



# Evaluating the Academic and Behavioral Impact of “School in the Park”

Gary Painter, Johanna Lacoë and Danielle Williams

*University of Southern California*



# USC Price

Sol Price School of Public Policy  
*Sol Price Center for Social Innovation*

Social Innovation Policy Brief  
© 2015 University of Southern California  
Sol Price Center for Social Innovation

**For Further Information:**

Sol Price Center for Social Innovation  
635 Downey Way, Suite 207  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles, California 90089-3331  
[socialinnovation.usc.edu](http://socialinnovation.usc.edu)

# Evaluating the Academic and Behavioral Impact of “School in the Park”

Gary Painter, Johanna Lacoë and Danielle Williams

*University of Southern California*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief summarizes estimates of the impact of School in the Park, a museum-based educational program for low-income students that takes place within the cultural institutions and museums of San Diego’s Balboa Park. The study evaluates the impact of participation in the program on short-term and long-term academic and behavioral outcomes. Findings indicate that participation in the program has positive but limited short-term impacts and more enduring long-term effects through high school.

Notable findings include:

1. Small positive effects on math and ELA test scores and reduced absences and suspensions while the students are in the program.
2. Similar or larger short term impacts for students who were struggling the most in second grade (before being exposed to School in the Park).
3. Positive impacts on rates of expulsions and retention in the long term.
4. More positive long-term outcomes for students who attended the program for a longer period of time in elementary school (i.e. for more weeks). These include higher SAT scores in math, higher probabilities of taking an AP course, graduating with a diploma, and enrolling in college; fewer suspensions and expulsions, and lower probabilities of grade retention and dropping out in high school.

## Evaluating the Academic and Behavioral Impact of “School in the Park”



### DESCRIPTION OF THE SCHOOL IN THE PARK PROGRAM

School in the Park (SITP) is an educational program for third, fourth, and fifth grade students that takes place among the cultural institutions and museums of San Diego’s Balboa Park. Students in two inner-city public elementary schools, Rosa Parks and Hamilton Elementary, participate in eight week units at Balboa Park. Rosa Parks began their SITP program in 1999-2000, and had full participation from all third, fourth, and fifth graders by 2001-2002. Hamilton Elementary began with full participation for all third, fourth, and fifth graders at the start of the 2006-2007 school year. The schools are located in the City Heights neighborhood, which is a major refugee portal for families from Burma, Iran, and Somalia, as well as a destination for immigrants from Latin America.<sup>1</sup> The majority of students who attend the two schools are low-income. In the San Diego Unified School District, 61 percent of school children qualify for free or reduced price lunch,<sup>2</sup> while over 97% of the students at the School in the Park elementary schools qualify.<sup>3</sup>

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addresses three primary research questions:

1. How does participation in the School in the Park program impact academic and behavioral outcomes for students during the year of participation?
2. Do impacts of School in the Park participation extend beyond the year of participation to affect longer-term outcomes?
3. Do students that spend more time in School in the Park do better than those who spend fewer weeks in the program?

# Results

## SHORT-TERM IMPACTS: SMALL POSITIVE EFFECTS ON TEST SCORES; REDUCED ABSENCES/SUSPENSIONS

For Rosa Parks SITP students, average performance was 7.29 points higher on the standardized math exam than students who did not attend SITP in the same year. SITP participation at Hamilton results in an increase in the likelihood of taking both the language arts and math exams, as well as a 3.51 point increase in language arts scores. SITP participation results in small reductions in suspensions at both schools.

Research also tested whether students who were already struggling academically are adversely affected by an extended period of time outside the classroom to participate in SITP, we estimate short-term models stratified by whether the student passed or failed the second grade standardized language arts and math exams. Students that were already struggling academically before School in the Park had the same or better results than their peers.

## LONG-TERM IMPACTS: SIGNIFICANT, LASTING EFFECTS THROUGH THE HIGH SCHOOL YEARS

Despite gains in the short term, the measureable long term impact of SITP was small. However there were notable differences that emerged depending on how many weeks a student had attended SITP. Each additional week of SITP participation results in numerous positive outcomes for Rosa Parks SITP students. Each week of participation increases tenth grade language arts scores by 0.19 points, for an estimated impact of 1.46 points for students that attend the average of

8 weeks in SITP. An additional week of SITP participation in elementary school translates into a higher probability of taking an AP course in high school, and although there is no effect on the probability of taking the SAT, each week of SITP increases math SAT scores by 0.651 points. Each additional week of participation in SITP also results in small reductions in suspensions and expulsions and in the likelihood of being retained during high school. Further, an additional week of participation increases the probability of earning a high school diploma and enrolling in college, while decreasing the probability of dropping out of high school. There is no significant effect of SITP on the probability of passing the high school exit exam. These models highlight the importance of the length of participation in SITP on longer-term academic engagement and persistence.

***“Each additional week of SITP participation in elementary school translates into a higher probability of taking an AP course in high school and increases math SAT scores by 0.651 points.”***

## Policy Implications

A number of policy implications emerge from these findings:

1. Despite some concerns in educational policy circles that reduced time spent on core instruction may hurt academic performance of students in the short run, exposing students to a new learning environment in lieu of traditional class time does not harm educational achievement. In fact, we see slight gains for the students who are struggling, compared to similar students who do not receive the program.
2. Second, in the short term, larger effects are found for the behavioral outcomes. These behavioral changes might translate into improved academic achievement in the longer term.
3. Third, the program has lasting effects beyond the school year in which students participate, with positive impacts well into high school. The benefits of the program accrue to students that spend the most time in the museums.

In sum, the program shows impacts in both the short and long-term, well beyond those intended by the program in its design. If we are concerned with affecting

student achievement in the long run, investing in experiential education programs that offer prolonged and structured experiences for students outside the classroom may boost achievement and long-term academic success for even the most at-risk students.

***“exposing students to a new learning environment in lieu of traditional class time does not harm educational achievement. In fact, we see slight gains for the students who are struggling”***



## REFERENCES

1. Florido, Adrian (2011). A refugee hub in City Heights: San Diego Explained. <http://voiceofsandiego.org/2011/09/01/a-refugee-hub-in-city-heights-san-diego-explained/> and Montgomery, Bob. Executive Director, International Rescue Committee (IRC) San Diego Office. <http://www.rescue.org/us-program/us-san-diego-ca>
2. San Diego Unified School District. <http://www.sandi.net/site/Default.aspx?PageID=984>
3. California Department of Education, School Fiscal Services Division. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sh/cw/filesafdc.asp>
4. Students from Hamilton were not yet in high school at the time of this study.



Photo Credits:  
Pages 3, 5, 6, Cover and Back - Rachel Madewell



# USC Price

Sol Price School of Public Policy  
*Sol Price Center for Social Innovation*

