent challenges faced by schools and districts by gathering data from teachers, students, and school and district leaders.

The REM Center team devised a data collection plan that included site visits to five purposefully selected school sites across five different counties that participated in ECM summer and afterschool camps. Site visit schools were purposely selected to encompass a range of rural, high-poverty communities served by ECM. The primary purpose of the site visits was to interview at least one teacher and administrator who were involved in the camps and to orally administer a student survey to at least ten purposefully selected students who participated in the camps.

After the visits to the five school sites, the evaluation team conducted virtual interviews with teachers from the remaining ECM sites. All remaining sites were asked to participate in virtual teacher interviews, and evaluators were able to schedule interviews with teachers at two of the sites. Finally, to capture the impact of ECM's camps on teacher practices and teacher affect, the REM Center created an impact survey to distribute to all participating teachers across all ECM sites. In this report, we synthesize the findings from teacher and leader interviews at the site visits, teacher survey findings, and student survey findings to illustrate the impact of ECM's summer and afterschool programs.

Educator Interview Findings

During REM Center's evaluation site visits, we interviewed at least one school or district administrator and interviewed at least one teacher. Teachers who were interviewed were largely serving as instructors in ECM camps. The evaluation team also orally administered at least ten student surveys at each site. The findings from student surveys are discussed elsewhere in this report. The following findings are based on a synthesis of 7 teacher interviews and 5 school or district leader interviews, referred to broadly here as "educators." Two major themes emerged from the interviews:

1. The presence of ECM programming during summer and after school led to changes during the school day.
2. ECM provided safe spaces and resources that enhanced communities. The following paragraphs provide more depth and contextualization for these two overarching themes.

The presence of ECM for summer and afterschool programming led to changes during the school day.

One of the primary themes that emerged across all of the educator interviews was that ECM's impact on the school site extended beyond what happened during ECM programming. Teachers who served as ECM instructors found that their teaching, including how they interacted with students as well as their connection with creativity in their own classroom was changed by their participation in ECM. School leaders also noticed this change in their teachers and attributed it to ECM.

ECM's "woohoo spirit" transformed how teachers taught and interacted with students during the school day.

At all the sites, respondents expressed how ECM had brought joy and enthusiasm to both students and teachers. In one school community, the teacher and administrator who were interviewed shared their community's journey through the COVID-19 pandemic. The administrator reflected, "But after we got through COVID I just felt like we never shook that off. ... school was boring." ECM played a pivotal role in rekindling the joy of learning in their community.

"And then they [ECM] came in with their pom poms. ... And, bubble machines, and just, you know school is fun again! School was fun again, I mean like it was teaching 10 years ago. ... Yeah, school was fun again. I keep telling them. I'm gonna get it put on a t-shirt."

The teacher we interviewed at the same site shared a similar sentiment. She shared that she has found happiness in teaching again and has taken ECM's "woohoo spirit" into her daily teaching practice.

"My favorite thing was creating a woohoo spirit. So, I learned that during our first ECM camp, I want my kids to come to school and want to come to school. So that woohoo spirit, that the idea of a woohoo spirit that carries over [into] my first-grade class. Because, you know, if everybody comes in, and they don't want to be here, it makes for a long day in first grade. ... We come, we have fun, we learn. We do new stuff. We do cool things."

Throughout our visits and across school districts, we found that administrators valued the excitement, fun, and "woohoo spirit" ECM brought to their teachers and students. Administrators discussed how they saw teachers who were part of ECM camps transform during the school day. One administrator raved about the energy ECM brought to her school

and teachers' instructional delivery. She found the energy irresistible when the summer camp started at her school. She ventured throughout the building each day to enjoy the projects and experiences teachers and students created. She also talked specifically about one teacher who was particularly impacted by ECM's presence.

"So she's kind of loosening up, you know, and she's being more engaged. So I have noticed that. And even when she delivers a lesson, she's more relaxed, if I should say. And I want to [attribute] it to ECM ..."

In an administrator interview in another district, the administrator shared that ECM creates happy teachers and students. When we asked her what motivates her as an administrator to stay after school and work as a camp champ (CC), she shared that she wanted to be a part of the happy dynamic ECM created.

"I love it too. *laughter* It feels like the dynamic here among the staff is like family. ...The kids are happy. And we know if the teachers are happy then the kids gonna be happy too. ... It's very different, you know. And that's a good way to end before you go home."

There are many other quotes from across the sites that carry this sentiment. For some communities, ECM has restored a sense of togetherness, happiness, and purpose. Administrators, teachers, and students are motivated throughout the school day as teachers' dispositions have become more fun and relaxed. Some students and teachers are motivated throughout the day as they look forward to the different environments they experience through ECM in the afterschool setting. During the site visits, the evaluation team could sense participants' excitement as they talked about the energy of ECM.

ECM allowed and encouraged teachers to express their creativity.

Teachers and administrators across multiple site visits discussed how comfortable they felt trying out new ideas with ECM. The program not only provided them with the supplies and sometimes implementation guidance to try creative lessons, it also awakened many of the teachers to their own creativity. One teacher we interviewed began as a camp counselor in the summer, observing an instructor. When the ECM afterschool camp started at her school, she requested to serve as an instructor. In her interview, she went on to share that she wants to continue working as a visual art instructor in the summer,

“Oh, put me down for visual art because *I still have things that I need to do* [emphasis added], not need to do that I *want* to do. I have these ideas because I don't know. I don't know *I guess art is my little thing that I didn't know* [emphasis added].“

Throughout her interview, the teacher shared that she also envisions her instruction during the school day in a new way now that she thinks about art differently. Working with ECM expanded her thinking about visual art and how to bring visual art to her students. She was not alone in gaining more interest in creative thinking. Another teacher shared that

“ECM is stretching my professional development and my thinking as a [professional]. ... Like, how can I bring that engagement and the act of learning into classrooms by you know, using *creative instructional activities* [emphasis added] like this,”

Across sites, we heard teachers, and some administrators, discuss how ECM is changing teachers' mindsets and ways of being in the classroom. In changing how teachers think about creativity, active learning, and the arts, ECM is helping teachers improve student engagement while also increasing teachers' joy and sense of themselves as creative individuals.

ECM provided safe spaces and resources that enhanced communities.

Another major theme emerging from interviews relates to the ways in which ECM's presence has enhanced school communities. ECM's camps have provided a safe place for students after school and have created a sense of belonging for students. Further, ECM has served as a resource for equipping schools in rural areas to provide arts experiences that would otherwise be out of reach for their students.

ECM's afterschool camps were physically and emotionally safe spaces for students, providing a sense of belonging for all.

Educators across multiple sites were thankful that ECM camps provided a physical place of safety for students who, without the camp, may go home to no adult supervision or enriching activities in which to participate. At many of the sites, camp staff members were also members of the community and were deeply rooted there, with some attending the same school where they now work. They were familiar with the lack of opportunities for school-aged children in their communities. One teacher was relieved that ECM was a part of the school community. As a member of the community, the teacher shared that ECM keeps

students engaged in something positive. In her interview, she raved, “ECM, it’s just, it’s a big [positive] change for the community.”

Camp staff members were also grateful that ECM provided a space with a sense of belonging for students. At one camp, the camp champ (CC) shared the story of one student who wanted to give up on life. One day, while attending ECM camp, the student shouted, “Woo hoo!” The CC asked her, “You are so excited. What makes you so excited?” the student replied that ECM camp is where “I get to be me.”

Another teacher from a different camp shared that ECM provides an outlet for students to release negativity and find their “happy.”

“There are kids over there that this is their home, that the three hours they spend with us, that's our happy. This is their escape. And we're so thankful that they have that. You know, if you have a bad day, and you get to bang on a drum, I promise you, it changes your whole mood. No matter how bad your day was, you just take a deep breath, and you let it all go. And that ECM funding, for them, gives them all that release.”

Comments from another CC illustrate how ECM camp provides a place of belonging for every student. In reference to the music offerings at their camp, she celebrated that all students are welcome at the ECM camp. In contrast, for some music groups offered at the school, students must audition and may be deemed unable or unsuitable to participate. At this school, all students are welcome to join in the music programs made available through ECM, regardless of their proficiency levels. Similarly, a CC at another camp shared that no afterschool space exists for students who do not engage in sports. For these sites, ECM provides a physically and emotionally safe environment for students who may not feel they belong in other traditionally offered afterschool spaces. In one teacher interview, the teacher shared that, through ECM, students learn to communicate with other students they would not normally interact with during the school day. Across sites, educators shared that the camps gave students opportunities to grow socially and that students enjoyed the afterschool space. At some sites, the CC and teachers shared that students enjoy coming to ECM so much that it curbs misbehavior during the school day; students are motivated to behave positively during the school day to ensure they can participate in ECM after school.

Across sites, administrators, CCs, and teachers consistently reported that ECM provided their students with a safe place to spend time after school. It also provided a strong sense of community and belonging and served as a motivator for good behavior during the school day.

The ECM team was regarded as very helpful across numerous sites. School personnel reported that the resources provided by ECM served as a jumpstart for creative work.

Across all sites, the ECM team and program were highly regarded. Many teachers and administrators raved about the team’s availability and dependability. When discussing these qualities in the ECM team, teachers from multiple sites discussed how quickly ECM met their needs to create active learning experiences in the classroom. One teacher noted that, in the past, she’d have creative ideas, but she did not have the materials to implement her plans. With ECM’s help, she’s created engaging experiences for her students. We heard the same testimony from another teacher who, with assistance from ECM, has constructed gingerbread houses with students, hosted a canvas painting experience for students, and partnered with another teacher for students to create and market their “ugly Christmas sweaters” through an infomercial. It is important to reiterate here that the sites we visited are in rural and under-resourced areas of the state, so teachers mentioned that students in their communities often do not have access to a variety of art materials and experiences. ECM helped to bridge this resource gap with the materials and support they provided.

“They are phenomenal, very helpful anytime you call or email, they’re willing to help.”

Relatedly, when we asked teachers and administrators how ECM has addressed some of the challenges in their school districts, they said that ECM has brought arts experiences where they were lacking or absent. One teacher shared that ECM helped bridge the gaps in the electives offered at their school. Through ECM, students in this district could participate in dance and drama, experiences not available in the school prior to ECM’s involvement.

At another site, a teacher shared that, given their community’s geographic isolation, stores often do not have supplies for students to complete arts-based projects. She shared that even when students see supplies such as markers and crayons in the local “Dollar General” store, their caregivers may be unable to purchase them. For this teacher’s students and school community, ECM provides a space and the resources for students to participate in activities they can seldom access. She talked about students' excitement as they created gingerbread houses in ECM. Students shared that they had seen gingerbread houses on television, but most had never created their own. She shared, “[ECM] gives them the opportunity to do projects and things that they otherwise would not be afforded the opportunity to do.”

In other counties, ECM supplemented arts activities that were already happening. In one district, the teacher and administrator we interviewed separately shared that they already provided these arts-based afterschool activities. However, volunteers were participating in

these activities without receiving payment. When they partnered with ECM, they received resources to pay their afterschool teachers and enhance the supplies they used with students. Another shared that ECM so greatly enhanced and improved their school's existing summer and afterschool programs that students and teachers are now excited to attend. Notably, this same administrator shared that ECM does not feel like "a program." When asked to elaborate, she shared that ECM is not a package coming in trying to fix a problem. Instead, ECM's message is, "I want you to have the support and the tools to start to think about how we can reshape education."

Educator Interview Summary

The following evaluation questions guided the site visits:

- To what extent is participation in ECM summer and afterschool camps alleviating district leaders' stated challenges?
- In what ways are district leaders reporting ECM's intervention as a solution to their challenges?

ECM is meeting the challenges of schools and districts in South Carolina by creating an infectious energy that is transforming teacher and administrator sentiment about the school day, sparking creativity in teachers and impacting their daily practices, and providing resources for schools, teachers, and students to engage in creative and exciting learning experiences. Injecting this kind of enjoyment into teaching is vital given the state and national crises around teacher recruitment and retention, and our site visits revealed that ECM is providing deeply enjoyable and enriching experiences for teachers. Across sites, teachers and administrators talked about how ECM's presence enlivened their teaching experience and practices. Teachers and administrators discussed ECM's role in expanding their thinking about the arts, creativity, and engagement. Teachers shared that being touched by ECM's "woohoo" spirit changed how they provided instruction to their students during the school day. Overwhelmingly, teachers and administrators praised ECM's ability and willingness to provide materials and resources to spark creativity and provide a sense of belonging in their communities. By fostering enthusiasm and providing support, ECM has helped address the challenges districts face in enhancing a positive school climate and increasing student engagement.

Teacher Survey Findings

The ECM Teacher Impact Survey is a 20-item survey divided into the following sections: Demographic Information (7 items), Impact on Classroom Community (6 items), and Teacher Affect (7 items). The closed-ended responses in the Impact and Teacher Affect sections are assessed using a 4-point Likert scale: *No Impact (1)*, *Little Impact (2)*, *Some Impact (3)*, and *Large Impact (4)*, and the survey also included two open-ended items. The survey was given

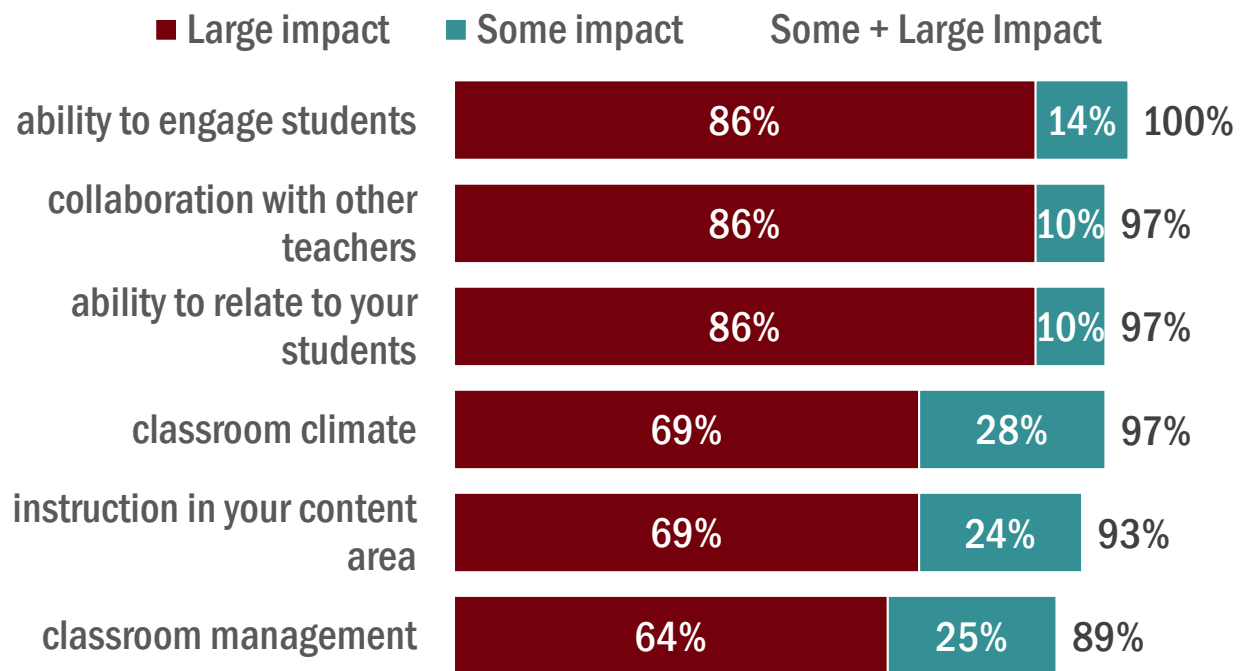
to teachers participating in ECM’s summer and/or afterschool camps. A total of 29 teachers responded from seven schools across South Carolina.

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All teacher respondents reported that ECM impacted their ability to engage their students.

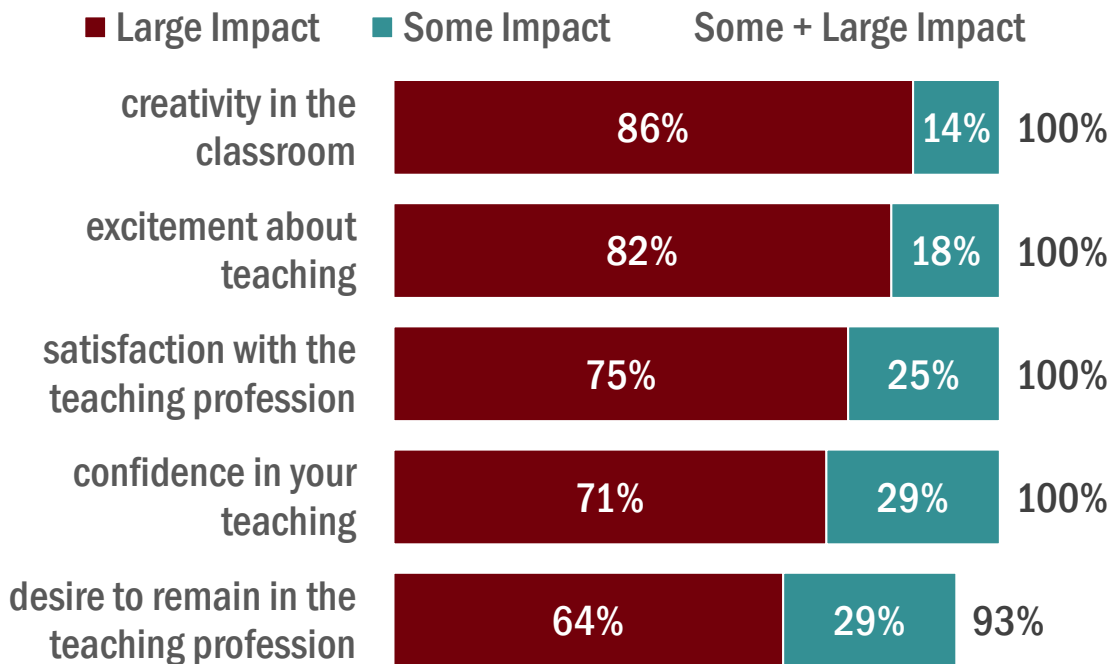
In three areas, 86% of teachers reported that ECM had a large impact on their (a) ability to engage students, (b) ability to relate to students, and (c) collaboration with other teachers. Most notably, 100% of the teachers reported that ECM impacted their ability to engage students. This is at the core of ECM’s mission.

An open-ended question asked teachers what changes they have seen in their students/ student outcomes as a result of working with ECM. A total of 10 of the 26 responses explicitly used the word “engage” to describe changes observed in students. Other responses used words like, “enthusiasm,” “fun,” and “interested” to describe how students interact in the classroom as a result of ECM. The other open-ended question asked teachers what changes they have made in their classroom as a result of ECM. A teacher noted incorporating “more ‘WooHoo” into assignments, leading to increased student engagement.



In four areas of teacher affect, every teacher reported that ECM made an impact.

One survey section measured teachers' sentiments about ECM's impact on them as professionals. Teacher retention is a national crisis, and where applicable, teacher-focused organizations should understand how their work impacts teacher well-being and professional satisfaction indicators. The teacher affect section of the survey consisted of five questions to understand the extent to which ECM supported teachers' job satisfaction. In four of the five included areas, 100% of the teachers reported that ECM had an impact.



Student Survey Findings

The ECM Student Impact Survey is an 8-item survey divided into two sections: Demographic Information (2 items) and Impact on Student Learning (6 items). Each item in the second section was assessed using a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 represented the strongest influence, and 1 represented the least influence.

The survey was orally administered to students. A total of 42 students participated in the survey across different schools and grade levels. The majority of the respondents were middle school students, followed by high school students. Over half of the respondents reported that this was their first time attending ECM camp. The results below for the student survey are displayed in item response means with a maximum possible score of 5.

Collaboration with others and a desire to participate in the arts emerged as ECM’s most impactful areas as reported by students.

Across the student survey, the item means ranged from 4.05 to 4.60, indicating that ECM positively impacted students’ excitement, confidence, academic abilities, collaboration, and interest in the arts across all school levels. The highest mean score (4.60) was for “the ability to work with others,” suggesting that students felt particularly empowered to work collaboratively as a result of participating in ECM. Students also reported that ECM has a strong influence on their desire to participate in the arts (4.55) and reported that ECM made them more excited about learning (4.43).

ECM Student Survey Response Means (out of 5)

