

Expanded Learning: The New Key to Increase Student Achievement

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Experts say partnership, data-sharing and professional development poise providers to help students and schools increase achievement



Students from PS/MS 188, an elementary and middle school on the Lower East Side, on a field trip to the local branch library during the expanded school day (Photo courtesy of ExpandedED Schools by TASC)

At PS/MS 188, a middle school on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, teaching artists from a partner organization bring social studies to life through plays, puppet shows and painting.

In Chicago, education and nonprofit leaders collaborated to find a legal way to access and share student data from the public schools that would have otherwise been confidential. They ultimately used the data to enhance and expand youth-development programs to reach thousands more young people throughout the city.

At the Family Resource Center in Valley Palms Apartments, a low-income housing community in San Jose, Calif., a staffer uses lessons from a professional development training to create engaging theme-based activities for the center's after-school and summer enrichment programs.

In all three cases, specialists say, youth-development workers were employing the kind of best practices that they should within the evolving field of expanded learning. Such practices will be key in assisting schools that are under perpetual pressure to raise student achievement and prepare young people for college and careers.

“In our experience, the most successful programs that are getting the best attendance and best student outcomes on a range of indicators are the ones that are seeing expanded learning as a shared task,” said Jennifer Peck, executive director of the California-based Partnership for Children and Youth, or PCY.

Collaboration creates collective outcomes

Peck’s organization, a member of the nationwide Collaborative for Building After-School Systems (CBASS), has been a leader in various statewide efforts to build and finance after-school and summer learning programs.

She said successful expanded learning programs that involve partnerships between schools and other organizations are coming up with program goals and activities together, sharing resources and jointly assessing their efforts.

“They’re really seeing the whole thing as a team effort,” Peck said.

The move toward more partnerships in the field of expanded learning is part of a national trend driven by an array of factors that range from providers trying to stay in the game to future workforce considerations.

“One of the things we’ve seen is what we used to call CBOs [community-based organizations] such as your Boys and Girls Clubs, they have increasingly started partnering with schools so that in a sense they don’t go out of business, because if you expand the school day to 4 p.m., it doesn’t leave much time for a Boys and Girls Club,” said Kathy Schleyer, director of training at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time.

Partnerships around expanded learning have implications for employers as well, Schleyer said.



“Increasingly in cities, many mayors are working with schools to build partnerships,” Schleyer said. “So of course, schooling is one of the key areas because it builds the workforce for the next generation of employers that are in the city.

“It makes sort of a natural way of bringing community to schools; that’s a good thing,” she said. “Whether it’s church, business, community organization, there’s a lot of ways to sit people at a common table and work together to decide what those shared outcomes are.”

Getting on the same page

The term expanded learning is just one of several used to describe learning that transcends the regular school day. Other terms include after-school learning and out-of-school learning.

One of the challenges the field face is trying to build a common understanding of just what expanded learning entails, said Peck.

Peck said PCY, which works with government, education, philanthropic, nonprofit, business and community leaders, is currently working with the California Department of Education to define expanded learning as “before- and after-school programs, summer learning, and extended-day, -week or -year programs, with a focus on

developing the academic, social, emotional and physical needs and interests of students through hands-on, engaging learning experiences.”

The proposed draft of the PCY’s definition continues: “Expanded Learning programs should be results-driven, flexible to student and community needs, include community partners, and complement but not replicate traditional classroom instruction.”

Peck said the definition takes on added importance in light of policies that have emerged, applying expanded-learning concepts to 21st Century Community Learning Centers, School Improvement Grants, NCLB waivers and experimentation around longer school days.



“We think it would be really important to have [a] strong and broad definition in policy to help guide the use of funding resources at the federal and state level that can apply to expanded learning time,” Peck said.

Experts say providers should focus on:

Partnership: “We have very strong reasons, based on our experience around the country, that partnerships are key to success and that they should be required,” Peck said during a recent American Youth Policy Forum discussion on expanded learning. “We’re talking about a range of supports for young people that go beyond what’s happening in the classroom. We have rarely met a school district that wants to do this alone.”

Data-sharing: In getting public school districts to share student data in order to better serve young people, Peck said one of the biggest hurdles to clear is to have school districts gain a firm sense of what’s permissible under federal law. “Many of them are afraid of FERPA,” Peck said in an interview, referring to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. “Also, I think many districts are nervous about sharing data even if they know what they can share because they don’t like it or don’t want to share.”

Professional Development: Despite a long history of seeing after-school programs as something “nice to have for kids but not necessarily a profession,” things are changing, Peck said. “The more and more we learn about the difference these programs can make in students’ lives and their ability to stay in school and achieve in school and move on to college and careers, it’s had to become a much more recognized professional activity.

“Those of us who are intermediaries, doing training, technical assistance, professional development, are trying to raise awareness that we absolutely have to be prioritizing and insisting in professional development for staff who work in after-school programs,” said Peck.

Leaders in the field also recommend a focus on continuous improvement, quality standards, ensuring that young people get an adequate “dosage” of programming, and using assessment tools to measure program effectiveness. “With dosage, I think it comes down to clearly communicating an expectation around participation and attendance,” said Christina A. Russell, a researcher at the Washington, D.C.-based Policy Studies Associates, Inc. who specializes in youth development.

Schleyer, the training director at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, said measurement of outcomes is becoming more essential in the field.

“These days it’s very important to measure outcomes or attempt to measure outcomes, because we’re trying to use data to help impact change,” Schleyer said. “Through setting goals and some common idea of what we want for our children and youth, we can then use tools to measure the activities, to look at the quality of the program, level of design of the activities, to make sure they’re strong.”

She mentioned the After-School Assessment System, or APAS, as one such tool that is meant to link program quality to outcomes. “Increasingly, we do a lot of training here; a lot of our training is based on using that system,” Schleyer said of APAS.

“As we try to reach more outcomes for youth, try to really help youth [who] are challenged, then increasingly funders are looking to use measurement tools to help youth reach those outcomes.”