

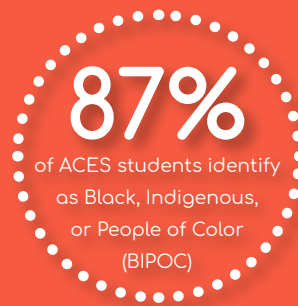


**2021
IMPACT
REPORT**

MISSION & VISION

ACES's **mission** is to reduce the academic opportunity gap in the Twin Cities and improve the likelihood of success for underserved students.

Our **vision** is that ACES students succeed in college and career, and become engaged citizens in safe and equitable communities.



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DEAR FRIENDS,



Though the 2020-21 school year brought unimaginable challenges and unanticipated changes, ACES never wavered in our commitment to Twin Cities students. Implementing new tools, developing new methods, calling on new partners, and with a steadfast team by our side, ACES continued to deliver the high-quality academic instruction and social-emotional learning that every child deserves. **Our students and families, volunteers, staff, leaders, and supporters like you stepped up to the plate.** I am inspired, humbled, and profoundly grateful.

This year, we return to classrooms in a still-shifting learning landscape. When the dust finally settles and normal routines return, we know that the pandemic's impact will endure. Students from all walks of life face learning loss, missed social connection, and declines in overall wellbeing. And those already most affected by education disparities – students of color, English language learners, and those from lower-income households – have been disproportionately impacted. The pandemic has exacerbated Minnesota's already pronounced academic opportunity gap – and **the students we serve need ACES's responsive, empathetic, youth-centered programming more than ever before.**

There is no time to waste. And thanks to the commitment of supporters like you, we are ready to meet this moment. ACES is putting our growth mindset into action and embarking on a targeted, three-year strategic plan to broaden our reach and deepen our impact. **We are growing our team, building new partnerships, introducing programming at more schools, and increasing enrollment exponentially.** The momentum is palpable and, looking ahead, I am exhilarated by the opportunities and promises on the horizon.

At this important inflection point, I also find myself reflecting on the past. The students who entered ACES's first classroom nearly three decades ago are well into adulthood today. No doubt, life has taken them in many different directions. Perhaps they are innovators and entrepreneurs, community leaders and advocates, frontline workers and healthcare providers, mothers and fathers, neighbors and friends. Regardless of the paths they've followed, I deeply believe the qualities they cultivated during afterschool hours with ACES – teamwork, responsibility, problem-solving, respect, perseverance – will have served them well through recent challenges and changes.

ACES is here to provide that same development for the young learners of today. **For today's students are tomorrow's leaders.** We must do all we can to prepare them for the challenges and changes, opportunities and promises that lie ahead. Thank you for standing with ACES in this work.

In gratitude,
Christina Saunders, Executive Director





ABOUT ACES

ACES (Athletes Committed to Educating Students) is an innovative out-of-school time program that brings learning to life for Twin Cities students. Our original, hands-on curriculum develops math and social-emotional skills and prepares students to succeed - all through the exciting lens of sports!

Since our founding in 1994, more than 6,000 fourth-eighth graders have participated in ACES's programming at schools and community centers across Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Through small group sessions, one-on-one mentorship, and once-in-a-lifetime experiential learning opportunities, ACES boosts confidence and improves outcomes for young learners in some of Minnesota's most historically marginalized communities.

ACES is proud to be the first and only organization of its kind to have the direct support of every Minnesota professional sports team. In synergy with ACES's classroom programming, partnerships with the Minnesota Lynx, Timberwolves, Twins, United FC, Vikings, Wild, and Saint Paul Saints, as well as the University of Minnesota Athletic Department, spark learning and inspire students to succeed in school, career, and community.



ACES ALUM SHINES AS SCHOLARSHIP WINNER

When Kalid Ali and his sister arrived in Minnesota in 2013 as immigrants from Ethiopia, he spoke just a handful of English words. Hoping to strengthen his language skills and make friends, he enrolled in ACES as a fifth grader at Saint Paul's Linwood Monroe Arts Plus (now known as Global Arts Plus).

For the next three years, Kalid immersed himself in ACES's programming – attending daily classroom sessions, meeting with mentors and Academic Coaches, and soaking up every opportunity to participate in field trips and supplemental events. He quickly became fluent in English, built lasting relationships with peers and instructors alike, and proved himself to be an exceptionally dedicated student and remarkable young person.

“From the moment he joined ACES, Kalid has demonstrated incredible resilience, tenacity, and optimism. We are fortunate to have been part of his journey, and I have no doubt we’ll continue to see great things from him. Students like Kalid make me feel hopeful. They’re the reason this work is so important.”

– Christina Saunders, Executive Director



Kalid’s leadership grew exponentially in high school. He served on the Saint Paul Public Schools Student Engagement and Advancement Board (advocating passionately for immigrant and ELL students), was twice elected Student Body President, ran varsity track and played soccer for the state team, volunteered at the Minnesota Capitol and Regions Hospital, worked multiple part-time jobs, and completed two years of college coursework through the PSEO (Post-Secondary Enrollment Option) program at the University of Minnesota.

This spring, Kalid graduated *summa cum laude* from Saint Paul’s Como Park High School with a jaw-dropping 4.61 GPA. As class valedictorian, he delivered a powerful address to classmates, families, and cheering supporters at the June commencement ceremony.

Kalid arrived on campus at Saint Paul’s Macalester College in August, the recipient of a prestigious and competitive full-ride QuestBridge scholarship. The first in his family to go to college, he plans to double major in International Studies and Economics, and hopes to someday work for the US State Department. Kalid credits ACES with helping him start on a path to success – and he’s determined to make similar opportunities possible for others. Now a member of the ACES Associate Board volunteer committee, Kalid is working to expand ACES’s reach and impact across the Twin Cities.

Pictured: ACES Executive Director, Christina Saunders (left), and Evaluation and Grants Manager, Misha Evertz (right), celebrated with Kalid Ali at his commencement ceremony in June 2021

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT: NORTHEAST COLLEGE PREP



ACES's relationship with Northeast College Prep (NECP), a tuition-free charter school in Minneapolis, was forged via email, over the phone, and through Zoom. Yet even when internet connections waivered and screens froze, our partnership with NECP remained strong, synergetic, and continued to grow.

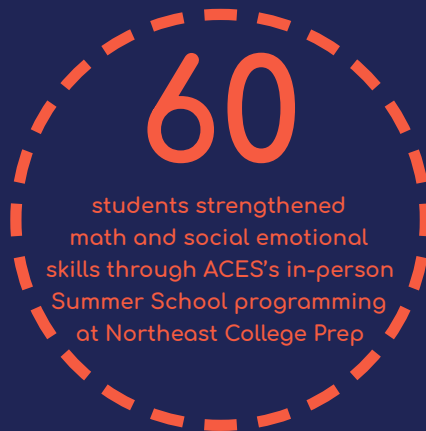
In the summer of 2020, as schools adapted and planned to support students through another year impacted by COVID-19, ACES contacted NECP school leaders to propose a virtual, out-of-school-time program for students struggling with distance learning and in need of an academic boost. In collaboration with dedicated administrators and teachers, we quickly established the program's structure, secured needed tools and technology, connected with families, and enrolled the inaugural cohort of NECP ACES All Stars. 30 middle schoolers opted in – joining us for an impactful, rewarding year like no other.

ACES adapted our curriculum for smaller class sizes (more conducive to remote learning), and Academic Coaches Cleveland Miller and Iris Helm-Hernandez led 8-10 weekly sessions for groups of 3-4 students. Cleveland and Iris also held one-on-one weekly check-ins with every ACES participant. ACES staff made monthly visits to each student's home, delivering customized Academic Achievement Kits filled with materials needed for ACES's hands-on lessons. For example, to supplement a physics and applied math unit, students received popsicle sticks, twine, and bottle caps to construct balloon-powered model cars! Though instruction was delivered through a screen rather than in a bustling classroom, we continued to provide the project-based, interactive curriculum that makes our program unique.

Working together, students, families, and ACES staff built connection and community – even when in-person contact wasn't possible. Our team remained in regular, direct communication with parents and guardians to share progress updates, provide resources for at-home learning, identify areas for growth, and collaboratively develop student support strategies.

As spring semester programming continued virtually, pandemic dangers began to subside and NECP started planning the return to in-person learning. When school leaders approached ACES to lead the math component of NECP's Summer School, we immediately accepted. For three weeks in July, ACES staff delivered custom lessons that reinforced foundational math – and aligned with the coinciding 2021 Tokyo Olympics! ACES Site Coordinator Claire Williams, who oversaw the NECP Summer School program reflected, **“The students were so happy to be at school. Everyone was so engaged. It was awesome to be back in the classroom.”**

ACES was thrilled to return to Northeast College Prep in September – prepared to deliver in-person, hybrid, and virtual programming as needed. After just one year at NECP, enrollment for our 2021-22 program has already doubled and interest continues to grow. ACES is the only after school program offering at NECP this fall and, just one year into our partnership, we are honored by the confidence school leaders have placed in ACES's program. We look forward to growing our partnership with NECP – virtually and in-person – for years to come.



ACES returned to in-person programming this summer, designing and delivering math curriculum for Northeast College Prep's Summer School. Lessons aligned with the coinciding 2021 Tokyo Olympics and students earned medals for their hard work!



ACES IN ACTION

In 2020, ACES quickly pivoted to a virtual model - ensuring continued support and mentorship for our students in a constantly-changing learning landscape. Throughout the 2020-21 school year, we used digital tools to deliver one-on-one coaching and homework help, small group learning and connection, and impactful experiential learning opportunities.

Small group sessions: Groups of 3-4 students met virtually with an ACES Academic Coach once per week to strengthen math skills, develop social-emotional competencies, and build important connection and camaraderie. Each month, ACES staff delivered custom Academic Achievement Kits to every student, ensuring they had the supplies needed to complete hands-on lessons at home.

One-on-one check-ins: ACES Academic Coaches conducted weekly one-on-one virtual sessions with every student, providing individualized homework help and math skill practice, as well as mentorship and positive role modeling. Academic Coaches also remained in regular contact with families and caregivers to assess students' progress and collaboratively develop tailored support strategies.

Large group learning: Students participated in at least one large group virtual "field trip" per month, creating a vitally important sense of connectedness and community. From a behind-the-scenes tour of the Vikings Practice Facility to a conversation with Minnesota Wild defenseman Matt Dumba, these unique experiences helped learning come to life!

1,200

Academic Achievement Kits delivered directly to students' homes, ensuring they had tools and supplies to complete ACES's hands-on, project-based lessons

3233

total hours of programming attended throughout the 2020-21 school year



Pictured: Site Coordinator Claire Williams delivered a custom Academic Achievement Kit, including supplies needed to complete hands-on lessons, to an ACES student.



MINNESOTA TWINS GO TO BAT FOR ACES STUDENTS



The Minnesota Twins know that all students deserve an all-star education. From enabling once-in-a-lifetime field trips to providing grants from the dedicated Community Fund, the Twins have been steadfast partners in ACES's work for nearly three decades. Despite the challenges and changes of the 2020-2021 school year, the Twins continued to show up for ACES students in big, creative ways.

In June, Twins Manager Rocco Baldelli joined ACES classrooms for a lively, inspiring discussion of teamwork and perseverance, the importance of hard work, and, of course, baseball! Darwin and Thomas, two ACES all-star students and lifelong Twins fans, moderated the conversation, and all students had the chance to ask questions.

The Twins also facilitated ACES's first in-person field trips since the beginning of the pandemic. In July, students and instructors from Northeast College Prep celebrated the end of Summer School by watching the Twins take on Cleveland at Target Field. A few weeks later, more than 90 ACES e-mentoring program participants gathered at the ballpark, and students and their families had a chance to meet the mentors with whom they had corresponded throughout the summer. For many ACES students, these were their first experiences at a major league sporting event – and the sense of joy and wonder exuded as they took in the sights and sounds of Target Field was palpable.

Experiential learning opportunities like team leader visits and game day field trips – made possible through our partnerships with Minnesota's professional sports teams – build community connection and bolster ACES's academic and character-building curriculum. We are grateful to the Twins, and to all of our team partners, for everything they do to bring learning to life for our students.



"I would highly recommend the ACES program to all families. It makes learning math fun and relatable for kids, especially someone like Darwin, who loves all sports. Darwin has become more confident in his leadership skills, helping and supporting other kids, and also building up the courage to speak in public. He was a shy and timid kid when he was younger, but he has overcome quite a bit in the last year."

– Rhiannon, Darwin's mother



For many students in the Northeast College Prep Summer School program, the Twins game they attended with ACES was their first experience at a major league sporting event.

“ACES is leveling the playing field for kids who need an extra boost in their education. Especially after so much distance learning and time apart, their program is more important than ever. I’ve had a blast connecting with the kids over the last couple of years, and I’m proud to give back to our Twins Territory community by partnering with ACES.”

– Rocco Baldelli, Twins Manager



Twins Manager Rocco Baldelli (center) joined ACES for a virtual field trip, answering questions from student moderators Darwin (left) and Thomas (right) on everything from school study habits to shortstop fielding.



During June’s virtual field trip with Twins Manager Rocco Baldelli, Darwin, a fifth grader in ACES’s program at Hiawatha College Prep

in Minneapolis, asked the questions. Now we’re turning the tables and asking Darwin a few questions of our own!

ACES: Do you like being part of a program that teaches you about math and sports?

DARWIN: Yes, I like the math part... but I like how you relate sports to math. You made learning fun!

ACES: What is the coolest thing you learned?

DARWIN: There was one class where we made our own dimensions in building sports fields. We measured using inches, feet, and area. Being an architect and constructing our own fields was so much fun.

ACES: What was your favorite part of participating in the ACES program this year?

DARWIN: The virtual field trips were the best! Getting to meet and interview Rocco Baldelli and Matt Dumba from the Minnesota Wild were my favorite parts.

ACES: You did a great job interviewing Rocco! What was that experience like for you?

DARWIN: I love baseball! Interviewing the Twins Manager was really exciting and basically like a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

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aces4kids.org



“The partnership between NECP and ACES has been a huge success for our students. Not only is ACES’s sports-themed curriculum highly engaging, but our students also learn valuable social emotional skills along the way. ACES’s programming energizes students to be active learners in both math and SEL skills.”

-Michelle Roy, Northeast College Prep Teacher