

Integrating Expanded Learning and School Reform Initiatives: Challenges and Strategies



A POLICY BRIEF from Learning Point Associates and The Collaborative for Building After-School Systems

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“Engaging students in afterschool activities is a critically important strategic part in improving a school’s performance, and in helping schools that have historically struggled go to the next level.”

—*U.S Secretary of Education*
Arne Duncan, January 12, 2009

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Introduction

Despite considerable investments in school reform initiatives over the past 30 years, the daunting number of schools that are failing to meet their annual achievement targets continues to increase. For this reason, expanded learning programs need to be given more attention as a core element of school-based reform strategies.

Research suggests that students strongly benefit when they are provided substantially more time to engage in academic enrichment and youth development opportunities, both within and outside the school building. Well-designed expanded learning programs can have a positive impact on student achievement, attendance and graduation rates, and other desirable student outcomes—but they are not often incorporated as a key element in school improvement plans. Priscilla Little, associate director of the Harvard Family Research Project, notes that the primary and underlying obstacle to greater implementation of expanded learning as a school reform strategy is that “too often, these supports continue to be seen as ‘add-ons,’ not integral to in-school education efforts,”¹ even though a decade of investments in afterschool and summer programs has built a strong evidence base about the academic and developmental benefits of afterschool programs.

To address this issue, Learning Point Associates and the Collaborative for Building After-School Systems (CBASS) launched an initiative to strengthen collaboration between school-focused reform efforts and those that seek similar outcomes but instead employ student-focused interventions, two examples of which are extending the time and expanding the opportunities to learn. Since this initiative began in early 2009, the federal policy landscape has dramatically shifted, coupling a growing recognition that more and better use of time is essential for preparing youth for success with an unprecedented concentration of resources—particularly the substantial funding available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA)—specifically targeted to turning around low-performing schools. Some 30,000 schools had not made adequate academic progress under the accountability provisions of the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Although many of them are beginning to offer tutoring and perhaps afterschool programming, nevertheless few have adopted more broadly expanded learning opportunities as a key component of their turnaround strategy.

¹ Stonehill, R., Little, P. M., Ross, S. M., Neergaard, L., Lynn Harrison, L., Ford, J., et al. (2009). *Enhancing School Reform Through Expanded Learning*. Naperville, IL: Learning Point Associates (p. 9).

Background

On January 12, 2009, Learning Point Associates and CBASS convened a national meeting to promote a shared vision of expanded learning time as a strategy to improve student success. This event comprised a National Press Club briefing and an invitation-only working-group session. The National Press Club briefing brought together Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (via video), Thomas Brady, superintendent of the Providence (Rhode Island) Public Schools, Greg Darnieder, formerly the director of Postsecondary Education for the Chicago Public Schools and now the Secretary of Education's senior adviser for college access, An-Me Chung, senior program officer at the C. S. Mott Foundation, and other leaders in the education, afterschool, and philanthropic community to release and discuss the report *Enhancing School Reform Through Expanded Learning*. Through a review of research and evaluation findings, development of case studies, identification of effective strategies, and an analysis of funding streams, *Enhancing School Reform Through Expanded Learning* makes an evidence-based case for two important points:

- Expanded learning can be an effective strategy to promote student performance and turn around low-performing schools
- Resources are available to implement expanded learning opportunities as core components of school reform plans

After the National Press Club event, proponents of expanded learning opportunities and school reform leaders came together to discuss their experiences and ideas for a more consistent and deliberate integration of expanded learning within district and school reform plans and initiatives. The discussion was structured around three guiding questions:

- Why have schools, districts, and education reformers not fully embraced expanded learning opportunities as an effective and affordable strategy?
- What are the barriers to incorporating expanded learning into school reform?
- What leverage points, incentives, opportunities, tools, and resources can ensure that states, districts, and schools are able to take full advantage of expanded learning as a core strategy in their school improvement efforts?

Building upon initial recommendations offered in that discussion, Learning Point Associates and CBASS have continued—through extensive public engagement with education and youth development leaders—to probe the challenges and learn about effective local strategies in the expanded learning area. From our ongoing conversations with educators, policymakers, funders, and afterschool leaders, we have identified key strategies that can address the most significant challenges to a broader adoption of expanded learning strategies in school reform efforts.

This policy brief synthesizes these ongoing discussions and observations as six recommendations to extend the integration of high-quality, expanded learning opportunities in state, district, and school reform initiatives:

1. Promote a unified vision of expanded learning that includes core elements, appropriate outcomes, and reasonable impact indicators.
2. Implement a broad research agenda in expanded learning and its connections to school reform.
3. Encourage strategic use of existing funds for expanded learning.
4. Improve staff quality and career opportunities.
5. Support intermediaries that promote high-quality expanded learning opportunities.
6. Create, validate, and disseminate integrated design models.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Promote a unified vision of expanded learning that includes core elements, appropriate outcomes, and reasonable impact indicators.

Many district and school administrators lack information about the value of expanded learning and the role that it can play in improving outcomes for children and youth. The current emphasis on accountability for results, represented by the need to demonstrate student proficiency on state assessments, has limited school administrators in considering expanded learning within the structure of school improvement planning. At present, the reforms that underperforming schools tend to undertake are mostly focused on changing the way the regular instructional program is delivered. These changes include, for example, implementation of new instructional programs in reading or mathematics, enhanced teacher training and support, and test preparation activities.

Administrators may not realize that expanded learning can support the realization of education goals and provide students with opportunities to develop and refine their skills, including those required for participating in a skilled 21st century workforce. Sometimes providing expanded learning is perceived as an administrative and financial burden not linked to substantial outcomes. The development of a strategy for effective communication and ongoing outreach to the K–12 community will improve the probability that expanded learning will come to be seen as a critical component of effective school reform efforts.

Education leaders, including technical assistance providers and developers of school reform approaches, are just beginning to understand what expanded learning is, how it offers opportunities that engage students in new ways different from traditional afterschool and extended day or power hour programs, and what the range is of potential academic and social benefits from participating in a high-quality program. Educators as well as afterschool and youth development leaders are starting to understand that expanded learning does not mean an extended school day with more of the same delivery of content and instructional methods. Rather, expanded learning can provide all students with opportunities for academic enrichment and time to enjoy sports and develop other interests with peers in a safe, supervised environment, not necessarily within the school or with the school's regular day teachers.

A strategic campaign to engage and educate school administrators at all levels—and organizations that provide school reform services as well (e.g., intermediate education agencies, university-based reform leaders, regional educational laboratories, and comprehensive assistance centers)—can be effective in broadening the strategies in school reform models. Goals of the campaign would include the following four:

- Promoting a clear message that expanded learning does not stop at remediation or traditional academic instruction and includes the best elements of afterschool and school—for example, inquiry-based learning
- Developing a set of core elements, attainable outcomes, and impact indicators for high-quality expanded learning models
- Ensuring that a new reauthorization of ESEA will provide incentives for districts and schools to implement high-quality expanded learning strategies
- Raising awareness of the potential of expanded learning partnerships through a national clearinghouse

Recommendation 2:

Implement a broad research agenda in expanded learning and its connections to school reform.

Expanded learning would benefit greatly from a longitudinal study showing its benefits, as the Perry Preschool Study published nearly three decades ago gained enormous support for early childhood education. In the absence of major, compelling studies that demonstrate program benefits, it remains difficult to persuade school administrators that an investment in expanded learning can produce a substantial return on investment in the form of increased student achievement.

Although encouraging evidence for the positive effects of expanded learning for students continues to accumulate, further research and evaluation studies would both strengthen the case and expand our knowledge of effective practice. We also a need to identify key components of high-quality expanded learning and their direct relationship to student outcomes, measured by a broad set of indicators; on this score, the recent *Practice Guide* released by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, *Structuring Out-of-School Time to Improve Academic Achievement*,² is a positive first step.

In the short term, to ensure expanded learning incorporates the best elements of enriching, high-quality afterschool programs, supporters can take the lead in developing a common language in their quality standards and define a range of reasonable, attainable, and meaningful near-term and long-term student outcomes and indicators to measure progress. Although some outcomes can be tracked with existing school measures (e.g., attendance, course grades, high school graduation rates, grade promotion rates, test scores, reductions in disciplinary actions), the measurement of other variables (e.g., avoidance of risky behavior or criminal incidence, better overall health and nutrition, employment and salary, 21st century skills) will require work.

In addition to expanding research knowledge on expanded learning, serious effort is needed to ensure two-way data sharing between school systems and afterschool providers in the collection and sharing of data on student participation and satisfaction. Technology-based systems will drive continuous improvement and will yield data that can be used in research studies. Again, the availability of substantial ARRA funds and the specific priority for using them to develop longitudinal data systems can offer critical support.

Recommendation 3:

Encourage strategic use of existing funds for expanded learning.

Although incorporating expanded learning opportunities into a school reform plan requires additional funds, many communities already have substantial resources—federal, state, and local—that can be reallocated for this purpose. Throughout the nation, many communities are working to merge separate funding streams to create sustainable systems of support, but despite some success stories, several have encountered difficulty channeling funding streams together to support expanded learning programs, often because of rigid eligibility and reporting requirements.

² Beckett, M., Borman, G., Capizzano, J., Parsley, D., Ross, S., Schirm, A., et al. (2009). *Structuring Out-of-School Time to Improve Academic Achievement*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

The afterschool and education communities should partner with the federal government, particularly the U.S. Department of Education (ED), and the foundation community to expand support for knowledge development, innovation, and dissemination in the field of expanded learning. Examples of ED and foundation support can include the following activities:

- Establishing priorities or incentives under the 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) program to ensure that funds are used to create innovative expanded learning opportunities in high-need schools and communities
- Establishing research, evaluation, and innovation funding opportunities—through ED’s Institute of Education Sciences, the Office of Program Evaluation and Policy Development, the Office of Innovation and Improvement, or the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education—to scale up and validate expanded learning models
- Establishing demonstration sites that engage the best practitioners in the field in ongoing development and validation while providing professional development support for colleagues in earlier stages of design and implementation
- Supporting expansion of the community schools model to enable other localities to provide more comprehensive services and learning experiences for their students
- Exploring ways to better coordinate funding streams at the national level (e.g., 21st CCLC, Child Care Development Block Grant, TANF, Supplemental Education Services, Title I, School Improvement Funds, ARRA funds) to coherently support substantial and sustainable investments in expanded learning

Recommendation 4:

Improve staff quality and career opportunities.

High-quality expanded learning programs need to be staffed appropriately. We should be able to develop creative ways of attracting talented people into the field and of designing ongoing professional development that improves the skills of staff working in expanded learning programs. Organizations such as the Center for After-School Excellence of The After-School Corporation, The After-School Institute, the National AfterSchool Association, and the National Institute for Out-of-School Time have developed strong training and even accreditation programs for afterschool workers. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done in strategizing the way differentiated staffing—engaging school-day teachers, retirees, volunteers, career youth workers, college students, and staff likely to change careers after a few years—can be carried out more deliberately and thoughtfully.

Some specific examples of strategies to attract and retain high-quality staff follow:

- Creating a coherent professional development approach that provides opportunities for afterschool staff to earn college credits or professional certificates
- Forging partnerships between universities and community-based organizations to infuse college and university students into the afterschool workforce, through fieldwork placements and as volunteers and paid staff
- Incorporating youth development and afterschool practica into teacher training and professional development programs
- Utilizing national service funding streams such as AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve to attract service members and bolster the quality of programs
- Creating career pathways that enable afterschool and youth workers to deliberately progress, within three to five years, and become fully certified teachers or similarly skilled professionals

Recommendation 5:

Support intermediaries that promote high-quality expanded learning opportunities.

Far too often, school districts want to draw on community resources to provide enriching opportunities to students but lack the capacity to forge new partnerships with community-based organizations, assess program quality, train staff, and leverage resources. A great deal of planning, implementation, management flexibility, and collaboration among a diverse set of stakeholders is necessary to effectively implement high-quality expanded learning opportunities. Fortunately, the evolving work of Mass2020 in establishing the Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time (ELT) Initiative, The After-School Corporation in the development of ELT/NYC, and the involvement of the Providence After School Alliance and San Francisco School Alliance in New Day for Learning sites in Providence and San Francisco provide guiding examples of how nonprofit intermediaries can play a critical system-building role for expanded learning. This role can be similar to the critical part played by intermediaries such as LA's BEST, PlusTime NH, After School Matters (in Chicago), and many others in promoting wider availability of and higher quality in afterschool programs.

Although federal and state funds primarily are used for direct services and not to create intermediary organizations, federal and state agencies can create leverage, for example, by establishing competitive priorities that favor grants that have value-added coordination partners that can provide program design, technical assistance, management, advocacy, and evaluation support.

Recommendation 6:

Create, validate, and disseminate integrated design models.

Research and evaluation studies continue to accumulate evidence that the implementation of high-quality expanded learning opportunities can create positive behavioral and academic outcomes.³ Despite successes, we are still seeing schools and districts falter when attempting to incorporate these practices for improving student achievement. Similarly, as schools and districts develop and implement a number of turnaround strategies, it is clear that despite the substantial funds allocated to reshape schools into more effective learning environments, only some such efforts will succeed.

By synthesizing the research already available on comprehensive reform models and by providing strategies on how to implement expanded learning opportunities into these various reform designs—and by looking carefully at the charter school models that already embrace a more innovative approach to learning time—we can help schools and districts create stronger and more comprehensive programs without having to reinvent the wheel. The development and dissemination of clear and validated examples of how to integrate school improvement strategies and expanded learning opportunities into comprehensive designs for school transformation should be the ultimate goal of this initiative.

³ For two examples, see Vaden-Kiernan, M., Hughes Jones, D., Rudo, Z., Fitzgerald, R., Hartry, A., Chambers, B., et al. (2009). *The National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning randomized controlled trial studies of promising afterschool programs: Summary of findings*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Retrieved February 1, 2010, from <http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/downloads/rb/rb-issue3.pdf>; and Vandell, D., Reisner, E., & Pierce, K. (2007). *Outcomes linked to high-quality afterschool programs: Longitudinal findings from the study of promising afterschool programs*. Irvine, CA: University of California, and Washington, DC: Policy Studies Associates.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Entering 2010, we have an unprecedented opportunity to apply the lessons learned over the last 30 years of school improvement initiatives to a next-generation effort that will transform schools into community-based, networked hubs for learning and leading. The State Fiscal Stabilization grants and additional Title I, IDEA, and School Improvement funds are providing much-needed resources to face the challenge that as many as 30,000 schools have not attained their student achievement goals. These funds can enable districts not only to improve their school-focused improvement strategies but also to integrate into that work strong interventions focused directly on student needs and interests. In addition, for the next year states and districts will be participating in the Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation discretionary grant competitions. But even with the massive one-time infusion of ARRA funding, the current economic climate—with LEAs and afterschool providers battling a struggling economy to make ends meet—calls for collaboration to ensure efficiency of resources as well as innovation. Educators and community partners can collaborate to foster the broader implementation and validation of promising, evidence-based strategies, such as expanded learning, particularly within an environment in which states and districts participating in ARRA reform efforts must strategically integrate their resources to ensure that high-quality teaching and exciting learning opportunities become available to all students.

This Policy Brief was prepared by Robert Stonehill (Learning Point Associates), Jessica Donner (CBASS), Emily Morgan (CBASS), and Molly Lasagna (Learning Point Associates), with support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and The Atlantic Philanthropies. The lead authors can be contacted at robert.stonehill@learningpt.org and jdonner@tascorp.org.

Learning Point Associates (www.learningpt.org) is a nationally recognized nonprofit educational consulting organization with 25 years of experience. Learning Point Associates applies research, evaluation, and direct practice to inform policy and find solutions to the most pressing problems in education and translates ideas and data into actionable plans and meaningful improvements for education systems.

The Collaborative for Building After-School Systems (www.afterschoolsystems.org) is a partnership of intermediary organizations dedicated to increasing the availability of quality afterschool programming by building citywide systems that make afterschool part of the essential services that support children and youth. CBASS Partners include Chicago's After School Matters, Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign and The After-School Institute, the Bay Area Partnership for Children and Youth, Boston After School and Beyond, the DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation, Prime Time Palm Beach County, the Providence After School Alliance, and The After-School Corporation in New York.

Cover photograph courtesy of the Providence After School Alliance.



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