

Expanded Learning Opportunities— Pathways to Student Success

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There is growing momentum in the education policy arena to educate children and youth in all settings in which they learn and develop in more intentionally aligned ways. This momentum is creating a range of increasingly integrated education approaches at multiple levels, including those that rethink the use of time across the school day and year to support learning. Collectively, these approaches are referred to as **expanded learning opportunities (ELO)** (see text box). At the same time, increased investments in afterschool and summer learning over the past decade have resulted in a substantial evidence base about their academic, social, health, and other benefits; the evidence has created a strong case that such nonschool supports are important pathways to learning, particularly when they work in intentional alignment with schools to support student success. Yet, too often, these supports continue to be seen as “add-ons,” not integral to in-school education efforts.

Expanded Learning Opportunities in Massachusetts¹

Across the state there are a variety of expanded learning approaches being implemented. The unifying factor across these approaches is that they strive to support healthy learning and development by supporting and complementing in-school learning with positive out-of-school experiences. These approaches include:

Afterschool programs: structured programs that operate in the morning, the afternoon, or on weekends that coordinate with schools and provide children and youth supervised and safe activities designed to promote learning across time, contexts, and developmental stages.

Summer learning programs: structured programs and enrichment activities designed to supplement academic learning and promote enrichment opportunities during the nonschool summer months.

Extended day and year schools: school models that expand the traditional school day and calendar in order to balance the core curriculum with enrichment opportunities, often including afterschool programs.

Community schools: comprehensive public schools that provide a range of services and supports for children, youth, and families across the day and throughout the year.

School–community networks: intentional connections between schools and community organizations for the purpose of promoting and supporting students’ learning needs.

For a complete review of new approaches to time and learning, see, Malone, H., Weiss, H., & Little, P. (In press). *Rethinking time and learning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

Integrated learning efforts are not new; in fact, they served as the impetus for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program, which, for the past decade, has called for schools to work in partnership with community- and faith-based organizations. However, the past ten years have witnessed tremendous growth in ELO programs and initiatives aimed specifically at intentional partnerships between afterschool and summer programs and schools in order to support—but not replicate—in-school learning and development. This ELO policy brief describes the potential benefits of participation in afterschool and summer learning programs for students of all ages and highlights the possible benefits of strong partnerships for learning between schools and afterschool and/or summer programs. It concludes with a set of policy implications for considering different ELO approaches.

Expanded Learning Opportunities Can Support Student Success¹

Evidence from a decade of national, state, and local research and evaluation studies on a range of approaches to delivering quality afterschool and summer experiences indicates that

What is “Student Success”?

21st century society necessitates a broadened definition of student success, one that goes beyond “the 3 Rs” and includes the development of skills such as effective communications skills; the ability to develop and sustain interpersonal relationships at school, at work, and at home; the ability to solve complex problems; and the development of a strong sense of self.

they have the potential to positively impact learning and academic success. Relative to participation in other afterschool arrangements (such as self-care or sibling care), participation can result in less disciplinary action; lower dropout rates; better academic performance in school, including better grades and test scores; greater on-time promotion; improved homework completion; and improved work habits.² Further, there is growing recognition that afterschool is important not just for elementary students, whose parents need supervision for their children when they are not in school, but also for middle and high school youth, whose participation in afterschool programs can help keep them connected to positive role models and learning and engaged in their education at a time when many are beginning to disengage from schools.

Afterschool programs can also promote social, prevention, and wellness outcomes which contribute to in-school success. In fact, many of the studies which have found academic gains through afterschool programs have also found gains in other developmental domains, which suggests that academic success is integrally related to a student's social, emotional, behavioral, and physical status.³

The evidence for summer learning is equally compelling. When students actively participate in summer programs, and particularly when they are encouraged to participate by their families, they stand to improve their reading and math levels going into the next grade, as well as their standardized test scores.⁴ In addition, academically focused summer programs help students successfully transition into the next grade level, a benefit attributable to smaller class size, individualized learning, and personal attention by teachers, all of which might not be available to students during the academic year.⁵

Several national, state, and local studies of afterschool and summer programs confirm these findings:

The two-year longitudinal *Study of Promising After-School Programs* examined the effects of participation in quality afterschool programs among 3,000 elementary and middle school students in afterschool programs located in 14 cities and eight states. Results from that study indicate that the students who participated in quality afterschool programs, alone or in combination with other structured afterschool opportunities, demonstrated significant gains in standardized math test scores, compared to their peers who were regularly unsupervised after school. Further, regular participation in afterschool programs was associated with improvements in work habits and task persistence.⁶

The *Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study*, which collected data on over 4000 children and youth attending 78 afterschool programs across the state, found that well-organized activities with clear routines can promote both staff and youth engagement and thereby facilitate high-quality learning opportunities, which in turn can lead to positive youth outcomes.⁷

The *Transition to Success Pilot Project* (TSPP) in Boston coordinated afterschool services with intensive academic tutoring and a range of family and support services. Its quasi-experimental evaluation revealed that participation resulted in improved grades in reading and reduced absences from school. Further, three-quarters of parents of TSPP students declared that the program helped them connect with their child's teachers and that their involvement in their child's school increased because of their child's involvement in this afterschool program.⁸

Evaluations of *Citizen Schools*, which provides hands-on apprenticeships, academic skill-building, leadership skills development, and homework help, found that participants outperformed comparable non-participants on many measures of academic success, such as selecting higher-

quality high schools, school attendance, promotion rates, lower suspension rates, and some measures of grades and test scores.⁹

A random assignment evaluation of *BELL's (Building Educated Leaders for Life)* 1,000 elementary school students who attended the summer programs in Boston and New York in 2005 found that the intervention helped students gain a month's worth of reading skills compared to the control group.¹⁰

A key message from many of the studies of afterschool and summer programs and initiatives is that such programs support student success when they afford children and youth opportunities to learn and practice new skills through hands-on, experiential learning in project-based afterschool programs, which complement, but do not replicate, in-school learning. Extra time for academics alone may be necessary but may not be sufficient to improve academic outcomes. Balancing academic support with a variety of engaging, fun, and structured extracurricular or co-curricular activities that promote youth development in a variety of real-world contexts appears to support and improve academic performance.

Expanded Learning Partnerships Benefit Students and Families, Schools, and Community Partners

Evidence is mounting that sustained participation in a quality ELO programs that have strong connections to schools and to families yields the greatest gains for program participants.¹¹ In addition to better supporting student success as described above, ELO partnerships can serve to strengthen, support, and even transform individual partners, resulting in improved program quality, more efficient use of resources, and better alignment of goals and curricula among partners. Effective partnerships are those in which each partner experiences the value-added of working with the other entity.¹²

Strong school–afterschool/summer partnerships **benefit students and families** in important ways beyond the academic support described above:

- Provide continuity of services across the day and year, easing school transitions
- Facilitate access to a range of learning opportunities and developmental supports
- Facilitate information-sharing about specific students to best support individual learning
- Provide family members with alternative entry points into the school day to support their student's learning

The *Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study* found that afterschool programs with stronger relationships with school teachers and principals were more successful at improving students' homework completion, homework effort, positive behavior, and initiative. This may be because positive relationships with schools can foster high-quality, engaging, and challenging activities, and also promote staff engagement (Intercultural Center for Research in Education et al., 2005).

Partnerships with afterschool and summer learning **can help schools**:

- Provide a wider range of services and activities, particularly enrichment and arts activities, that are not available during the school day
- Support transitions across the school years, particularly from middle to high school
- Reinforce concepts taught in school
- Improve school culture and community image through exhibitions and performances
- Gain access to mentors and afterschool staff to support in-school learning

Partnerships with schools **can help afterschool and summer programs:**

- Gain access to and recruit groups of students most in need of support services
- Improve program quality and staff engagement
- Foster better alignment of programming to support a shared vision for learning
- Maximize resource use such as facilities, staff, data, and curriculum

The Promise of Expanded Learning Opportunities for Education Reform

The research warrant for afterschool and summer learning programs is clear: Children and youth who participate in well-implemented programs and activities outside of school are poised to stay enrolled longer and perform better in school than their peers who do not attend such programs. Further, emerging research indicates that when schools and afterschool programs partner to support student success, all parties stand to benefit. The time is ripe to move afterschool and summer learning programs into the mainstream of education reform efforts, implementing and testing a variety of expanded learning opportunity models aimed at forging new and sustainable partnerships with schools in support of learning. However, doing so requires states to embrace a range of ELO approaches that are designed to best meet the needs of students, families, and communities. Key factors to consider when adopting an ELO approach are as follows:

Participation in ELO is in part predicated on the choices families and young people make about how to use their time.

- How can choice be built into ELO options to ensure that programs are responsive to the needs of working families and youth participants alike?
- Will participation be voluntary or mandatory?
- How can ELO ensure that older youth have the opportunities for choice which research indicates are requisite to sustained participation and engagement?

Quality afterschool and summer environments foster inquiry, critical thinking, and engagement in learning, and these features can support a range of positive academic and developmental outcomes. As such, they are uniquely poised to support in-school learning and development without replicating the school day.

- How can the research-based practices known to be effective in afterschool programs be adopted more broadly within and across ELO models and approaches?
- Are there elements of quality environments that all ELO partners should implement?

With scarce resources, many providers are competing to develop ELO partnerships with schools as a sustainability strategy.

- How do schools choose the “right” partners?
- How many partners are necessary to provide a full range of learning supports?

In ELO partnerships there is shared accountability for learning outcomes.

- How can an accountability structure be developed that considers the contributions of all ELO partners?
- Are there outcomes that all partners can agree to work toward?

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- ¹ Adapted from Weiss, H., Little, P., Bouffard, S., Deschenes, S., & Malone, H. (2008). *The federal role in out-of-school learning: After-school, summer learning, and family involvement as critical learning supports*. Paper commissioned by the Center on Education Policy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.
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- ¹² Harvard Family Research Project. (in press). *Partnerships for learning*. Cambridge, MA: Author.

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About HFRP

Harvard Family Research Project researches, develops, and evaluates strategies to promote the well being of children, youth, families, and their communities. We work primarily within three areas that support children's learning and development: early childhood education, out-of-school time programming, and family and community support in education. Underpinning all of our work is a commitment to evaluation for strategic organizational decision making, learning, and accountability. Building on our knowledge that schools cannot do it alone, we also focus national attention on complementary learning. Complementary learning is the idea that a systemic approach, which integrates school and nonschool supports, can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed. To learn more about how HFRP can support your work with children and families, visit our website at www.hfrp.org.

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