



**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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Building Powerful Partnerships With Parents and Communities: Integrating 21st Century Community Learning Centers With Education Change and Reform

What if parents and the community came *first* in education reform? The current test score accountability movement—birthed by the *Nation at Risk* report, followed by the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, reinforced by the No Child Left Behind law, and reaffirmed by the Race to the Top reforms—has relegated parents and community to a low priority in policy, low priority in practice, and low priority in partnership.

There is one program, however, that should serve as a signature element of the next version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA): 21st Century Community Learning Centers. It is one of the few programs at the federal level that requires a deep partnership between the school, community, and parents as a condition for funding.

Even as ESEA is being considered for reauthorization, both the Obama administration and Congress continue to resist robust support for parent involvement, community engagement, coordination of services, and partnership building, relegating them to the back burner as strategies for increasing achievement or reforming schools. In an over 800-page ESEA proposal passed by the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee in October 2011, community partnerships and parent engagement are mentioned, sadly, as mere afterthoughts but are never required or considered as priority elements of reform. Yet, at the same time, public opinion polls conducted by Gallup, and other research conducted over more than 40 years, find that involving parents or engaging families in their children's education and schools is one of the highest priorities for improving American education (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011; Public Impact, 2007).

While a national debate rages about how to “fix” America’s schools and improve public education, many public schools and their communities have already realized that there is no silver bullet. Yet, one thing is crystal clear in the swirl of evolving and often conflicting reform efforts: Failing to engage parents and the community dramatically lowers the prospect of increasing the number of students going to college or being prepared for a 21st century career.

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The research over the years is both extensive and conclusive regarding the importance of parents and community engagement related to increased student learning (Sanders, 2006). It was the 2009 research that came out of the Chicago Consortium, led by Dr. Tony Bryk, however, that should have been a wake-up call to policy makers to move parent and community partnerships from rhetoric to reality, making these partnerships a core element of change essential to increased student achievement (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2009).¹ In short, research reveals that *good things happen when the public is involved*—citizens feel ownership, share responsibility and accountability for results, and support sustaining change, no matter how many principals or superintendents come and go.

The wheel does not have to be reinvented, however. Established in 1994, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program has spawned almost 11,000 centers nationwide. As part of their core purpose and function, these centers bridge school-based learning with its natural counterpart, *community-based learning*, through partnerships with parents, United Ways, 4-H groups, libraries, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, higher education, nonprofits, museums, educators, parks and recreation departments, municipalities, businesses, and other community organizations. These partnerships not only advance learning and use time wisely before and after school and during the summers, they also help build strong public schools and community demand for sustaining change. Drawing on the strengths brought by partner organizations, each center includes a range of services tailored to the needs of each school community. Services provided by centers typically include several of the following: health care, tutoring, afterschool programs, English as a second language classes, parent training, college-access services, and math and reading classes.

Given both the significant need for and interest in these services in communities across the country, wouldn’t it be a remarkable achievement if, in the reauthorization of the ESEA and in subsequent appropriations measures, 21st Century Community Learning Centers were to be expanded to support more school-community partnerships, from the current nearly 11,000 to possibly as many as 20,000 to 30,000?

1. Bryk’s most recent research gives evidence from Chicago on how the organization of schools and community context influences the capacity to enhance student engagement and advance student learning.

Cincinnati provides a good case example of why this would make a lot of sense. Deciding a number of years ago that there was a pressing need to reconnect the public with its public schools, the community developed community learning centers in 31 of the district's 43 low-income schools. Each of the programs focused on academic enrichment opportunities for students, and the first nine centers in Cincinnati were funded with federal grants in 2004.

Both the Cincinnati chapter of Parents for Public Schools (PPS) and the Cincinnati STRIVE Partnership, a local affiliate of the national Public Education Network (PEN), came together, along with dozens of other community-based organizations in Cincinnati, to support the leadership, implementation, evaluation, accountability, and sustainability of each of the centers. PPS and STRIVE were natural partners to strengthen public education in the community by mobilizing, engaging, and training parents through partnership connections—and notably, they were provided the incentives to do so by the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative.

As Cincinnati's community learning centers continue to grow, they will need to be able to measure their impact. Aware of the importance of demonstrating accountability to the community through the use of quantifiable metrics, the local centers have developed a Learning Partner Dashboard through funding provided by the school district, Microsoft, Proctor & Gamble, and the STRIVE Partnership.

The dashboard provides individualized student academic and developmental data to the school resource coordinators.

The dashboard uploads student data from the school system database, and then program coordinators add data about the services that each student currently receives. The coordinators then match students with the additional services they need based on an analysis of gaps between student performance and behavior on the one hand and received services on the other. If a student fails the state math tests, for example, the student is flagged in the system, and the coordinator matches the student with a math tutor. If a student has trouble getting to school on time, a match is made with a social worker to support the family.

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative should not be confused with the recent push for extended school time, although the two are not mutually exclusive. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers are intended to bridge school and community and to build the resources, supports, and community buy-in that are essential to making expanded school time successful. Depending on the community, the initiative provides vitally important opportunities to students and their families, such as:

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- *tutoring*
- *college access*
- *mentoring*
- *internships*
- *health and wellness*
- *parenting classes*
- *community engagement*
- *hands-on, creative learning in areas such as STEM, the arts, and sports*

Efforts to extend time in school should therefore complement the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative in order to ensure wise and creative use of time and partnerships. Unfortunately, many plans for extending time in school often focus only on adding small increments of time—for example, 30 to 60 minutes a day. The school day still ends well before parents come home from work, which means that many children in those schools still need care and support after school, and of course, during the summertime. If a school or community wants, therefore, to extend the school day or year, decision makers should work with families to make sure the additional time is actually more engaging, interesting, active and relevant than the typical school day. In addition, programs like the 21st Century Community Learning Centers and similar efforts (e.g., community schools) should not be destroyed in the process. That would be a huge net loss, not a net gain. Indeed, we know that schools alone—without the academic supports, enrichment, and personalization provided by 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs and other afterschool and summer learning programs—will not lead us to 21st century achievement.

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Crystal Hoffman is a parent and a parent leader/volunteer at her children's school, Pleasant Ridge Montessori in Cincinnati. She talks about how the school's 21st Century Community Learning Centers resource coordinator brings together partners from the community to support academic success and to make the school more open and accessible to the community. She notes that:

- *local businesses volunteer in the school,*
- *a GED program is available for families,*
- *the gymnasium is used for a table tennis club several nights a week,*
- *there is an afterschool program that offers motivating experiences for students, and*
- *the program offers both homework tutoring and enrichment activities and reaches out to the student and family's unique learning and support needs.*

The work of 21st Century Community Learning Centers was recently validated by an independent study that concluded that these programs do, indeed, contribute to increased achievement for the PreK through eighth grade low-income students whom they serve (Brown, 2011). Schools that reach out to parents and the community and that integrate community supports into the school day show increases in student learning. Moreover, parents feel more satisfied, and the public is assured that their efforts are making a meaningful contribution to their students and their community (Brown, 2011). For PEN and PPS, as national organizations with community-based affiliates, the study reinforces the value of deep collaboration with their local members in support of reform efforts.

Massachusetts Secretary of Education Paul Reville and Teachers College/Columbia University Professor Jeffery Henig sum it up when they say: "When thinking about their own families, parents take it as a given that nonschool factors—good health, good food, emotional well-being, safety, stability, enrichment activities, positive peer influences, parental encouragement, and guidance—affect whether their children will thrive" (Henig & Reville, 2011). With their richly diverse afterschool and summer learning program offerings, their school-community partnerships, and their emphasis on family engagement, 21st Century Community Learning Centers should be significantly expanded, not have their funding diverted for other purposes. As the economy starts to recover, school districts, local governments, states, and the federal government should be investing in this collaborative, cost-effective approach to improving education and strengthening communities and schools. 21st Century Community Learning Centers are not just good policy; indeed, they are good common sense as well.

Cleveland Afterschool Program Opens Doors for Parents

Spread across eight sites in Cleveland, Open Doors Academy (ODA) believes that "it takes a community to raise a child" and provides a multitude of ways for parents to be involved. This includes participating in project-based learning and team building among students, attending family events with their children, and volunteering on field trips and/or a variety of educational workshops that teach parents how to recognize their child's learning style.

This unique program begins in the sixth grade and has a 7-year curriculum plan for participating students. ODA serves 300 middle school and high school students that live in high-risk environments. For those students who completed all 3 years of the middle school program, 100% of them went on to graduate from high school.

Parents are viewed as critical partners and are required to contribute at least 16 service hours every year to their child's programming. Through activities such as calling parents when their children are excelling, ODA is successfully working to create a positive, supportive atmosphere for students and their parents. This positive reinforcement led to 98% of parents completing the service requirements in 2011.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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