

**Evaluation Report
2020 Program Year**

Submitted February 26, 2021
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Executive Summary

Introduction and Methodology

Environmental Learning for Kids (ELK) is an inclusive nonprofit organization that develops inspired and responsible leaders through science education and outdoor experiences for underserved, urban youth ages 5–25. ELK’s mission is to cultivate a passion in science, leadership and service in a diverse community of learners. It envisions a world in which all people are caretakers of themselves, each other and the natural world. ELK’s programming encompasses its values of life-long learning, diversity and inclusiveness, direct experience in the outdoors and development of human potential.

Through its programs, ELK seeks to achieve the following outcomes:

- Develop participants’ leadership skills.
- Increase participants’ environmental stewardship.
- Provide participants with a positive exposure to science.
- Increase participants’ positive feelings and attitudes about school.
- Increase participants’ commitment to school.
- Prepare participants for college and career.
- Provide participants with access to a positive adult role model.

ELK partnered with Point b(e) Strategies (Point b(e)) in 2020 to evaluate its programs and understand the extent to which it is achieving its outcomes. ELK and Point b(e) initiated the evaluation in March 2020; however, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the evaluation was delayed until the fall of 2020. When the pandemic began, ELK immediately transitioned programming to a virtual format to continue to engage youth in activities during restrictive stay-at-home orders. As restrictions have lessened, ELK continues to modify and adapt its programs to meet the needs of youth and families. The results of this evaluation reflect a blend of perspectives, from participants and families engaged for just this modified year, to those who have participated for many years under more traditional circumstances.

Point b(e) utilized a mixed-methods evaluation to gather student and family feedback about ELK programming and how it impacts participants. Through surveys, interviews and focus groups, Point b(e) gathered both quantitative and qualitative data to inform results. By utilizing multiple methods with multiple stakeholders, the data provides rich and meaningful feedback about ELK’s programs, their impact on youth and families, and how they can be improved. The following data collections were utilized:

- Anniversary Survey for Youth
- Anniversary Survey for Parents and Caregivers
- Focus Groups and Telephone Interviews with Youth
- Focus Groups and Telephone Interviews with Parents and Caregivers

Findings

What ELK Means to Youth and Families

Youth provided insights into what ELK means to them:

- ELK means family, connection to others, friendship, and support.
- ELK is environmental learning—learning about plants and animals and how to care for the environment in an outdoor setting that “isn’t boring.”
- ELK is having fun in nature and participating in new experiences outside.
- ELK is being empowered to express self and achieve goals in a safe space.
- ELK is volunteering in and taking care of the community.
- ELK is happiness, health and opportunities.

Develop Participants’ Leadership Skills

The evaluation revealed the following results related to this outcome:

- High percentages of surveyed youth agreed they are respected by others their age, and there are things about them that would make a good role model.
- 100% of youth in focus groups and interviews expressed that ELK has made them a better leader by helping them develop confidence, learn how to connect with others, explore the outdoors, use their voice, try new things, engage in public speaking, practice skills, find a community, and explore career paths.
- A high percentage of parents and caregivers also stated that ELK has made their youth a better leader through activities such as volunteering in the community, developing communication skills, building confidence, interacting with others and getting out of their comfort zones.
- Alternatively, fewer than half of all surveyed youth agreed they feel comfortable teaching others or feel comfortable being a group leader.

Increase Participants’ Environmental Stewardship

The evaluation revealed the following results related to this outcome:

- Almost all surveyed youth agreed they have a responsibility to make the world a better place and spending time in the outdoors makes them want to protect outdoor spaces.
- 89% of surveyed youth who have been engaged in ELK longer (two or more years) agreed it is important to do community or volunteer work, compared to 60% of those engaged for one year or less.
- Similarly, 100% of surveyed youth who had participated in ELK longer agreed they like learning about the environment, compared to 80% of those engaged for one year or less.

- Alternatively, fewer than half of all surveyed youth agreed they educate others about the environment, although 46% of those engaged for two or more years agreed compared with only 20% of those engaged for one year or less.
- All (100%) of youth engaged in interviews and focus groups expressed that participating in ELK has changed their knowledge and attitude about the environment. As a result, they now talk to others about the environment, understand the racial disparities in outdoor spaces and advocate for increased outreach, participate in community service, explore career options in natural resources, and take better care of the environment.
- Parents and caregivers also indicated that their own knowledge about the environment has changed because their family participated in ELK.

Provide Participants With Positive Exposure to Science

The evaluation revealed the following results related to this outcome:

- The majority of surveyed youth agreed that science makes sense to them and they like learning about science.
- A higher percentage of surveyed youth who had been engaged with ELK for two years or more indicated they have met scientists of their same race and gender, compared with those who had been engaged with ELK for less time (64% compared to 50%, respectively).
- Alternatively, fewer than half of all respondents indicated that they think about someday having a job in a science field.
- Over half of the youth engaged in focus groups and interviews indicated they have a more positive attitude about science. They expressed that ELK makes science interesting by relating it to the outdoors. ELK exposes them to different jobs in science, and they have more respect for science because of ELK.

Increase Participants' Positive Feelings and Attitudes about School and Increase Participants' School Commitment

The evaluation revealed the following results related to this outcome:

- Almost all surveyed youth agreed that finishing high school is important, that they see how the work they are doing now will help them in the future, and that getting good grades is important.
- Youth who participated in interviews and focus groups indicated that ELK gives them more motivation to do well in school, and ELK staff checks in on them about school and helps with hard subjects.
- The majority of youth from focus groups and interviews discussed how ELK educated them about college and career and provided information about internships and scholarships.
- 72% of surveyed parents and caregivers agreed that the ELK program helps their kids in school.

Prepare Participants for College and Career

The evaluation revealed the following results related to this outcome:

- The majority of surveyed youth in high school are taking classes that will prepare them for college, they know what courses they need to get into college, and they understand the academic areas they need to improve.
- High percentages of high school youth understand important job interview skills, such as it's important to be on time for an interview and to have appropriate clothes to wear to a job interview.
- Alternatively, the survey identified areas high school respondents need to work on, such as having an up-to-date resume, how to introduce themselves at an interview, and how to talk clearly about background and skills.
- Youth and parents/caregivers in focus groups and interviews had very positive reflections about how ELK has prepared youth for college and career. ELK has prepared youth by teaching them about scholarships, opening their eyes to the field of science, providing a support system, reiterating the importance of internships, helping identify colleges, providing opportunities to practice interview skills, and exposing youth to outdoor agencies.

Provide Participants with a Positive Adult Role Model

The evaluation revealed the following results related to this outcome:

- Surveyed youth who had participated in ELK for two or more years had more positive perceptions of ELK staff than those who had been engaged for one year or less. For example, almost all youth with extended engagement in ELK agreed that ELK staff encourage them to do their best in school and give good suggestions and advice about their problems. Alternatively, those who had engaged with ELK for one year or less had much lower ratings for these same statements.
- 82% of youth who have been engaged in ELK for two or more years agreed they can go to ELK staff members to talk about important life decisions (compared with only 30% of those engaged for one year or less.)
- Overwhelmingly, 100% of the youth in focus groups and interviews agreed they feel comfortable going to ELK leaders and volunteers for advice. Youth expressed sincere appreciation for the leaders and indicated they can go to leaders for help with anything. Youth agreed that ELK leaders are incredibly encouraging and supportive.

Introduction and Methodology

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Point b(e) utilized a mixed-methods evaluation to gather student and family feedback about ELK programming and how it impacts participants. Through surveys, interviews and focus groups, Point b(e) gathered both quantitative and qualitative data to inform results. By utilizing multiple methods with multiple stakeholders, the data provides rich and meaningful feedback about ELK’s programs, their impact on youth and families, and how they can be improved. Each of the data collections methods is described in more detail.

Anniversary Survey for Youth

Through prior evaluations, ELK developed an annual survey for participants with the help of the University of Colorado Boulder research and evaluation team. The original survey included 12 scales of questions aimed to measure all of ELK’s outcomes for youth. During the current evaluation, ELK and Point b(e) modified the survey by removing a few scales and questions in order to streamline the survey for youth. This survey was administered to 87 youth via an online platform. A total of 43 youth completed the survey, for a response rate of 49%. Note: This survey was not administered to the

youth who participated in interviews and focus groups in order to reduce the amount of time spent on evaluation.

Anniversary Survey for Parents and Caregivers

Similarly, ELK had previously developed an annual survey for parents and caregivers of youth engaged in ELK programs, which was available in both English and Spanish. This survey was administered online to 240 parents and caregivers, and ELK received 50 responses to the survey (21% response rate). Note: This survey was not administered to the parents and caregivers who participated in interviews and focus groups in order to reduce the amount of time spent on evaluation.

Focus Groups and Telephone Interviews with Youth

Point b(e) facilitated three focus groups with youth, engaging with a total of 17 youth. All three focus groups were facilitated via Zoom to accommodate safety restrictions related to COVID-19. The focus groups represented perspectives from individuals in middle school, high school and college. Additionally, Point b(e) conducted individual telephone interviews with six ELK participants, primarily in college, who had actively participated in ELK programs though high school. The questions for the focus groups and interviews were the same, and all data was qualitatively analyzed in order to better understand the impact of ELK on participants. (In total, Point b(e) engaged 23 youth in interviews or focus groups.)

Focus Groups and Telephone Interviews with Parents and Caregivers

Point b(e) also facilitated one focus group with four participants and conducted nine individual interviews with parents and caregivers of youth engaged in ELK programs (for a total of 13 parents and caregivers). Parents and caregivers represented perspectives from those whose children had been engaged for many years to those whose children were new to the program. The questions for the focus groups and interviews were the same, and all data was qualitatively analyzed in order to better understand the impact of ELK on participants and families from the perspectives of parents and caregivers.

Findings

The mixed-methods evaluation provided numerous insights into the impact of the program on participants and families. The following section outlines the findings of the evaluation by each outcome area.

Survey respondents were asked to indicate how many years they had been part of ELK programs. As Figure 1 reveals below, the majority of respondents (68%) had participated in ELK for three or more years. Where appropriate, results of the survey were broken out by the length of time respondents engaged in the program to see if there were differences among the groups. Respondents were broken into two categories for this additional data analysis—those who had participated in ELK programs for one year or less and those who had participated in ELK for two years or more (Figure 2). (Note: additional demographic information about respondents is available in Appendix A.)

Figure 1. Length of Engagement in ELK

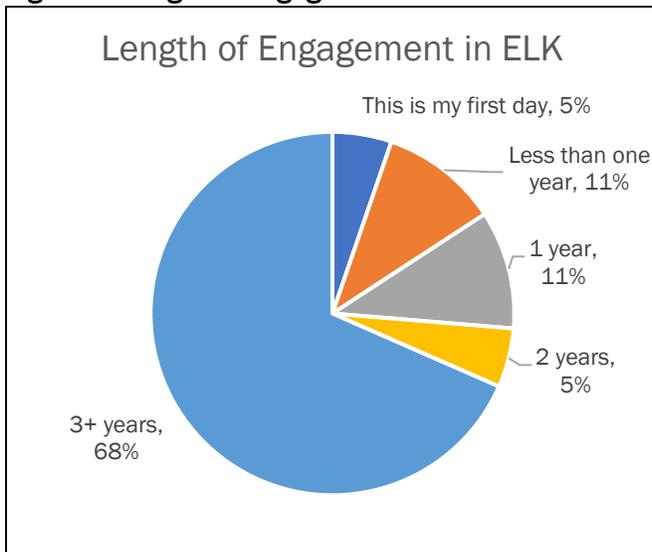
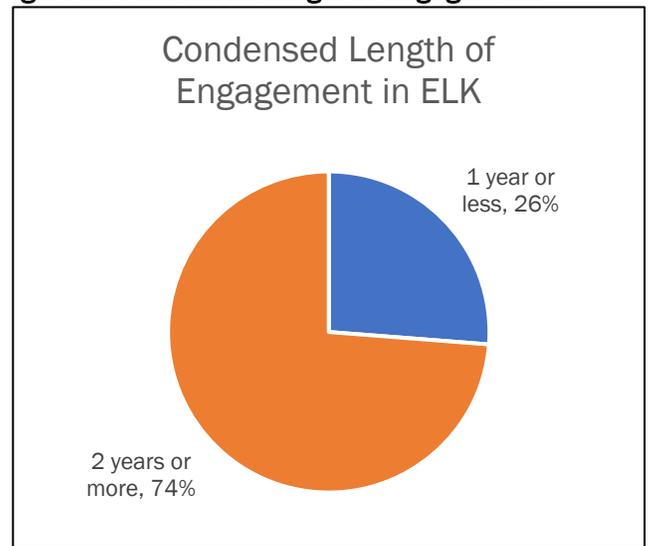


Figure 2. Condensed Length of Engagement



Develop Participants' Leadership Skills

ELK seeks to develop leadership skills in youth as well as help youth learn and understand their strengths. The Youth Survey asked participants to reflect on a series of statements focused on leadership by rating each statement on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree. As illustrated in Figure 3, a high percentage of **youth agreed they are respected by others their age** as well as **there are things about them that would make a good role model**. On the other hand, fewer than half of participants indicated that they feel comfortable teaching others or feel comfortable being a group leader.

Figure 3. Leadership Skills



*Ratings on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Youth who participated in focus groups and interviews provided meaningful insights into how ELK programs have made them a better leader as well as how participating in ELK has helped develop their strengths. All of the focus group and interview participants (100%) **expressed that ELK has made them a better leader**. Participants' reflections about how ELK programs has made them a better leader and how ELK has helped develop their strengths showed overlapping and similar comments. According to participants, ELK has helped them achieve the following (note: "n" refers to the number of respondents who identified or selected the response):

- Develop confidence, engage in groups, meet other people, or move beyond initial shyness (n=10).
- Learn how to connect with others and build relationships (n=8).
- Explore the outdoors and enjoy spending time outside (n=8).
- Learn how to use their voice, discuss important topics and be a voice for their community (n=7).
- Try new things, get out of their comfort zone and overcome obstacles (n=7).
- Engage in public speaking at various levels—from speaking in front of adults to teaching kids (n=6).
- Develop skills through hands-on opportunities—ELK programs teach participants specific skills, then provide opportunities to implement them (n=5).
- Find a community in the outdoors and engage with others that look like them—see there is a space for every person in the outdoors (n=3). *(This feedback was provided by youth who self-identified as a person of color).*
- Explore career paths focused on the outdoors (n=2).

As one participant noted, "I've learned that I can really be a go-getter. I used to be really shy in public and I didn't like to reach for opportunities, and I didn't think opportunities would happen to me. I am able and allowed to get out of my comfort zone. I grew up with only people who looked like me—Mexican Americans and Black people. Everything felt out of reach. Now I know that's not true. I deserve opportunities. I deserve to reach for things. I can get out of my comfort zone. They allow us to see the world from a different view. They allow us to take that extra step and to know our place and to know our place is valuable and respected even when it's not acknowledged by others."

Additionally, parents and caregivers in focus groups and interviews were asked to reflect on whether participating in ELK programs has made their youth a better leader. Ten of the 13 **participants (77%) stated that ELK has made their youth a better leader**. Based on feedback from parents and caregivers, ELK has helped their youth become better leaders in the following areas:

- Supporting the community through volunteer work and service (n=5).
- Developing communication skills to express opinions and have conversations with others (n=2).
- Building confidence (n=2).
- Interacting with others and mentoring others (n=2).

- Getting out of comfort zones (n=1).

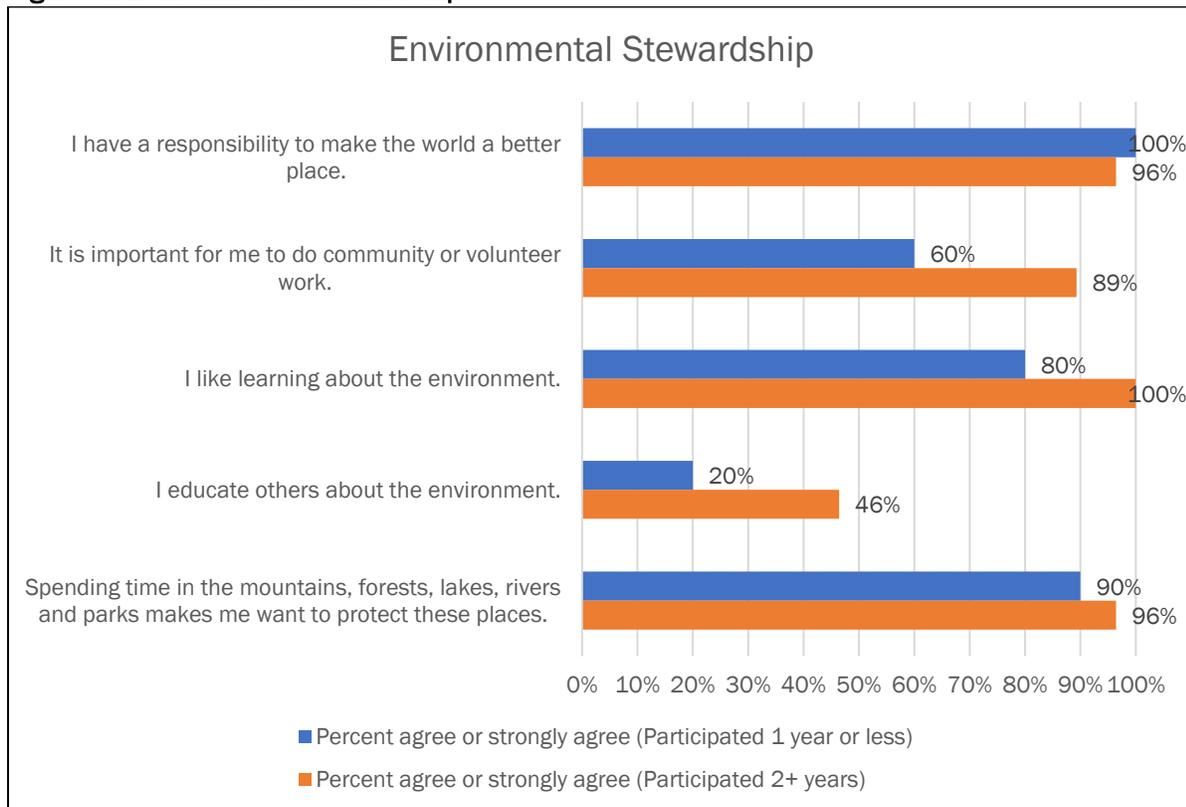
Increase Participants' Environmental Stewardship

ELK seeks to develop environmental stewards who appreciate the outdoors and participate in outdoor activities. Youth survey respondents were asked to rate the extent they agree with several statements about the environment and the outdoors. As illustrated in Figure 4 below, almost all of the survey respondents **agreed they have a responsibility to make the world a better place** as well as **spending time in the outdoors makes them want to protect outdoor spaces**.

Breaking the data up based on the number of years respondents had participated in ELK programs revealed that a higher percentage of respondents who had participated in ELK programs for two or more years **agreed it is important to do community or volunteer work** compared with those who had been engaged in ELK for one year or less (89% compared with 60%, respectively). Similarly, a higher percentage of youth who had engaged with ELK longer **agreed they like learning about the environment (100%)** compared with those who had been engaged for one year or less (80%).

Finally, when asked whether they educate others about the environment, fewer than half of respondents in both groups agreed (46% of those who have participated for two years or more and 20% of those who have participated for one year or less).

Figure 4. Environmental Stewardship



*Ratings on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Youth who participated in focus groups and interviews were also asked to discuss whether they spend more time outdoors and in nature because of their participation in ELK as well as whether their participation in ELK has changed their knowledge and attitude about the environment. **All of the youth focus group and interview participants (100%) expressed that participating in ELK has changed their knowledge and attitude about the environment.** Participants specifically indicated that ELK has impacted their attitude about the environment through the following ways:

- Talking to others about the environment, teaching what they've learned, encouraging others to spend more time outdoors (n=6).
- Understanding the disparities of representation by people of color in outdoor spaces and advocating to increase outreach; helping others understand they have a place in the outdoors (n=4).
- Participating in community service, cleaning lakes, picking up trash, planting trees and recycling (n=3).
- Learning new things, such as about plants, trees and animals (n=3).
- Exploring career options in natural resources and the environment (n=3).
- Changing behaviors to take care of the environment or spend more time outside (n=3).

As one participant stated, “[ELK] definitely changed my knowledge about the environment...As a kid in a suburban area in the city, I didn't know much about the outdoors...All the outdoor activities—I wasn't aware of that growing up...Discovered there's an ongoing trend in POC communities that don't know about opportunities in the outdoors. They don't feel welcome. Time in ELK made me a huge advocate.”

Similarly, the **majority of the caregiver focus group and interview participants also indicated that their own knowledge about the environment has changed because their family participated in ELK.**

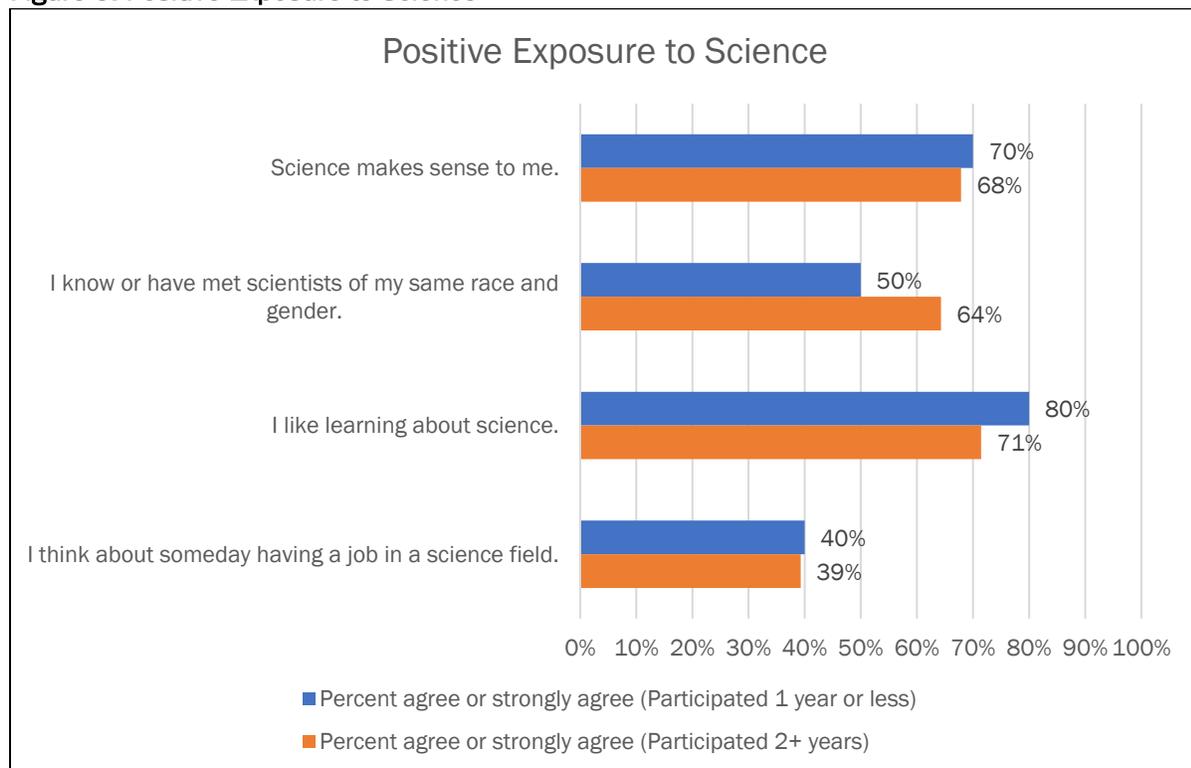
Participants indicated they were more conscious about how to take care of the environment through activities such as protecting parks, recycling, saving water, using the car less, respecting the environment, reducing the use of plastic and picking up trash. Participants also highlighted that they have learned about how animals, trees and plants need to be nurtured by humans. One participant stated, “ELK helped us understand things that are affecting that neighborhood due to the refinery and how all of that affects the environment. We are more conscious of how to take care of the environment and the earth; how to protect the national parks and to keep them clean and keep them functioning.”

Additionally, **the majority of both youth and caregiver focus group and interview participants indicated they spend more time outdoors and in nature because of their participation in ELK.** Those who did not answer yes indicated they already spend a lot of time in nature. When asked to describe what they enjoy doing outdoors, youth listed the following activities: hiking, going to parks, playing soccer, skateboarding, snowboarding, rock climbing, mountain biking, backpacking and visiting the mountains. Caregivers identified the following activities: learning about parks; fishing; visiting places such as Aurora Reservoir, Highline Canal, Morrison Nature Center, and Hanging Lake; riding bikes; playing tennis; hiking; camping and spending time in the mountains. Caregivers also appreciated the equipment and gear that ELK provided, such as fishing poles, sleeping bags and special sunglasses.

Provide Participants With Positive Exposure to Science

Through its environmental and experiential programming, ELK seeks to provide participants with positive experiences related to science and building the next generation of scientists, engineers and natural resource professionals. The Youth Survey asked respondents to respond to a series of questions about science. **The majority of respondents agreed that science makes sense to them and they like learning about science.** A higher percentage of participants who had been engaged with ELK for two years or more indicated they have met scientists of their same race and gender, compared with those who had been engaged with ELK for less time (64% compared to 50%, respectively.) Finally, fewer than half of all respondents indicated that they think about someday having a job in a science field.

Figure 5. Positive Exposure to Science



*Ratings on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Similarly, respondents of the Parent Survey were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement “The ELK program helps my kids(s) learn about science and the environment.” **The majority of respondents (98%) agreed that their kids learn about science and the environment through ELK programs.**

Focus group and interview participants were also asked to discuss whether their attitude about science changed because of their participation in ELK. **Over half of the participants indicated they have a more positive attitude about science as a result.** Several participants indicated they already loved science, or alternatively, they had not been engaged with ELK long enough to change their perspectives. Youth discussed the positive exposure they have had to science, which fell into the following themes:

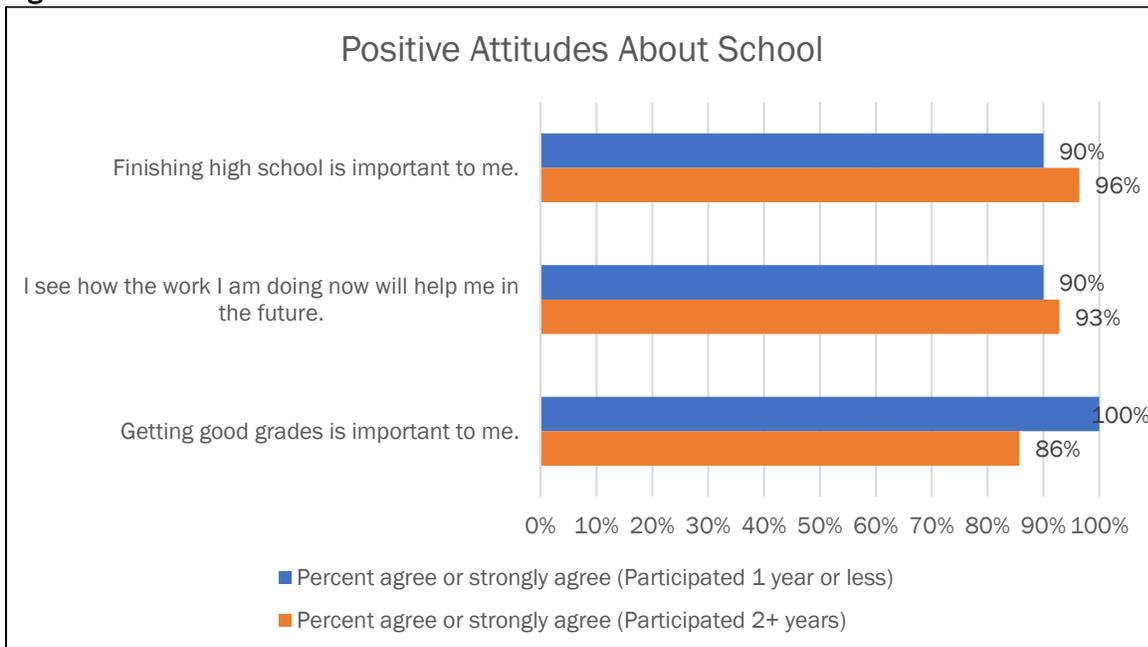
- ELK makes science interesting by relating it to the outdoors, providing hands-on experiences in nature, and teaching about ecosystems and animals (n=6).
- ELK exposes them to the different roles and jobs in science that they hadn't considered before (n=6).
- Participants have more respect for science because of their experiences at ELK (n=3).
- Participants have a love/hate relationship with science, and while they enjoy the activities outdoors, they don't enjoy it at school (n=2).

According to one youth, *“I thought of science as a guy in a white lab coat mixing stuff together in a lab. But there are people out there taking samples and measuring stuff and figuring out how what we do impacts our environment. I'm leaning toward wanting to do that work. It helped me find a passion.”*

Increase Participants' Positive Feelings and Attitudes About School and Increase Participants' Commitment to Schools

In addition to exposing youth to positive aspects of science, ELK also seeks to develop in participants positive feelings and attitudes about school. Similarly, they want to increase participants' commitment to school in the process. The Youth Survey asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with questions related to school. As illustrated below, both groups of participants had high percentages of respondents who **agreed that finishing high school is important, that they see how the work they are doing now will help them in the future, and that getting good grades is important.**

Figure 6. Positive Attitudes About School



*Ratings on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

To better understand how ELK participants do in school, the Youth Survey also asked respondents to select the grades they typically get in school. Table 1 provides the results of that question. Interestingly, respondents who had been engaged in ELK for one year or less predominantly selected Bs (80%), whereas those who had participated for two or more years were more evenly distributed between As, Bs and Cs.

Table 1. Grades Participants Typically get.

Grade	Participated 1 year or less	Participated 2+ years
As	10%	33%
Bs	80%	30%
Cs	10%	33%
Ds	0	0
Fs	0	4%

Parents and caregivers were also asked in the Parent Survey whether the ELK program helps their kid(s) in school (by rating on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree.) Based on results, **72% of parents and caregivers agreed that the ELK program helps their kid(s) in school.**

Youth were asked through interviews and focus groups whether participating in ELK affected the way they see school. **Approximately half of participants indicated ELK gives them more motivation to do well in school.** Several participants (n=6) noted that **ELK staff checks in on them about school, motivates them to get good grades and even helps with hard subjects.** As one youth commented, “[ELK leader] gave me that extra push. At least I knew somebody believed in me.” A few (n=2) also discussed that they learned through ELK that good grades can help them get into better classes. The majority of focus group and interview participants discussed the role that ELK played in educating them about college and career, providing information about internships, and helping with scholarships. These comments will be elaborated upon in the next section.

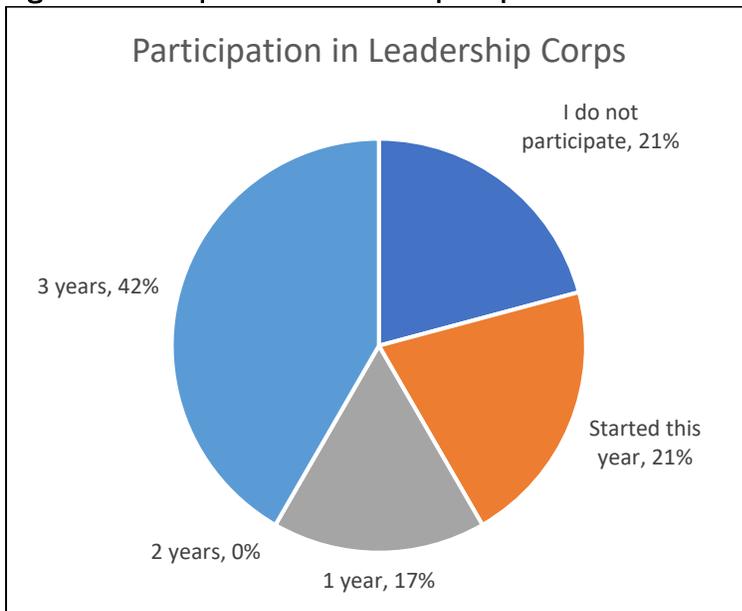
Parents in focus groups and interviews had similar insights about school for their youth. **Approximately half of the parents and caregivers discussed that ELK has helped their youth be more engaged or motivated in school.** The responses focused on **ELK providing them opportunities to do cool science activities and learn about environmental science.** Parents and caregivers also noted that ELK has provided information about college, scholarships and career paths for their youth.

Prepare Participants for College and Career

In addition to providing positive exposure to science, ELK programs and staff provide insight and information to youth that can prepare them for success after high school. ELK’s programming provides numerous opportunities to engage youth in discussion about college and career and how to navigate the process. The Youth Survey included questions specifically for high school students to gather their feedback about college and career. High school survey respondents were also asked to

indicate whether they have participated in the Leadership Corps program and for how long. Figure 7 below outlines the percent of students who have participated in Leadership Corps.

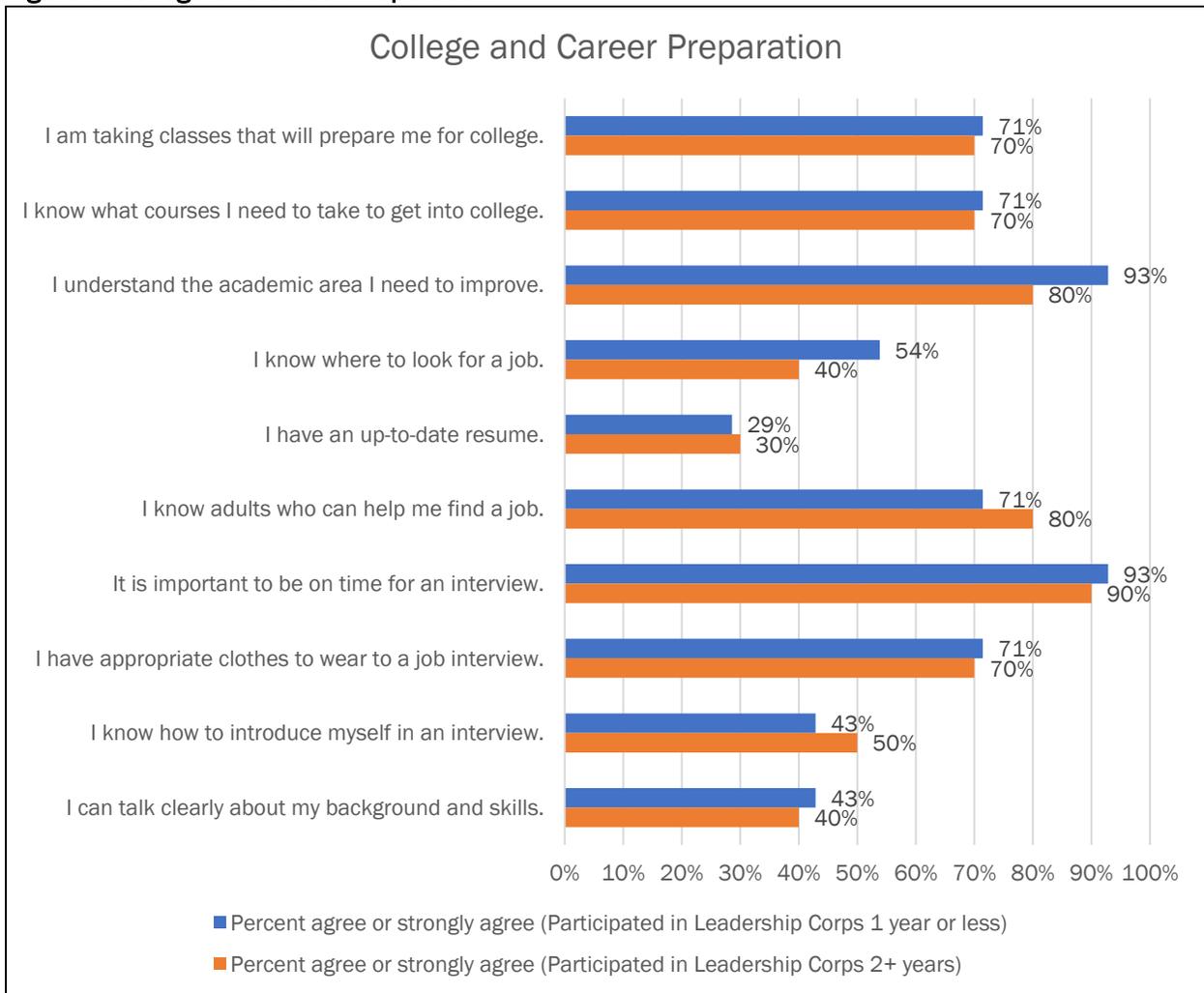
Figure 7. Participation in Leadership Corps



Survey questions related to college and career preparation were broken out by those who have participated in Leadership Corps for one year or less and those who have participated for two or more years in order to see if there are meaningful differences based on participation in Leadership Corps. As illustrated in Figure 8, there are not major differences in ratings on statements based on Leadership Corps engagement.

Figure 8 illustrates that **the majority of high school respondents are taking classes that will prepare them for college, they know what courses they need to get into college, and they understand the academic areas they need to improve.** Additionally, high percentages of respondents understand important job interview skills, such as **it's important to be on time for an interview and to have appropriate clothes to wear to a job interview.** Alternatively, the survey identified areas high school respondents need to work on, such as having an up-to-date resume, how to introduce themselves at an interview, and how to talk clearly about background and skills.

Figure 8. College and Career Preparation



*Ratings on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Youth focus group and interview participants had very positive reflections about how ELK has prepared them for college and career. Half of the participants indicated they are more knowledgeable about jobs in the science field because of their participation in ELK. Participants indicated ELK programs have prepared them for college and career in the following ways:

- Learning about scholarships and how to apply for them; learning that college isn't out of reach (n=11).
- Opening their eyes to the extent of the field of science and learning about jobs in environmental studies, wildlife management, environmental engineering, park rangers and additional opportunities in nature (n=7).
- Having a support system in ELK staff and receiving advice and help (n=7).
- Learning about the importance of making connections and getting internships (n=4).
- Receiving help about identifying colleges, applying for college, and locating resources (n=5).

- Having opportunities to learn and practice interview skills (n=2).
- Being exposed to different outdoor agencies, specifically through the Urban Rangers program (n=2).

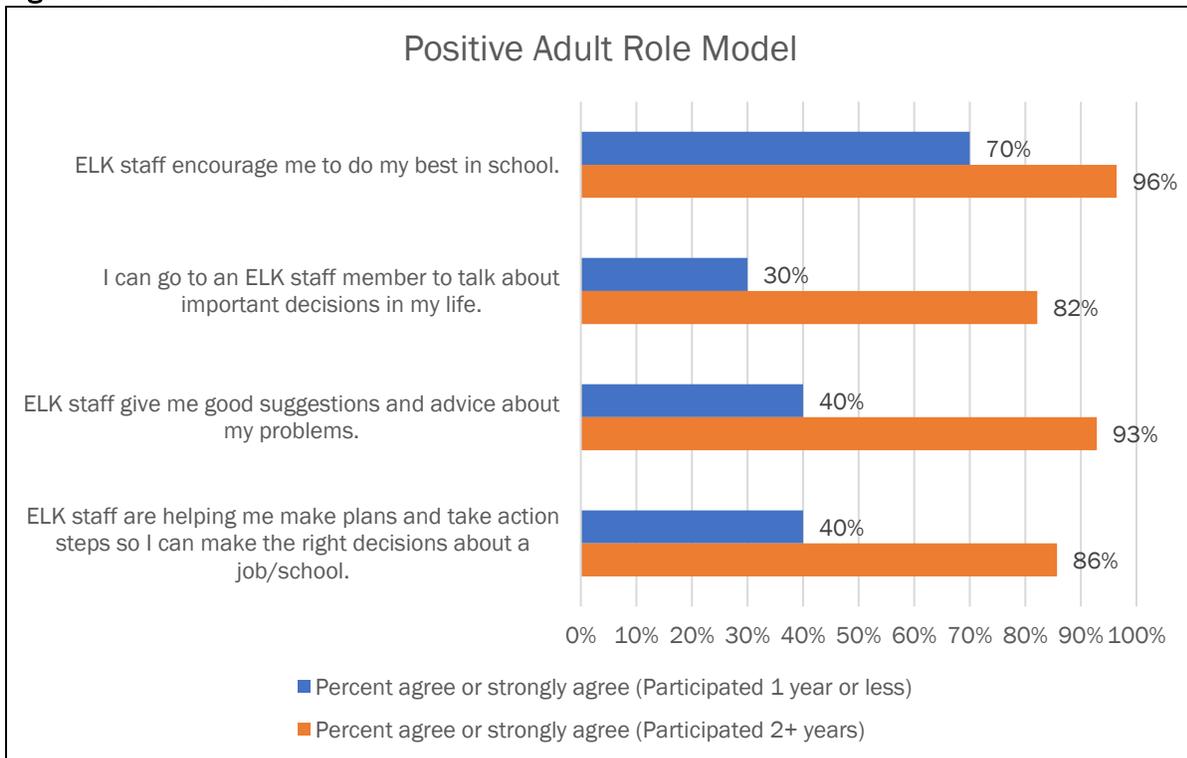
According to one participant, *“Throughout time they’ve mentored me to want to be good in school. I used to tell the staff that college wasn’t for me. But it’s been my choice, now I want to go to college. In Leadership Corps they give help with building a savings account, building credit, you want to go to college, they tell you about a scholarship and how to get it.”*

Parents and caregivers echoed the comments made by youth. They acknowledged that their youth have been exposed to different careers focused on the environment and science. Parents and caregivers also noted that their youth have learned about scholarships, how to interview successfully, and have been exposed to adults and kids from different backgrounds. Several parents and caregivers also highlighted the ELK staff who are engaged in their youth and help them develop confidence.

Provide Participants with a Positive Adult Role Model

ELK programs are led by a team of staff dedicated to helping youth achieve their full potential. Staff members aim to not only be a positive adult role model, but also to provide youth with guidance for important decisions and help youth create successful plans for life after high school. The Youth Survey asked respondents to rate a series of statements about ELK staff. As illustrated in Figure 9 below, responses to these questions varied greatly based on the length of time youth had participated in ELK. Those who had participated for two or more years had very positive ratings. For example, **almost all youth with extended engagement in ELK agreed that ELK staff encourage them to do their best in school and give good suggestions and advice about their problems**. Alternatively, those who had engaged with ELK for one year or less had much lower ratings for these same statements.

Figure 9. Positive Adult Role Model



*Ratings on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Overwhelmingly, **100% of the youth in focus groups and interviews agreed they feel comfortable going to ELK leaders and volunteers for advice.** Youth expressed sincere appreciation for the leaders and indicated they can go to leaders for help with anything—school, personal issues, family issues. Youth agreed that ELK leaders are incredibly encouraging and supportive and are always “gassing them up.” They also commented that the leaders have been mentors who will give them good advice, even if it’s hard to hear. Finally, the leaders are trustworthy and will accept the youth for who they are. Quotes from youth included:

- *“I can call them for anything and they’d be willing to help. They are those people who will put something to the side to help us. Created a relationship over the past 5 years. They are more than willing to help me if I’m in need of anything. School. Personally. Can definitely go to them for anything.”*
- *“People from ELK have always been encouraging of me. “You can do it.” Always gassing up students way beyond what we are expecting. A great place to go to get some gas—more fuel to your fire to keep moving. They really, really believe in their students and capabilities. Only want us to be successful....Always, always big supporters. Ask about family. ELK staff know a lot about a lot of families.”*
- *“I have so many people at ELK that I consider my mentors. Inspire me. Not just school, but in life. I always look to them for advice if I need it.”*
- *“I feel like ELK are like a member of my family because they are so caring for me. They know me, they care about me.”*

- *“Whenever someone needs to share something very vulnerable—really comfortable going to ELK leaders because they value us as leaders just as much. Has changed my life for the better and I know I can fall back on them for whatever reason it may be.”*

What ELK Means to Youth and Families

Data collection efforts also gathered feedback from participants to better understand whether youth and families are satisfied with programming, as well as how programming can be improved (which will be discussed in the next section). The Youth Survey asked respondents to reflect on what ELK means to them. While responses to this question varied, the following themes emerged:

- ELK means family, connection to others, friendship, and support (n=21).
- ELK is environmental learning—learning about plants and animals and how to care for the environment in an outdoor setting that “isn’t boring” (n=12).
- ELK is having fun in nature and participating in new experiences outside (n=8).
- ELK is being empowered to express self and achieve goals in a safe space (n=3).
- ELK is volunteering in and taking care of the community (n=2).
- ELK is happiness, health and opportunities.

A few quotes from youth:

- *“ELK means inclusivity, equality, and determination. I have always felt like I am welcomed with open arms at ELK and have always been able to find a second home at ELK. No matter where I am at in life, the staff has always taken the time to make sure that I am okay and doing well in school, life, etc.”*
- *“ELK to me means a community of people who wish to work together to better themselves, their [sic] future, and their [sic] community they live in while improving each other.”*
- *“Elk is a way that I learn about animals that I never knew and the environment, they also teach me about how much we need nature and how to survive in it.”*
- *“ELK means helping others and putting the community before yourself. It’s a safe place where you go to learn and thrive in.”*

Youth were also asked to identify their favorite thing they did with ELK. Responses varied greatly and spoke to the wide range of activities ELK facilitates. The following activities were identified by youth: camping (n=12), snowboarding and skiing (n=4), fishing (n=4), archery (n=3), backpacking (n=3), Sand Dunes (n=2), Aurora Reservoir (n=2), dissecting frogs (n=1), cleaning up invasive plants (n=1), the food (n=1) and rock climbing (n=1).

A few quotes from youth:

- *“My favorite thing I have done with ELK is camping because we go hiking, fishing, we do service projects, swimming, and we roast marshmallows. I get to spend time away from everything and join the people I love on a big, fun trip.”*

- *“My favorite thing I have done with Elk is the snowboarding trip because without Elk I would not have even dreamed about going to the mountains and getting to meet as many friendly instructors. This trip was truly my favorite because just getting to experience something new from the place I have been living all my life has left me grateful for Elk.”*

Respondents of the parent and caregiver survey as well as participants of the parent and caregiver focus group were also asked to identify their favorite part about the ELK program. Responses from parents and caregivers echoed those of the youth. Respondents listed the following:

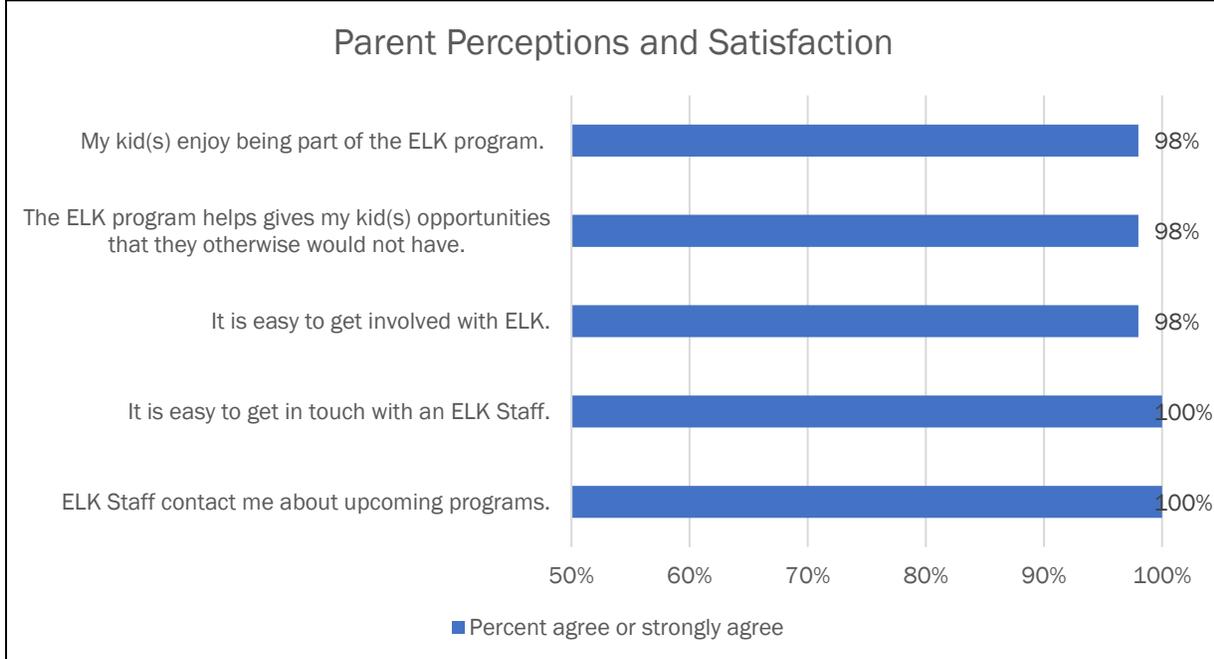
- The activities, events and field trips with a focus on the outdoors (n=31)
- The staff (n=16)
- The opportunity for their youth to learn about nature (n=12)
- Fishing (n=8)
- Camping (n=8)
- Family-oriented programming (n=5)
- Hiking (n=4)
- Friendships their youth have made (n=3)
- Support for college and scholarships (n=2)
- Others: Aurora Reservoir, museums and helping elderly (each with n=1)

A few quotes from parents and caregivers:

- *“They are very supportive and attentive towards us. As a mother, I like the high human quality of the ELK staff. They are kind and compassionate and they have that desire to form a relationship with ELK families. Its sincere, not just a job.”*
- *“I always looked for organizations where we could spend time as a family. ELK allows us to do that. Some of the activities are more geared to the kids but they never tell the adults that we can’t participate. I wanted to be able to get out in nature as technology is taking such a hold of society and home life.”*
- *“The sense of community has been amazing. My boys cling on to the mentors and leaders. The way ELK chooses their people is thoughtful. The connections my sons have made has been unbelievable. I like the inclusion. ELK takes kids who could never get into the outdoors because they are urban kids. ELK creates access and exposure. They are able to be conservationists and have a relationship with the land. They have an appreciation for the land and the water because you see how we are all connected even us humans. They create opportunities for them to be stewards of nature. They learn to love being in the outdoors.”*

Respondents of the parent and caregiver survey were also asked to rate their level of agreement with a series of statements related to their overall perceptions of ELK. As illustrated in Figure 10 below, almost all of the respondents have high perceptions of ELK. For example, all respondents agreed (100%) **that it is easy to get in touch with ELK staff**. Almost all of respondents agreed (98%) **that ELK program helps give their kids opportunities that they otherwise would not have, and their kids enjoy being part of the ELK program**.

Figure 10. Parent Perceptions and Satisfaction with ELK



*Ratings on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Suggestions From Youth and Families

Finally, in an effort to be responsive to the needs and insights of the community, youth and families were asked to provide suggestions about how ELK can better support their families as well as suggestions for additional field trips.

Overall, youth and families are very pleased with ELK and are grateful for the engaged staff, outdoor activities, and opportunities to learn about the environment. There were minimal comments with suggestions for improvement. The following suggestions came from either youth or families:

- Provide more opportunities for youth to be exposed to STEM careers as well as facilitate more field trips to support life skills, job readiness, or coding.
- Provide more opportunities for youth to be tutored, potentially by an older student engaged in ELK.
- Provide transportation for youth.
- Provide a gear library where families can check out outdoor gear.
- Expand the program to more schools in the metro region as well as potentially expand outside of Colorado.
- Allow middle school students to do more of the high school type field trips.
- Increase outreach in the community so more youth know about the program.
- Increase the number of activities available to families.

- Increase the presence of staff members and adults of color on trips and leadership roles.
- Offer more weekend programs, as weekday programs can be challenging to participate in.

Youth and families gave numerous suggestions for additional field trips or activities, with surprisingly little overlap in responses. Youth and families would like to see more of the following activities (note: during COVID, several respondents indicated they would like the return of more in-person activities).

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Camping • Science activities • Skiing • Backpacking • Fishing • Winter activities • Family-oriented activities • Bike riding • Horseback riding • Sports | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pools • Hiking • Water sports, such as paddle boarding, kayaking, tubing or canoeing • Learning to blend technology with environment and music • Visiting specific places: Garden of the Gods, Lake McConaughy, Mesa Verde, Sand Dunes, Dinosaur Ridge and Yellowstone |
|---|--|

Conclusion

This evaluation of ELK programs provided meaningful insights into how ELK is meeting its outcomes and serving both youth and families. Overall, youth and parents/caregivers have very positive reflections about what ELK means to them—ELK is family, environmental learning, fun in nature, empowerment, and community service, to name a few. These reflections speak to the strength of ELK programs. ELK is helping to create environmental stewards who enjoy spending time outdoors. ELK motivates youth to do well in school and provides them with additional support for success. ELK staff help prepare youth for college and career by educating them about scholarships, colleges and job opportunities as well as providing an ongoing support system. The evaluation also made clear the level of engagement and support provided by ELK staff, particularly to those who have been engaged in ELK programs for two or more years.

The evaluation also provided insights into the ways ELK can be improved. For example, there are opportunities for ELK to increase programming that would help youth feel comfortable teaching others or being a group leader. Similarly, programming could help foster confidence in youth to use their learnings to educate others about the environment. Finally, the evaluation also identified areas that could be strengthened pertaining to preparing youth for life after high school, such as updating resumes and preparing for interviews. ELK is in a unique position to draw from the learnings of this evaluation to improve future programming.

Appendix A: Demographics of Respondents

Survey respondents were asked to respond to several demographic questions. Figures 11 through 13 below, provide results.

Figure 11. Current Grade Level in School

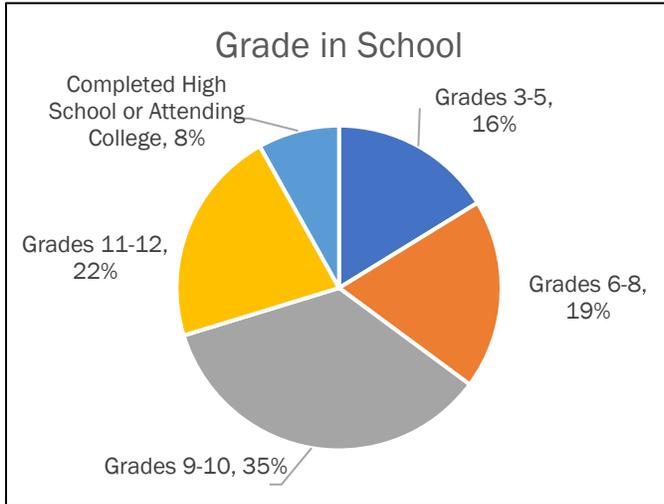


Figure 12. Ethnic/Racial Identity

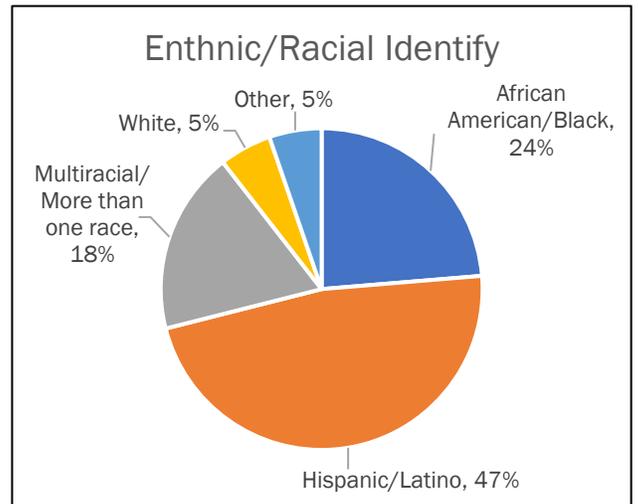


Figure 13. Gender Identity

