

Using Expanded Learning Opportunities to Manage Key Transitions for At-Risk Youth

Introduction

The American Youth Policy Forum hosted a discussion group to explore how Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELOs) are being used to manage key transition periods for at-risk youth. As attention has recently been drawn to thinking outside the box regarding how and where students learn, AYPF believes it is important to see how community based organizations (CBOs) are playing key roles to fill voids left behind by traditional public schools. The need is obvious: studies show that students who are ill-prepared for high school and fail a core class during their ninth grade year are more likely to drop out of high school (Allensworth and Easton, 2005). Additionally, students whose parents did not attend college are less likely to matriculate or graduate from college (Chen and Carroll, 2005). Throughout the country more community based organizations are recognizing gaps such as these that public schools have been unable to fill and are attempting to fill these gaps. AYPF invited two programs doing an exemplary job working with at-risk youth to manage key transitions to share their lessons and asked policy experts in the afterschool field about the implications for this work, with an eye toward the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Leaders from College Bound in St. Louis, MO, Open Meadows Alternative Schools – Step Up in Portland, OR, The After-School Corporation (TASC) in New York City, and the Afterschool Alliance in Washington, DC, presented to the group.

Step Up

Hanif Fazal, Program Director, Step Up – Open Meadow Alternative Schools

Open Meadow Alternative Schools aim to re-engage disconnected youth in the Portland, Oregon, area. Founded in 1971, Open Meadow operates small programs in middle and high schools that provide academic and support services to students at risk of dropping out. All Open Meadow students work toward high school graduation, and the program offers transition services to guide its graduates from high school to college and career. Open Meadow served more than 700 students throughout its array of programs during the 2007-2008 school year.

In 2003, Open Meadow developed a partnership, called Step Up, with Roosevelt High School in Portland to provide youth previously identified as at-risk with summer and after-school academic and support services to help them make the transition from middle to high school. The Step Up program now serves 230 ninth grade and 64 tenth grade students in seven different high schools spread across two school districts.

Step Up students are identified primarily through three eighth grade early warning indicators: Students who received a 'low' or 'very low' on two of three statewide assessments, students with 16 or more school absences, and students with poor academic performance in core eighth grade subject areas. Students can also be referred to Step Up if they have significant school behavior issues or if they have multiple social or familial risk factors. In 2009-2010, 71%

of Step Up's students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, and 65% were students of color.

Students are identified and enrolled in Step Up during the spring semester of their eighth grade year, and meetings are held with the students' parents to create engagement and partnerships with families. Students then attend a rigorous summer leadership academy that emphasizes a recommitment to education, building relationships, and addressing barriers that inhibit school success. During the school year, students receive extended day services that include school-aligned tutoring, social and emotional support, behavior interventions, and continued family outreach. Step Up also runs its own district certified summer school to assist students with credit retrieval and credit attainment. All schools that serve as Step Up sites have a full-time coordinator and a full-time counselor on site. The day to day programming is led by advocates who work 15-20 hours a week and manage up to 10 students.

Step Up's program has had a positive effect on student outcomes. Step Up students have higher attendance rates than their grade-level cohorts, higher GPAs than their grade-level cohorts at six of seven sites, and a 14% higher GPA than their grade-level cohort as a whole. In addition, 70% of Step Up students earned all required grade level core credits, and 98% of students were still enrolled at the end of the 2008-2009 school year.

The total operating budget for Step Up is \$1.5 million, and the program spends \$4,500 per student. Funding sources include Portland Public Schools, city funding through the Children's Levy, Supplemental Education Services, 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) Grants, Gear Up, and private support. In an effort to reduce the cost per student, Step Up is exploring partnering with universities to have students in schools of education serve as advocates.

Looking forward, Step Up has focused on several areas for future development. They are looking to expand their services throughout a student's high school career and are piloting an 11th and 12th grade model. They are also working to develop a both a reading and a writing curriculum that they believe will further bolster their students' academic success. Finally, after recently expanding to a second district, Step Up has begun to look at other states where they could take their program to scale.

College Bound

Lisa Orden Zarin, Executive Director

Laura Sakiyama, Director of College Access

Laurie Bainter, Director of Student Persistence

College Bound, which is not a satellite of the larger College Bound network, began operating in May of 2006 with a goal of increasing college access and success for underprivileged students in St. Louis, Missouri. Its comprehensive approach, beginning in ninth grade, includes six programs that guide students from early high school through college matriculation and graduation. The first of the series is Get Your Prep On, an outreach program

that uses quarterly student workshops, parent information sessions, and hotline and web support to provide students with information on how to plan, prepare, pursue, and pay for a college education.

From the 10th through 12th grade years, College Bound students participate in three complementary programs designed to prepare them for college access and matriculation. Admission Accomplished is an access program using weekly meetings, application assistance, college tours, and college counseling to help students find their best fit with a postsecondary institution. Making the Grade is College Bound's academic enrichment program that provides weekly tutoring, summer academic programs, spring break intensives, and weekend workshops to provide students with the skills they need to succeed upon arriving at college. Culture, Character, Capacity is a wraparound program exposing students to cultural events, financial and social services, and community service through leadership forums, stipends, referrals to partner agencies, and community service opportunities.

As students move toward high school graduation and college enrollment, they transition to College Bound's Complete U persistence program that provides transition workshops, financial aid advising, coaching, and case management beginning in the second semester of a student's senior year of high school and continuing through college graduation. Finally, College Bound's Family Program works with families to assist them in their ability to actively support their child in the college access, enrollment, and completion processes through workshops, access to social events, social service referrals, and 24/7 access to staff.

The initial results of College Bound's comprehensive program are promising: Every student in the program has graduated from high school and matriculated to college, and 94% of the students re-enrolled for their sophomore year. They accomplish this while working with a student population that traditionally struggles with high school graduation, college matriculation, and college completion. More than 90% of College Bound's students are first generation college students, and 80% are eligible for free or reduce priced lunch. Additionally, College Bound students attend schools where 80% score below grade level proficiency in mathematics.

A problem area for College Bound that emerged during the discussion was its students' struggles with math upon entering college. Only four College Bound students out of 35 were able to pass a non-remedial math course with a C- or higher. This struggle, however, emerged as a highlight of organizational flexibility: College Bound now recommends its students delay taking a math class until the second semester of their freshman year, thereby using the first semester to adapt to the rigor and culture shift of a college environment.

Additionally, after looking back at student records and seeing their students had all received strong high school grades in math, College Bound has altered their academic tutoring program to build in more math instruction. Finally, they have had discussions with their partner schools to share their students' results in an effort to beef up the curriculum to more adequately prepare students for college level instruction.

One key component to College Bound's model that allows them both to collect data and to closely monitor school performance is a requirement that the parents/guardians of all students

in the program sign a Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) waiver allowing College Bound to access student information once they enroll in college. Thus far, every waiver signed has been accepted by universities to which College Bound students matriculated, allowing the program to keep track of its students.

How Afterschool Policy Can Support Expanded Learning Opportunities

Lucy Friedman from The After-School Corporation in New York City identified one challenge in building comprehensive afterschool systems is getting policymakers to accept expanded learning, extended learning, and summer learning as a basic part of a student's education. She drew a parallel to kindergarten, an institution she said is only 60-70 years old in the United States but is now viewed as an element of school and not a separate entity.

Friedman identified several policy issues that can lead to a lack of coordination between afterschool and school. For one, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) makes principals narrowly focused on testing, which can lead some principals to see the enrichments provided by afterschool programs as valuable but nonessential. Additionally, principals receive little training on how to work with community organizations and incorporate them into schools. Friedman also said Title I funds known as Supplemental Educational Services (SES) funds, intended to be used by parents of students in persistently failing schools to access additional tutoring and support, are not being used well in most schools. Parents lack the ability and agility to make proper use of these funds, and as a result students often do not receive services, or they receive more of the same from the struggling school they attend. In New York City, Friedman said there is also a local government impediment to coordination: two separate inspections are needed for schools and afterschool programs, even when these programs take place at a school that has passed inspection.

Erik Peterson from the Afterschool Alliance addressed the policy perspective of afterschool on a national level. He emphasized the need for collaboration, communication, and coordination among schools, CBOs, and stakeholders. Peterson mentioned that while there are excellent examples of 21st CCLCs aligning with school day curriculum, opportunities exist to improve the coordination between afterschool and the school day, as well as strengthen summer learning connections. One area he noted that could benefit from coordination is experiential, project-based learning provided by both CBOs and schools that enhances what is taught in the classroom.

Peterson also stressed the need for better data systems that could be used to facilitate many needs for afterschool programs. He suggested software or an online system so afterschool facilitators can have access to what occurred with students during the school day (and vice versa), emphasized the importance of data to track and influence the effect of afterschool programs, and using data to unearth evidence of how students perform in college in order to influence K through 12 learning. Peterson also stressed the importance of sharing information and records with afterschool personnel and mentioned that coordination is typically successful

when there is an on-site coordinator who can manage the communication between the school and afterschool leaders. New York City, for instance, dedicated \$70 million five years ago, later increased to \$121 million annually to adopt the TASC model that has CBOs run afterschool programs led by full-time coordinators at every site.

Policy Implications

Following the presentations from the programs, hearing from policy experts, and engaging in a discussion with meeting participants, AYPF recognizes several key components that are necessary in order for students to receive the maximum value of the variety of services provided by afterschool programs, especially those that manage key transitions:

School leadership

Both College Bound and Step Up emphasized their relationships with the schools in which they operate and the principals of those schools. Both programs, and many others similar to them, occur at the schools themselves, giving their students unfettered access to them and giving the programs' staff access to school resources, teachers, and administrators. Such an involvement in the school community requires the commitment and buy-in of the school's leader. In New York City, TASC is focusing on principal capacity as part of its Expanded Learning Time/New York City, an initiative in which schools partner with CBOs to expand the learning day. School and CBO staff work together to maximize their effectiveness under the leadership of an empowered principal.

Accountability

As afterschool programs continue to grow in size and quantity, it is critical that these programs, particularly ones that offer academic assistance to students, be held accountable to standards by their partner schools and districts. Step Up's contract with their partner districts includes standards and target outcomes, and they meet with the deputy superintendent at the end of each semester to report their results. Additionally, the staff at each school site presents to the school's teachers and principals at the end of their school year (the end of the summer) on their accomplishments. Both Step Up and College Bound build in parent involvement and interaction as core values. They both involve parents in their programs and report to parents on student progress, thus creating accountability at the most basic level as well.

Cross system collaboration

One theme that often emerges from discussions on afterschool is the need for collaboration across systems. Too often the term 'silos' is used to describe the various entities

and institutions that all work to support children but rarely work together to do so. It is not unusual for one student to simultaneously attend school, attend an afterschool program, hold a part-time job, and receive other social services such as foster care, food stamps, or public housing. And yet, it is common that none of these programs, organizations, or services will share information about this student with each other in order to build a comprehensive support structure.

Step Up attempts to break down some of these barriers by providing its own on-site counselor who can provide or refer the student to wraparound services. The program also has a relationship with its district that allows it to access Snapgrades, a low cost online service that allows Step Up staff to see what the students are doing during the school day. Finally, Step Up students who complete high school can be funneled into Open Meadow's career services and or receive postsecondary education support as they seek a degree.

College Bound offers a similar support structure to its students with its Culture, Character, and Capacity program. Through this initiative, students are able to receive wraparound services through referrals to partner agencies, assistance with financial aid planning and applications, and stipends to minimize the need for overbearing work schedules that could conflict with school and college planning. Additionally, College Bound's ability to secure FERPA waivers from the families of each student allows the program to successfully monitor and work with its students once they have matriculated to a college or university, a barrier that often stands in the way of similar organizations fully supporting students after high school graduation.

Professional development

Just as many policymakers recognize that providing a quality education to underprivileged students requires rigorous instruction from a qualified teacher, it is similarly important for afterschool programs to employ staffers who receive ongoing professional development. Step Up's site coordinators and advocates participate in weeks of training during the summer and work with their school sites to participate in, and sometimes lead, the school's professional development. Both Step Up and College Bound rely heavily on student data to analyze their practice and provide for better design and instruction. It is often difficult, however, for ELOs to access money for professional development, an obstacle that Hanif Fazal of Step Up highlighted during the discussion.

Culture of afterschool vs. school

While afterschool continues to receive more attention and money, there still exists a fundamental divide in the minds of many policymakers between school and afterschool. AYPF believes that expanded learning opportunities, at their best, blur the lines between school and afterschool, allowing students to learn in a 24/7 environment, and take advantage of any number of available resources. The barriers that continue to exist between these entities and institutions must be broken down and the 'silo' approach discontinued. Both programs participating in this discussion

provided excellent examples of organizations that are able to blend their services with the traditional school day, providing greater and more seamless access for their students. Additionally, the tracking of student performance, relationships built with families, collaboration with outside organizations and schools, and ability to provide wraparound services creates an environment in which a student can access any number of needs without being bounced around and caught up in bureaucratic entanglement. More efforts should be made to recognize the comprehensive environment in which students learn, with less attention paid to the formal division among the providers.

For more information about the programs and organizations mentioned in this report, please visit their websites:

[The After-School Corporation \(TASC\)](#)

[Afterschool Alliance](#)

[College Bound](#)

[Step Up – Open Meadow Alternative Schools](#)

Cited Sources:

Allensworth, E., & Easton, J. Q. (2005). *The On-track indicator as a predictor of high school graduation*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Carroll, C.D., & Chen X. (2005). *First-Generation Students in Postsecondary Education: A Look at Their College Transcripts*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.