

Policy Perspectives in Expanded Learning: Lessons Learned at the Local Level and Implications for Federal Policy

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Momentum is growing across the country to use expanded learning opportunities as an important strategy to support student success. Expanded learning organizations are increasingly seen as key players alongside the traditional K-12 system to help students develop the knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors needed for success. As communities across the country continue to embrace collaborative efforts to support students' holistic development, state and federal policy can play a key role in supporting such efforts.

This forum, co-sponsored by the American Youth Policy Forum and the Collaborative for Building After-School Systemsⁱ, highlighted policy issues informed by best practices at the local level related to the 1) value of intermediary organizations, 2) quality and accountability, and 3) school and community partnerships as these three areas are critical for influencing expanded learning and driving school change and youth outcomes.

Jennifer Peck, Executive Director, Partnership for Children and Youth

The Partnership for Children and Youth (PCY), a California-based intermediary organization, works to increase the quality and availability of community-school partnerships that ensure low-income students have the greatest chance for school success. Peck also works closely with the Collaborative for Building After-School Systems (CBASS), which is a coalition of organizations representing cities and regions around the county to expand the availability of high quality expanded learning opportunities that help children lead successful lives. PCY and CBASS say that expanded learning refers to a wide range of programs that promote learning and development of youth beyond the regular school days and hours. Peck said the specific approach to expanded learning is less important than providing students with opportunities critical to their learning and development.

The Partnership for Children and Youth is leading California's Summer Matters campaign as one approach to expanded learning. The comprehensive Summer Matters campaign is headed by a statewide coalition chaired by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson and aims to expand and improve summer learning for all students in California. The campaign, which builds on the state's after-school programming, is developing and advocating for state and local policy makers to increase public funding for summer programming. In addition, the campaign is piloting innovative summer programming and technical assistance to serve as high-quality models for future replication. In 2012 these programs reached more than 6,000 students in 12 communities, and an independent evaluation of the programming found significant increases in grade-level vocabulary amongst participating students, including English Language Learners.

Peck outlined the components of effective expanded learning systems and implications for policy. First, partnerships between schools and non-profit agencies are key and should be a component of any school improvement or turnaround strategy.

Second, it is important to ensure quality in programming, and this requires local discretion and flexibility and adequate funding allocations for training and technical assistance. Third, effective expanded learning systems must institute outcome measures that incentivize programs to collect data on academic and 21st Century skills, and data sharing between school and community partnerships is very important to on-going assessment and program improvement. Finally, intermediaries can support program quality, accountability, and sustainability by supporting systems-building.

Laura Hansen, Director of Information Management and Decision Support, Metro Nashville Public Schools, discussed how information sharing is driving a move toward collective impact in Nashville. Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) is the 42nd largest school district in the United States, with over 80,000 students in nearly 160 schools. Community partners are key to MNPS's strategy in working with struggling students. Nashville has a K-12 data warehouse in place and is working to grow that into a P-20 system.

Hansen discussed the components of a collective impact approach, outlining five conditions of collective success: collective agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, mutually reinforcing activities, and intermediary organizations. Hansen said that Metro Nashville Public Schools knows it cannot provide on its own the quality wrap-around services needed by its students. These services, which Nashville considers "insulation in the pipeline to help keep students from dropping through the cracks," are provided, in part, by community-based organizations. With a collective impact approach, there is a sense of ownership by all to work together to ensure students are getting the services and supports needed to succeed. In working together toward shared goals, the community is seeking to avoid programming silos, which often result in random acts of intervention and without a focus on ultimate impact. Nashville sees that information sharing and collaboration are the first step in breaking down silos and MNPS has worked to both share data with expanded learning providers and collect information from them to inform their work within the district.

Nashville After Zone Alliance (NAZA) is a network of established afterschool providers working in partnership with the MNPS. Data sharing and conversations have strengthened the partnerships and the programming itself, helping to streamline student recruiting and placement across organizations and to target the most at-risk students. Hansen said it is now possible to see where students in need of particular types of programming live within the city for decisions about program location. Similarly, MNPS is in partnership with the federally-funded Nashville Promise Neighborhood (NPN). Like NAZA, the NPN is taking a collective impact approach and sharing data across multiple agencies.

Hansen noted some challenges to local data sharing in Nashville, including concerns that data will be used to eliminate programs, fears about violating student privacy, and lack of

funding for data collection and analytics. However, with a collaborative culture and a focus on continuous improvement, she argued, these challenges can be overcome.

Christina Russell, Managing Director, Policy Studies Associates, provided a research perspective on the components of a high quality expanded learning program and the role of school and community partnerships in expanded learning models.

There is evidence expanded learning models can contribute to improved student outcomes. Expanded learning models provide opportunities for students to have enriched learning experiences that can fill in gaps or complement learning that takes place during the school day. In addition, program participation is associated with increased levels of school attendance, especially for older youth. Finally, there appears to be lasting academic benefits as students move through school, including increased academic motivation and increased success in the transition to high school. Effective community partnerships occur when there is strategic communication and alignment with the school day to support student needs, a shared vision between school and community partners, regular communication between partners, an explicit focus on building youth skills, and shared expectations for student participation.

Impact is most evident in models with structures that promote high levels of dosage, quality, and intentionality. Evaluations have found that in programs run by community partners, impact is strongest for students who attend on a regular basis and over multiple years. Similarly, evaluations have found positive correlations between the practices of community partners and student outcomes. Programs offering enriching learning experiences, highly credentialed educational staff, and well-planned lessons appear to have a greater positive impact on students, even more with longer program participation. Finally, intentionality of programming (e.g., having an explicit focus on career exposure or college preparation) is correlated with student success on related outcomes (such as persistence through high school).

Intermediaries are able to use research and data on expanded learning opportunities to develop quality standards and tools (e.g., data systems, self-assessment tools), promote continuous quality improvement (e.g., offering professional development), and leverage resources (e.g., data sharing, funding), said Russell.

Question and Answer Period:

What kind of policies can support the work you are doing in your communities? What policies have hindered your local level work?

Peck discussed partnerships as a key element in programming supporting expanded learning. Partnership for Children and Youth has a strong belief based on experiences around the country that partnerships are key to their success and should be required. Many of the schools PCY works with cannot provide the range of supports needed by young people. Also, Peck said that sometimes it is important to allow entities outside of

Local Education Agencies to be the fiscal agents for expanded learning opportunities because some school districts lack the capacity to apply for this type of programming. In addition, it would be useful to have more guidance to states from the federal level regarding programs like 21st Century Community Learning Centers about what are appropriate measures of success for these programs.

Hansen pointed out that a lot of rules for how funding sources can be used reinforce silos. In addition, sometimes the capacity that is built should be shared across youth-serving organizations; yet this is not always allowable. Other times separate grants create inefficiencies. Finally, it would be wonderful to see some federal focus on internet connectivity for out-of-school time programs in addition to in-school contexts.

What is the role of intermediaries in ensuring quality programming?

Peck said CBASS organizations provide a range of training and technical assistance, to meet a continuum of needs among providers. Intermediaries also led local efforts to develop quality standards, assessment tools and customized support to promote continuous improvement. Intermediaries can also provide assistance for networks of providers.

The concept of continuous improvement is pervasive in Nashville around professional learning, said Hansen. The Nashville After Zone Alliance has put together a youth worker certification program. As a school district, MNPS has partnered with NAZA to develop trainings on project-based learning that are available to youth workers.

What advice do you have for other communities wanting to work with states to develop a program for expanded learning opportunities?

An organized advocacy community has meant good relationships with leaders in California, responded Peck, and advocates have approached policymakers with very specific proposed solutions to problems the state faces. The Partnership for Children and Youth and other advocates have presented themselves as partners in the hard work that needs to be done to reach goals.

The Collaborative for Building After-School Systems (CBASS) (hyperlink to www.afterschoolsystems.org) is a coalition of leading after-school intermediary organizations representing cities and regions across the county. CBASS works to expand the availability of high-quality learning opportunities, including after-school and summer, that help children gain the skills, knowledge and experiences they need to lead successful lives. CBASS does this by helping cities and regions employ coordinated approaches to increase the scale, quality and accountability of programs, and to leverage the combined power of community organizations and schools to create integrated, effective, and inspired learning systems for our children and youth.

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