



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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Strengthening Out-of-School-Time Initiatives to Support Student Success: The Role of United Way in Afterschool, Weekends, and Summer Learning

Any effort to improve education must factor in the reality that students spend only 20% of their time in school (Davis & Farbman, 2002). Boosting youths' opportunity for success—in school, work, and life—must therefore include a robust strategy for using out-of-school time to expand learning opportunities.

Working with our partners at the national, state, and local level, we want to cut the number of high school dropouts—currently 1.3 million students every year—in half.

This strategy must include a shared vision, collaboration, aligned activities, and collective action among all sectors to reach our youth with high quality, well-designed, and well-implemented afterschool, summer, and weekend programs.

This is an issue that matters to United Way. Education is a priority for our network of 1,200 state and local United Ways. Working with our partners at the national, state, and local level, we want to cut the number of high school dropouts—currently 1.3 million students every year (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010)—in half. Quality afterschool and summer programs can address the very factors (such as poor attendance, failing grades, misbehavior, very low test scores, and disengagement from schools) that have been linked to dropping out (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007).

That means ensuring that meaningful supports and opportunities exist for all children—especially children from disadvantaged families—from birth through young adulthood.

It also means seizing every opportunity. United Way network surveys have found that some 95% of local United Ways fund out-of-classroom learning, but far fewer actually collaborate strategically with program providers and other key stakeholders to develop a system of well-placed, quality afterschool, weekend and summer learning programs that strategically capture the energy of many different providers and build strong school-community-family partnerships.

As program funders, United Ways have a unique opportunity to help advance

- *academic enrichment and supports that expand learning in engaging ways after the school day ends and during the summer and that do not merely provide youth with “more of the same” from the typical school day;*
- *opportunities for youth to build personal skills, cultivate new interests, and develop meaningful relationships with peers and supportive adults; and*
- *opportunities for youth to engage in constructive extracurricular activities that support learning and development.*

Yet, communities also need systemic approaches to address ongoing challenges around access, quality, participation, alignment, coordination, and sustainability.

United Ways are respected as community conveners, communicators, connectors, and funders. Increasingly, they are using their considerable capacity to fill these roles in their communities to help individuals and institutions better understand and fully realize the potential of afterschool, summer, and weekend programs to improve student success. They are mobilizing the community around expanding quality afterschool and summer learning programs, while working to deepen and strengthen existing efforts to ensure that community and school-based programs are high quality, relevant, engaging, age appropriate, accessible, and effectively targeted to serve those most in need.

That is happening across the country. In Boston, the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack County brought together key stakeholders to examine the challenge, to plan, and then to act in alignment. The group fielded a survey on existing youth assets, developed summer literacy and employment programs, and organized a donated playground in a housing development.

The aim was to maintain or increase student reading skills, build the capacity of afterschool and summer staff, and increase school partnerships and family engagement. The coalition (involving three United Ways) integrated literacy into expanded learning time programs in underperforming school districts, targeting more than 1,800 youth in seven communities. Some 68 hours of training for 100 staff helped integrate language and literacy into out-of-school-time learning, bring school and program staff together to learn from each other, and improve school-program-family partnerships.

Results for the Boston Summer Literacy Initiative showed that 85% of the participating youth tested better than expected—with 68% showing academic gains, according to a study commissioned by the MA Department of Early Education and Care (Love, 2011). Youth read more, improved their vocabulary and reading comprehension, and improved their attitudes toward reading.

In Austin, Texas, the United Way for Greater Austin made community engagement a focus of its expanded learning time work, including youth focus groups that informed an action agenda. Afterschool, school community partnerships, and family involvement were incorporated as a cornerstone of the United Way's new Middle School Matters initiative, a partnership with 16 agencies, including expanded learning time providers, to provide tutoring, parent education, mentoring, and after-school programs in the three lowest-performing schools.

Leveraging both organizational and individual partnerships is the “sweet spot” for many United Ways. These organizations are uniquely positioned in communities to support afterschool and summer learning coalitions by tapping

- *their ability to reach across sectors (e.g., local government, schools, cultural and philanthropic institutions, faith and community-based organizations, non-profit agencies);*
- *their annual workplace campaigns that engage individual donors;*
- *and their strong business relationships.*

For example, as part of United Way's national call to action to recruit one million education volunteers, United Ways are recruiting employees of local businesses as mentors and tutors for youth who may not have adult role models. By identifying and developing these mentors, volunteers, and tutors from the business community—and by regarding them appropriately as “second-shift caring adults” or “community teachers”—United Ways can give added significance and attention to this vitally important community learning resource.

In Grand Rapids, the Heart of West Michigan United Way is bringing the community together around 900 struggling students in its most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Some 1,200 community volunteers work one-on-one in the Schools of Hope initiative, with more than 60 companies giving their employees paid time off to mentor or tutor after school. The strategy is paying off, as kids are gaining academic and other skills.

Driving systemic improvements in afterschool, summer, and weekend programs requires understanding what works and replicating success. Since 2008, with the support of JCPenney, United Way Worldwide invested in out-of-school-time initiatives in 10 communities. These pilots have dug deep to strengthen existing, or build new, expanded learning time coalitions; map the availability and quality of programs in their communities; address the gaps in data, services, and opportunities; and engage key constituencies (for example, youth, parents, teachers) to get a better sense of needed supports.

Collectively, these learnings suggest that United Ways can significantly strengthen these efforts in their communities by taking these steps:

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- **Map the expanded learning time landscape.** *Without knowing where quality afterschool, weekend, and summer learning assets are located and needed, good and informed decisions are impossible. Many communities begin without a clear understanding of where the programs are, who they serve, and what kinds of outcomes they are producing. Gaining this understanding can be transformative, identifying unmet needs and galvanizing support.*
- **Measure program quality.** *Many programs do not have a way to assess their own impact and quality. Programs often use different approaches to show impact, so comparisons cannot be made. United Ways can help develop a common language and understanding of quality across programs. As funders, United Ways can invest in quality improvement approaches that tie professional development to specific areas that need support. There is a growing body of research that is finding factors that are linked to better program results.*
- **Leverage passion to develop professionals.** *People working in youth development are very passionate, but they often operate in isolation. Participating in professional convenings can therefore be an important way to generate an enhanced sense of professionalism. Also, connecting youth development professionals and community volunteers with educators and schools can produce more engaging, interesting, and quality afterschool, weekend, and summer programs. This takes thoughtful and focused collaborative planning among schools and community teachers or second-shift caring professionals. United Ways can insist on, fund, and help lead such collaboration.*
- **Create and coordinate an aligned network.** *“Connecting the dots” within a community matters. It is crucial to coordinate services to close gaps, avoid duplication, and demonstrate contributions of many community stakeholders. United Ways have relationships with stakeholders—providers, schools, community and faith-based organizations, arts and cultural groups, colleges, businesses, etc.—that can be leveraged to create stronger alignment, coordination, and communication.*

Achieving all of this requires a systemic, big-picture approach that is not piecemeal or focused on individual programs.

That means we must ensure a shared community vision and coordinated action—along with mutual accountability, sustained effort, and measured results—across a diverse coalition. It means working collaboratively on communitywide and community-based strategies that can drive real change. Finally, it means bringing people from all walks of life together to work in meaningful ways—not just giving but also advocating and volunteering—to advance these community strategies.

“Driving with data” is critical. In Jacksonville, Florida, the United Way of Northeastern Florida and its partners used local data, experts, and community conversations to create Achievers for Life, an effort to target struggling middle schoolers who showed

attendance, behavior, and self-esteem problems (based on school data). Key strategies included improving the quality and availability of out-of-school-time supports and employing Family Advocates to work with families. After one year, participants showed a 31% boost in GPA (United Way of Northeast Florida, 2008).

These are the kinds of creative partnerships and *results* that United Ways want to achieve in every community. The following are some suggestions for community organizations seeking to work with United Ways:

- *Attend United Way events and introduce yourself and your work. United Ways staff members meet many people this way that they would not otherwise know.*
- *Invite local United Way staff to your events and to see your program. United Ways spend a lot of time doing this to understand emerging best practices/ programs that might be off their radar.*
- *Ask about ways to get involved and who else you should get to know. United Ways have a good vantage point in the community and can help facilitate introductions to others.*
- *Share program outcomes and the demographics of the populations you serve. This way, United Ways can better align resources to meet needs.*
- *Be a liaison to the communities you serve. This will help United Ways understand how best to help bring resources to that neighborhood or community.*
- *Advocate and educate the public on important community, state, and national issues concerning education, income, and health.*

Conclusion

Evidence continues to mount that quality afterschool, weekend, and summer programming can turn out-of-school time into a positive learning opportunity, helping constructively fill the 80% of waking hours that young people are not in school. These expanded learning opportunities can also help address some of the key factors contributing to young people dropping out of school, including absenteeism, behavioral problems, and poor course performance. To leverage this time in a cost-effective manner requires bold, and often new, community-school collaborations, taking advantage of the many youth-serving organizations and volunteers who are interested in working with children and youth, as well as applying school resources in some new ways in the expanded learning time and space.

We know that “more of the same” is expensive and unlikely to make much difference. New partnerships, new ways of working, and new levels of collaboration are needed. Because of the United Ways’ broad reach in the community—active in 1,200 communities and in relationship with 50,000 employers—they can be a vitally important, positive force to support and drive the expansion of engaging learning opportunities after school hours and during summers and weekends by working closely

with schools, community organizations, and volunteers. It is imperative that community and youth-serving organizations, schools, and voluntary organizations work together with their United Ways to capitalize systemically on the power of expanded learning after school, during the summers, and over weekends. Working in new ways to generate new, more engaged learning and positive youth development opportunities can help dramatically improve the odds for success for many of America's youth.

For More Information

Please contact your local United Way's community impact staff. Contact information is usually on its website, or track down your United Way at <http://www.liveunited.org>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ayeola Fortune is the director of education initiatives at United Way Worldwide, leading the organization's work to improve middle grade success and boost high school graduation. She helped lead the development of United Way's education roadmaps, which outline core community strategies, high-impact implementation approaches, and roles United Ways can play to reach United Way's goal to cut high school dropout numbers in half by 2018. Previously, she served as the director of Extended Learning Opportunities and Development Project at the Council of Chief State School Officers. Fortune has also been a middle and high school teacher and has taught and developed curricula at the University of Pittsburgh.

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