The Horizons Program Overview

Vision
Building a more just and equitable society.

Mission Statement
Transforming the lives of underserved children and youth through year-round academic and enrichment programs to inspire learning, encourage success, and close the opportunity gap.

Values

- Equity through opportunity
- Educating the whole child
- Joyful and nurturing community

Population Served
Horizons at NCCS serves 350 plus kindergarten through grade twelve students from under-resourced Stamford and Norwalk public and public charter schools each year. 100% of admitted students come from households experiencing financial need, with incomes that are at or below 200% of federal poverty guidelines. At least 67% of admitted students are experiencing academic and/or social-emotional need. Horizons at NCCS receives many more applications than there are openings, with an average three year overall acceptance rate of 17%. All of our programs are tuition-free.

Landscape
Fairfield County, Connecticut exhibits some of the starkest economic divides in the nation, where severe opportunity gaps directly drive persistent disparities in student achievement. Children from under-resourced communities often lack access to summer educational opportunities, losing two to three months of academic ground each summer. Consequently, many low-income students fall up to three grade levels behind by fifth grade. This is particularly critical in early literacy, as students who are not reading proficiently by third grade face a 60% chance of remaining below proficient in middle school.

These inequities extend into life-saving physical skills: Black or African American youth ages 5–19 are nearly six times more likely to drown in a swimming pool than their White peers, with 64% of Black or African American children and 45% of Hispanic/Latino children having little to no swimming ability. Research confirms that swimming ability is deeply generational; surveys show that over 30% of Black or African American caregivers and over 25% of Latino caregivers never learned to swim, compared to less than 10% of White caregivers.

100% of Horizons students graduate from high school in four years in a state where only 85% of students

eligible for free or reduced-price meals are on track to graduate in four years, compared to 91% of their more affluent peers. Our students are beating the odds with a three-year average college enrollment rate of 98%, compared to a 72% college enrollment rate for Connecticut students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Many of our students are the first in their families to attend college and this opens many doors for them. Horizons is changing the odds for our students by providing them with the resources and opportunities they need to succeed in school, college, career, and life.

Data Sources: *Fairfield County Community Foundation/DataHaven (2025); CDC MMWR Fatal Drowning Disparities Study; USA Swimming Foundation & University of Memphis Study on Youth Aquatic Literacy; Annie E. Casey Foundation (Double Jeopardy Study); Connecticut State Department of Education (EdSight Cohort Graduation & College-Going Data).*

Program Overview

Horizons is anchored by an intensive six-week **summer program** held on the campus of New Canaan Country School. During the summer, Horizons gives approximately 300 children and youth in kindergarten through 9th grade a chance to have new experiences, meet new friends, take part in academic and enrichment classes, eat nourishing breakfasts and lunches, swim, and become part of a diverse family of caring teachers and staff.

The project-based educational model is designed to fuel a lifelong passion for learning, blending high-quality academics with rich cultural enrichment and confidence-building activities like swimming, the arts, and athletics. In small classes led by professional educators, students dive into a robust curriculum centered on literacy and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math). Each student receives nearly 200 hours of academic enrichment and classroom instruction, supported by an intentional 3-to-1 student-to-staff ratio for our youngest students that includes literacy specialists, a Social and Emotional (SEL) coach, and social workers. Through purposeful literacy and math instruction paired with differentiated interventions, our students consistently achieve measurable academic growth during the six-week summer program.

To maximize student outcomes and establish seamless educational continuity, Horizons strategically transitioned its assessment platform to mCLASS. By administering mCLASS pre- and post-assessments in math and literacy during the summer, our teachers were able to deliver targeted individual instruction, maximize learning time, and give Horizons a tool to accurately track year-over-year student growth.

Swimming is a critical life-saving skill that many children in under-resourced communities rarely have the opportunity to acquire. Swim instruction remains a hallmark of the Horizons summer program, with virtually all participants learning to swim during their time in the program. Additionally, Horizons expands student opportunities and perspectives through field trips, hands-on arts programming, cultural events, and community-wide celebrations. To eliminate barriers to participation transportation is provided to and from the program daily.

The Horizons **school year program** continues the learning and connections that began in the summer. The extended school year program gives students in grades 1-8 the opportunity to build on the academic and social and emotional progress made during the summer. We evaluate end of summer teacher feedback and mCLASS testing to identify the students who are performing below grade level and provide access to tutoring. Students in grades 1-8 will receive math and/or reading tutoring to “help move the needle” whereas high school students can receive tutoring in core subjects. Students and their families are invited to join us for our **Fall Festival** and our **Multicultural Fair**. Students in grades 1-10 participate in our four week **winter program** in January and February. To deepen our connection with families, we are

piloting a vibrant, bi-weekly evening program, **WIN (What I Need) Wednesdays** designed to serve the needs of the whole family simultaneously. Our caregivers will have the opportunity to be engaged in empowering workshops while their children will be participating in age-appropriate academic and leadership development in a separate space. Programming for caregivers may include ESL, financial literacy and budgeting while students will simultaneously be receiving homework assistance or enjoying art, music, PE or SAT prep. This school year programming provides connection and engagement at regular intervals to build off the summer program. The school year program also provides referrals for students or families in crisis when necessary.

A partnership with the Sasco River Center gives students who are struggling to make progress in school access to neuropsychological and psycho-educational evaluations along with therapeutic services. These comprehensive evaluations exceed the diagnostic capacity of local school districts and are typically cost-prohibitive for families with financial need. By pinpointing root learning barriers, these assessments provide the critical data needed to identify challenges and design effective, individualized intervention plans.

The **high school program** provides a robust list of programming and support throughout the school year to help students graduate with a clear post-secondary plan, along with the skills and resources needed to put that plan into action. Programming includes one-to-one tutoring; academic, life skills, and college readiness workshops; college counseling; college and post-secondary tours; career exposure and career readiness programs; volunteer opportunities; and social events. High school students are also encouraged to volunteer and help out during our Saturday events like the Fall Fair. A dual SAT and career prep course is offered, and juniors can also participate in a spring, multi-day regional college and post-secondary tour.

The **caregiver and family program** at Horizons encourages caregivers to be active participants in the Horizons experience. Studies have shown that active family involvement correlates to increased engagement and academic success. Horizons caregivers participate in our programming, from our Holiday Party to volunteering at our Faculty and Staff Appreciation Lunch. We have approximately 24 Family Grade Reps who meet bi-monthly with a subset of our full-year staff to give their opinions and recommendations on programming, educational workshops, and recruit volunteers for family events. Additionally, one Family Council Representative from Stamford and one from Norwalk serve as active, ex-officio members of our Board, providing a vital outlet for families to share their voices and perspectives directly with leadership. Each summer, caregivers have the opportunity to participate in weekly adult swim lessons, allowing them to make major strides in learning how to swim. Our families recognize the value of the experience their children are receiving through Horizons and are actively engaged as partners in their children's success. The WIN Wednesday's will complement our programming by offering additional support and resources to all caregivers.

Horizons **alumni association** provides an opportunity for Horizons graduates to stay connected with each other and take advantage of the valuable educational and professional network that exists within the Horizons community. The alumni association started with a closed Facebook group and now has 380 members. Each year, graduating seniors are inducted into the Alumni Association during the high school graduation ceremony, where an alum is also selected to speak at the event. We hope to continue to build momentum around our alumni association to deepen engagement through additional social events and connections.