

# Expanded Learning Opportunities in New Jersey— Pathways to Student Success

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The notion of when, where, and how children learn is expanding beyond the traditional boundaries of school walls to include a diverse range of learning settings such as afterschool and summer programs and workplace and virtual learning spaces, all of which work in intentional alignment with schools to support student success. Collectively, these approaches are referred to as **expanded learning opportunities (ELO)** (see text box).

At their core, ELO approaches share some common interrelated features:

- they recognize that students learn in and out of school classrooms;
- they rethink the use of time across the school day and year to support learning;
- they recognize that no single learning setting will prepare students for success; rather, an integrated approach to learning across the day, across the year, and across a student’s lifetime is required for mastery of a broad set of skills.

## Expanded Learning Opportunities in New Jersey

Across the state of New Jersey a variety of expanded learning approaches are being implemented. The unifying factor across these approaches is that they strive to support healthy learning and development by supporting and complementing in-school learning with positive out-of-school experiences. In New Jersey, these approaches include:

*Afterschool programs:* school and community-based programs that operate in the morning, afternoon, or on weekends; programs partner with schools and provide children and youth supervised and safe activities designed to promote learning, and in some cases provide remedial instruction and explicit academic support.

*Summer learning programs:* school and community-based programs and enrichment activities designed to supplement academic learning and promote enrichment opportunities during the nonschool summer months.

*Extended day and year and charter schools:* school-based models that expand the traditional school day and calendar in order to balance the core curriculum with enrichment opportunities, often including afterschool programs.

*Community schools:* comprehensive public schools that provide a range of services and supports for children, youth, and families across the day and throughout the year.

Integrated learning efforts are not new; in fact, they served as the impetus for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program, which, for the past decade, has called for schools to work in partnership with community- and faith-based organizations. However, the past ten years have witnessed tremendous growth in ELO programs and initiatives aimed specifically at intentional partnerships between afterschool and summer programs and schools in order to support and reinforce—but not replicate—in-school learning and development. In 2010, as the nation is on the verge of reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—and President Obama and Secretary Duncan seek new education solutions that better support the needs of students, schools, and families—, the time is ripe to consider what we know about ELOs as a core education reform strategy.

Increased investments in afterschool and summer learning over the past decade have resulted in a substantial evidence base about their academic, social, health, and other benefits; the evidence presents a strong case that such non-school supports are important pathways to learning, particularly when they work in intentional alignment with schools to support student success. Yet, too often, these

supports continue to be seen as “add-ons,” not integral to in-school education efforts. This ELO policy brief describes the potential benefits of participation in a range of well-implemented ELO programs and initiatives for students of all ages, including afterschool and summer programming, and underscores the benefits of strong partnerships for learning between schools and out-of-school learning supports. It concludes with a set of key policy factors to consider when adopting different ELO approaches.

## ELOs Can Support Student Success<sup>1</sup>

Over ten years of research and evaluation studies—conducted on a range of approaches at the national, state, and local levels—indicate that quality afterschool and summer programs have the potential to positively impact student achievement and success. Relative to participation in other afterschool arrangements (such as self-care or sibling care), participation can result in less disciplinary action; lower dropout rates; better academic performance in school, including better grades and test scores; greater on-time promotion; improved homework completion; and improved work habits.<sup>2</sup> Further, there is growing recognition that afterschool is important not just for elementary students, who need supervision when they are not in school, but also for middle and high school youth, whose participation in afterschool programs can keep them connected to positive role models and engaged in learning at a time when many are beginning to disengage from schools.

### What is “Student Success”?

21<sup>st</sup> century society necessitates a broadened definition of student success, one that goes beyond “the 3 Rs” and includes the development of skills such as effective communications skills; the ability to develop and sustain interpersonal relationships at school, at work, and at home; the ability to solve complex problems; and the development of a strong sense of self.

Afterschool programs can also promote social, prevention, and wellness outcomes that contribute to in-school success. In fact, many of the studies that found academic gains through afterschool programs have also found gains in other developmental domains, suggesting that academic success is integrally related to a student’s overall social, emotional, behavioral, and physical status.<sup>3</sup>

The evidence for summer learning is equally compelling. When students actively participate in summer programs, particularly when they are encouraged by their families to participate, they stand to improve their reading and math levels going into the next grade, as well as their standardized test scores.<sup>4</sup> In addition, academically focused summer programs help students successfully transition into the next grade level, a benefit attributable to smaller class size, individualized learning, and personal attention from teachers, all of which might not be available to students during the academic year.<sup>5</sup>

Specific national, state, and local studies of different approaches to expanded learning that confirm these findings include the following:

The national two-year longitudinal *Study of Promising After-School Programs* examined the effects of participation in quality afterschool programs among 3,000 elementary and middle school students in afterschool programs located in 14 cities and eight states, including some states in the Northeast. Results from that study indicate that the students who participated in quality afterschool programs, alone or in combination with other structured afterschool opportunities, demonstrated significant gains in standardized math test scores, compared to their peers who were regularly unsupervised after school. Further, regular participation in afterschool programs was associated with improvements in work habits and task persistence.<sup>6</sup>

Evaluations of the school-based *The After School Corporation (TASC)* programs in New York, which emphasize academic enrichment, homework assistance, the arts, and recreation, have demonstrated that participants outperform similar non-participants on math test scores and high school Regents exam scores, as well as high school credits earned and school attendance rates.<sup>7</sup>

*New Jersey After 3*, a state-wide public/private partnership, expands learning time by more than 40% each school day by partnering with public schools and a broad spectrum of community-based partners (including large youth-serving organizations, museums, mental health clinics, and faith-based organizations) to deliver high-quality out-of-school time experiences in urban, suburban, and rural school communities throughout the state. A three-year longitudinal evaluation of *New Jersey After 3* indicates that regular participation in its programs benefits students, families, and schools alike: Students' school day teachers reported improvements in the language-arts skills of students who participated in *New Jersey After 3* programs for two or more years, relative to grade-level expectations within their schools.<sup>8</sup> Most youth participants attributed important academic, social, and personal outcomes to their engagement in the program. Parents reported that the program had allowed them to pursue employment or increase their hours at work because they knew that their child was being well-supervised after school.

*Citizen Schools* is a lead partner providing expanded learning time (ELT) services to three schools in the *Massachusetts ELT to Support Student Success Initiative*. A review of the program's roles and contributions to the three partner schools indicates that *Citizen School's* trained staff extended the work of classroom teachers delivering academic instruction, particularly through the provision of opportunities for students to apply emerging academic skills in varied contexts. *Citizen Schools* also contributed to the mobilization of external resources that could bridge the gaps separating schools, families, and the community. While these results are based on programs implemented in Massachusetts, *Citizen Schools* is a presence in Newark as one of *New Jersey After 3's* over 40 nonprofit program partners.

*BELL (Building Educated Leaders for Life)* summer programs are full-day, five-day-per-week programs that blend tutoring in core reading, writing and math skills with strengthening social skills through daily enrichment activities like art, music, drama and dance. A random assignment evaluation of *BELL's* 1,000 elementary school students who attended the summer programs in Boston and New York in 2005 found that the intervention helped students gain a month's worth of reading skills compared to the control group.<sup>9</sup>

A key message from many of the ELO studies is that such programs support student success when they afford children and youth opportunities to learn and practice new skills through hands-on, experiential learning in project-based afterschool programs that complement, but do not replicate, in-school learning. Extra time for academics alone may be necessary but may not be sufficient to improve academic outcomes. Balancing academic support with a variety of engaging, fun, and structured extracurricular or co-curricular activities that promote youth development in a variety of real-world contexts appears to support and improve academic performance. A second message from these studies is that all of the programs and initiatives listed above place a premium on partnerships among schools and community partners and resources.

### **Expanded Learning Partnerships Benefit Students, Families, Schools, and Community Partners**

Evidence is mounting that sustained participation in quality ELO programs that have strong partnerships with schools and families yields the greatest gains for program participants.<sup>10</sup> In addition to better supporting student success as described above, ELO partnerships can serve to strengthen, support, and even transform individual partners, resulting in improved program quality, more efficient use of

resources, and better alignment of goals and curricula among partners. Effective partnerships are those in which each partner experiences the value-added of working with the other entity.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the academic support described above, strong learning partnerships **benefit students and families** in important ways. They:

- Provide continuity of services across the day and year, easing school transitions.
- Facilitate access to a range of learning opportunities and developmental supports.
- Facilitate information-sharing about specific students to best support individual learning.
- Provide family members with alternative entry points into the school day to support their student's learning.

Learning partnerships **can help schools**:

- Provide a wider range of services and activities, particularly enrichment and arts activities, which are not available during the school day.
- Support transitions across the school years, particularly from middle to high school.
- Reinforce concepts taught in school.
- Improve school culture and community image through exhibitions and performances.
- Gain access to mentors, afterschool staff, and other resources to support in-school learning.

Learning partnerships with schools **can strengthen and support community partners by**:

- Gaining access to and recruiting groups of students most in need of support services.
- Improving program quality and staff engagement.
- Fostering better alignment of programming to support a shared vision for learning.
- Maximizing resource use such as facilities, staff, data, and curriculum.

## **The Promise of ELOs for Education Reform**

The research warrant for ELOs is clear: Children and youth who participate in well-implemented programs and activities beyond the typical 6-hour school day are poised to stay enrolled longer and perform better in school than their peers who do not have access to, or participate in, learning experiences beyond the school day. Further, emerging research indicates that when schools and community-based organizations partner to support student success, all parties stand to benefit. The time is ripe to move afterschool and summer learning programs into the mainstream of education reform efforts, implementing and testing a variety of ELO models aimed at forging new and sustainable partnerships with schools in support of learning.

However, doing so requires states to embrace a range of ELO approaches that are designed to best meet the needs of students, families, and communities—approaches can and should vary depending on community needs.

This brief concludes with some key factors to consider when adopting an ELO approach that is right for a specific community or district.

**Partnerships are essential to successful ELOs, regardless of approach.**

- What policies can be created to support and incentivize school–community–family partnerships?
- What infrastructure is required to maintain and nurture local, district, and state partnerships?
- How can states, districts, and communities identify ELO partners?

**Effective ELO partnerships share a common vision and accountability for learning outcomes.**

- How can partners work together to ensure a common vision for student, family, and school success?
- How can an accountability structure be developed that considers the contributions of all ELO partners?
- Are there outcomes that all partners can agree to work toward?
- How can information systems be developed to improve and promote data sharing and learning among partners?

**Quality afterschool and summer environments foster inquiry, critical thinking, and engagement in learning, and these features can support a range of positive academic and developmental outcomes. As such, they are uniquely poised to support in-school learning and development without replicating the school day.**

- How can the research-based practices known to be effective in afterschool programs be adopted more broadly within and across ELO models and approaches?
- Are there elements of quality environments that all ELO partners should implement?
- How can ELO partners work together to ensure equitable access to quality out of school learning experiences?

**With scarce resources, many providers are competing to develop ELO partnerships with schools as a sustainability strategy.**

- How do schools choose the “right” partners?
- How many and what kinds of partners are necessary to provide a full range of learning supports?
- How can community partners work to effectively turn competition into meaningful collaboration?

**Participation in ELO is in part predicated on the choices families and young people make about how to use their time.**

- How can choice be built into ELO options to ensure that programs are responsive to the needs of working families and youth participants alike?
- Will participation be voluntary or mandatory?
- How can ELOs ensure that older youth have the opportunity for choice, which research indicates is requisite to sustained participation and engagement?

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Weiss, H., Little, P., Bouffard, S., Deschenes, S., & Malone, H. (2008). *The federal role in out-of-school learning: After-school, summer learning, and family involvement as critical learning supports*. Paper commissioned by the Center on Education Policy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

<sup>2</sup> Little, P., Wimer, C., & Weiss, H. B. (2008). *After school programs in the 21st century: Their potential and what it takes to achieve it*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

<sup>3</sup> Little, P. et al. (2008). Granger, R. T., & William T. Grant Foundation. (2008). After-school programs and academics: Implications for policy, practice, and research. *Social Policy Report*, XXII(2).

<sup>4</sup> Learning Point Associates. (2005). *Ten years of research on adolescent literacy, 1994-2004: A review*. Naperville, IL: Author.

<sup>5</sup> Cooper, H., Nye, B., Charlton, K., Lindsay, J., & Greathouse, S. (1996). The effects of summer vacation on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 66(3), 227-268.

<sup>6</sup> Vandell, D., Reisner, E., & Pierce, K. (2007). *Outcomes linked to high-quality after school programs: Longitudinal findings from the study of promising practices*. Irvine, CA: University of California and Washington, DC: Policy Studies Associates.

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<sup>9</sup> Chaplin, D., & Capizzano, J. (2006). *Impacts of a summer learning program: A random assignment study of Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL)*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

<sup>10</sup> Little, P. et al. (2008).

<sup>11</sup> Harvard Family Research Project. (2010). *Partnerships for learning*. Cambridge, MA: Author.