



Expanding **minds** and Opportunities

Leveraging

the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success

This article is an excerpt from the groundbreaking book, ***Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success***. This landmark compendium, edited by Terry K. Peterson, PhD, is composed of nearly 70 research studies, reports, essays, and commentaries by more than 100 researchers, educators, community leaders, policy makers, and practitioners.

Collectively, these writings boldly state that there is now a solid base of research and best practices clearly showing that quality afterschool and summer learning programs—including 21st Century Community Learning Centers—make a positive difference for students, families, schools, and communities.

Together, the collection of articles demonstrates the power of quality expanded learning opportunities to:

- **promote student success and college and career readiness;**
- **build youth assets such as character, resilience, and wellness;**
- **foster partnerships that maximize resources and build community ties; and**
- **engage families in their children's learning in meaningful ways.**

For information on how to order the full book, download sections and individual articles, or explore the topic areas, visit www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds.

About the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project

The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project is a 50-state initiative harnessing the power of networks and leaders to help schools and communities leverage the time beyond school to accelerate student achievement. A partnership of funders led by the C.S. Mott Foundation support the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project. More information about the book and the project, as well as additional resources, can be found at www.expandinglearning.org.

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A Proven Solution for Dropout Prevention: Expanded Learning Opportunities

A successful student in the 21st century is expected to graduate from high school; be prepared for the workforce, additional postsecondary education, or military service; and be able to participate in society as a productive, engaged citizen—one who votes, pays taxes, and serves on juries when called. Yet nearly 25% of America's youth do not complete high school on time, and in low-income communities, the rate of dropping out is much higher than the national average (Stillwell, 2010). These young people consequently lack many of the basic skills needed for future success.

The anecdotal reasons provided by students for dropping out of school, both before and after they actually leave school, are well documented and have been consistent for more than a decade. Most of the reasons focus on students' dissatisfaction with school policies and practices. In addition, students in high-risk circumstances (such as poverty) demonstrate a high disengagement with school, sometimes starting very early in elementary school or even before enrolling in school. Generally, these are the most common reasons provided by students:

- *I didn't like school.*
- *I didn't like the teachers.*
- *I didn't see the value in the schoolwork I was asked to do.*
- *I had family issues.*

The research literature, moreover, is convincing regarding a broad range of risk factors associated with dropping out of school. A review of this research by the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) at Clemson University has identified an extensive set of risk factors organized into four domains (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007):

A. Individual Factors (referring to the student)

- *Lacks future orientation*
- *Low academic achievement levels*
- *Low attendance*
- *Special learning needs*

B. Family Factors

- *Low socioeconomic status*
- *Low expectations for schooling*
- *Mobility of family*
- *Language and literacy levels*

C. School Factors

- *Lack of alternatives for learning opportunities*
- *No individual learning plans for students*
- *Unfair behavior and disciplines issues*
- *Retention policies*

D. Community Factors

- *Lack of community involvement*
- *Lack of support for schools*
- *High levels of violence and drug abuse*
- *Few recreational facilities*

Unfortunately, there is no “silver bullet” to reduce the persistent and unacceptably high dropout rate across America. While a range of strategies is needed to improve the high school graduation rate, one especially promising tool is that of quality afterschool and summer learning programs. These programs routinely incorporate strategies that complement and align well with effective, research-based dropout prevention programs. The purpose of this article is to illustrate how afterschool and summer learning programs and dropout prevention initiatives can be integrated in order to generate increased school attendance, continued student academic gains, and improved behavioral patterns, all leading to increased graduation rates.

Research Supporting Complementary Strategies: Expanded Learning Opportunities and Dropout Prevention

Longstanding research by the NDPC has identified 15 effective strategies to reduce the dropout rate, one of which is specifically providing afterschool opportunities (Smink & Schargel, 2004). An added advantage is that afterschool and summer learning opportunities delivered through strong school-community partnerships can readily incorporate many other effective dropout prevention strategies identified in the research.

To show this confluence of potential, it is valuable to compare the match between several of the dropout prevention strategies and the common elements of quality, comprehensive afterschool and summer programs.

To gain a nationwide perspective on this potential, it is valuable to review the offerings and elements of the largest nationwide funding source for afterschool and summer learning, the federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative. While the specific services provided to youth vary across communities to match local needs, programs funded through this initiative commonly include a focus on mentoring, tutoring, counseling for substance abuse and violence prevention, community service, recreation activities, and youth leadership activities, all of which are associated with effective dropout prevention programs.

Comparing directly a number of the key dropout prevention strategies against the core elements of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool and summer programs makes it clear that well-designed and well-implemented afterschool, summer learning, and dropout prevention programs align very closely (See Table 1).

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Table 1. The match between recommended dropout prevention strategies and required or recommended offerings in 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

Recommended Dropout Prevention Strategies	Required or Recommended Offerings in 21st Century Community Learning Centers
School-community collaboration	YES
Family engagement	YES
Mentoring/tutoring	YES
Service learning	YES
Active learning	YES
Professional development	YES
Educational technology	YES
Individualized instruction	YES
Career and technical education	YES for older youth

Another important comparison of the potential of quality afterschool and summer programs is to study the results of afterschool programs leading to school success against the findings of early warning factors linked to dropping out of school.

Research finds that quality afterschool programs can positively affect a number of key school success factors. In a meta-analysis, Durlak, Weissburg, and Pachan (2010), for example, analyzed more than 60 studies of afterschool programs that include emotional, social, and academic development components. They found that those programs meeting quality criteria demonstrated a positive impact in many key areas:

- *School grades*
- *School attendance*
- *Self-perception*
- *Reduction in problem behaviors*
- *Academic achievement (test scores)*
- *Positive social behavior*
- *School bonding*

Further, assessments by classroom teachers of students participating in 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs reveal results similar to those of Durlak et al. These teacher assessments have found that participating students demonstrated improvement in these areas:

- *Greater homework completion*
- *Better school attendance*
- *Better grades*
- *More positive engagement*
- *Less misbehavior*
- *Improved test scores (Learning Point Associates, 2012).*

When this research on the positive impacts of quality afterschool and summer programs is compared with the research on what is needed to help young people stay on a path to high school graduation, it is very apparent that the student success factors associated with quality afterschool programs and 21st Century Community Learning Centers directly address the predictive factors associated with dropping out of school (see Table 2).

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 Table 2. Predictive factors of dropping out of school matched against the impact of quality afterschool and 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

Predictive Factors Of Dropping Out	Impact of Quality Afterschool From Meta-analysis by Durlak et al.	Results from 21st Century Community Learning Centers
Failing grades in reading and/or math	Improved grades in reading and math	Better grades in reading and math
Poor attendance	Improved school attendance	Better school attendance
Misbehavior	Reduction in problem behaviors	Less misbehavior
Very low test scores	Improved academic achievement (test scores)	Increased test scores
Lack of effort/motivation	Positive social behavior	More positive engagement
Not engaging in class or school work	More positive school bonding	Greater homework completion

The meta-analysis from over 60 studies by Durlak et al. and the many years of data from the 21st Century Community Learning Centers paint a clear picture that quality afterschool and summer programs can have a positive impact on the early warning indicators for students with a high potential for dropping out of school and not graduating.

Real Life Lessons Learned: Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs, Including 21st Century Community Learning Centers Programs

There are many different program objectives for afterschool and summer programs and for community-based learning centers in the context of school-community partnerships across the nation. Basically, these programs are designed in whole or in part to deliver academic programs, provide additional supports, find ways to inspire young people to stay engaged in learning, and/or offer enrichment opportunities to students and sometimes to other family members, as well.

In light of the research discussed above, expanded learning programs, including 21st Century Community Learning Centers, can be designed and implemented in such a way that they can purposefully include dropout prevention strategies and other quality elements that will have positive effects on student success. What follows are several examples of noteworthy programs:

- *The Colorado MESA program in Denver, Colorado, is a premier educational resource and experiential program serving students throughout high school. MESA's mission is to increase the number of economically disadvantaged and at-risk students who graduate from high school fully prepared for post-secondary education in engineering, math, science, computer science, business, and other math and science-based fields. Hands-on activities, team building, and mentoring help build social and literacy skills. Field trips to*

colleges, universities, and industry sites, as well as engineering and science-related design challenges, excite students, sharpen their skills, and increase their awareness of career opportunities (Afterschool Alliance, 2009).

- *RiverzEdge Arts Project in Providence, Rhode Island, is an art and leadership program where high school students work with artists in fine and commercial arts. They guide youth to create art, and they run an arts enterprise in an environment that stresses hands-on learning, teamwork, mutual respect, responsibility, and workplace discipline. Participants build self-awareness and work skills by creating and selling products and services in the competitive arts and business markets, developing their creative voice, and preparing them for the job market. One hundred percent of participants go on to graduate high school in a city with a 34 percent dropout rate (Afterschool Alliance, 2009).*
- *Funded by a 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, EduCare is the afterschool provider at seven Los Angeles School District high schools. EduCare's programs are designed to give students the opportunity to develop their unique abilities, build relationships, and find relevance in their educational experience. Program activities are unique to each school and include homework assistance and tutoring, academic enrichment, structured fitness classes, and performing and fine arts activities. The 2011 graduation rate for students participating in EduCare afterschool programs over the course of 4 years of high school was 90%, as compared to 60% for nonparticipating students. School attendance and standardized test scores also significantly improved (EduCare Foundation, 2011).*

These examples illustrate the growing evidence that some of the predictive factors associated with dropping out of school can be successfully addressed in part through quality afterschool and summer programs and 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

Conclusion: Maximizing the Combined Power of Expanded Learning Opportunities and Dropout Prevention Programs

The lessons learned from both successful 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, as well as other quality afterschool and summer learning programs, and successful dropout prevention programs should serve as the standard for all new or revised programs designed to increase high school graduation rates. Programs should provide students with these opportunities and supports:

- *Engage actively in the strategies found in both types of program environments.*
- *Acquire extra critical thinking skills as well as basic skills.*
- *Develop positive attitudes.*
- *Keep on track to progress successfully through each step of the education pipeline (for example, maintain passing grades, develop regular attendance habits, stay out of trouble, bring up very low test scores).*
- *See a real and direct connection to jobs, careers, and/or 2- to 4-year colleges.*

Programs should also use these strategies:

- *Engage community organizations and schools as collaborators in time beyond the typical school day (e.g., afterschool, weekends, summers) to help more students succeed.*
- *Involve families outside the traditional school day, both in their own learning and supporting their child(ren)'s success.*
- *Deploy quality standards linked to successful programming and results. (See, for example: Durlak et al., 2010; Huang & Dietel, 2011)*

Although virtually any student could benefit from expanded learning opportunities and school-family-community partnerships, those students in high-risk situations or struggling in school will tend to benefit the most from quality expanded learning opportunities, especially those programs that implement intentional strategies geared to helping students graduate from high school. Now is the time to tap the potential of quality afterschool and summer learning programs—especially those embracing the vision of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative—in support of a nationwide commitment to increasing America's high school graduation rate.

For More Information

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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