



TIME WELL SPENT

School district strategies that help students
get the most from expanded learning time



September 2014

Executive Summary

With the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, an increasing number of schools and districts in California are looking beyond the resource and time constraints of the traditional school day to help all students attain the state's new goals for college and career readiness.

A rich body of research about expanded learning time and its impact on students makes it clear that high-quality expanded learning programs can help support this work, reducing the achievement gap and positively affecting a wide range of student outcomes. This is particularly true when schools and community partners are working in true collaboration to maximize the value of the additional learning time offered in both after-school and summer programs by coordinating with the school-day.

For more than a decade, California has invested in expanded learning programs at a level no other state can match. Yet in many school districts throughout California that are striving to improve student outcomes, these programs are either overlooked or under-utilized.

That is an opportunity missed.

Today, school district leaders in California have a critical and unique opportunity to maximize their existing investment in expanded learning time to better support local goals for student success. However, this opportunity won't be realized if these programs and partnerships continue to work only school by school. School districts need to take action, drawing on the wealth of experiences described in this report and elsewhere, to bring the best site-level practices to scale.

The available research and the experiences of communities throughout California suggest a set of strategic elements that school districts can use to leverage expanded learning time programs and resources in support of student learning. These strategies are like gears in a clock. You can arrange them in different ways to fit within an existing structure, but they must all be aligned in order for an expanded learning partnership to run like clockwork.

STRATEGIC ELEMENT



Build on existing assets as you create a broad-based expanded learning system and infrastructure.

The most coherent expanded learning programs take advantage of the partnerships, strengths, and opportunities already present in a given community. District leaders need to look at their local context carefully to find programs that are already working and assets they can build on. Most important, however, is to acknowledge that the district has a vital role to play if expanded learning is to become an integral part of a system-wide improvement effort.

STRATEGIC ELEMENT



Set the vision that expanded learning is part of the core work of your district's schools.

Through word, deed, and funding, top district leaders need to communicate their commitment to building strong partnerships in support of expanded learning. One important opportunity for doing so is to include expanded learning as a component in the district's larger goal setting activity related to local accountability and to the expenditure of newly-flexible state funding. It's a natural step to take when the vision of success for all students requires them to master both the academic and social emotional skills implicit in the Common Core State Standards.



STRATEGIC ELEMENT

Create and sustain authentic partnerships through shared planning and management.

True partnerships—in which each participant shares in the risk, responsibilities, and rewards—take time and commitment. To create these deep collaborations in support of expanded learning, a district first needs to take a critical look at its contracts, policies, and procedures to make sure they encourage rather than obstruct partner relationships. The district also needs to identify the right person to coordinate these often complicated partnerships, champion expanded learning, and represent the district’s point of view; and give that person sufficient time and resources to do the work. Then it is time to gather the available partners around the table, establish norms, and set shared goals.

Expanded Learning Time (ELT) is defined as: Before and after school, summer, and intersession learning programs that focus on developing the academic, social, emotional and physical needs and interests of students through hands-on, engaging learning experiences. Expanded learning programs should be student-centered, results-driven, include community partners, and complement but not replicate learning activities in the regular school day/year.

The After School Division, California Department of Education, working definition July 2014



STRATEGIC ELEMENT

Be clear about the critical role school level leadership plays in creating and sustaining effective programs.

Ultimately, it is at the school site level where effective, well-coordinated expanded learning programs take place. Districts that expect to see those programs in action need to give their principals responsibility and support to make it happen. In the most coherent expanded learning programs, the lines between school day and after-school staff are purposefully blurred. Officials can help create this possibility by working to make sure their personnel policies and union contracts support collaborative staffing.



STRATEGIC ELEMENT

Support the system’s capacity for continuous improvement.

Districts need to be as serious about capacity building and continuous improvement in expanded learning time programs as they are in the regular school day. Step number one is to work with expanded learning partners to put robust professional learning and data-sharing systems in place, in part by taking advantage of the strong state infrastructure that already exists.

Expanded learning partnerships can powerfully contribute to district goals for student learning and engagement, but only if district leaders provide the necessary supports and investments to make them function well. By doing so, school districts can replicate powerful expanded learning partnerships across all of their schools, put more hours in the learning day and year, and make sure those hours are time well spent for their students, especially those students with the greatest needs.

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