



This article is one of more than 40 in an upcoming Compendium on the opportunities and potential of expanded learning opportunities and the importance of afterschool and summer programs, including 21st Century Community Learning Centers. With support from the C. S. Mott Foundation and under the leadership of executive editor Terry K. Peterson, PhD, the Compendium comprises eight sections with articles authored by thought leaders, policy officials, researchers, practitioners and other professionals in the field. Articles from the Compendium are available for download from the new website **Expanded Learning & Afterschool: Opportunities for Student Success** at www.expandinglearning.org

Expanded Learning Opportunities Are Key to Student Learning

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All across the country, including my home state of Rhode Island, there is growing recognition that to remain competitive in the global marketplace, we must dramatically broaden our young people's academic skills and knowledge as well as the social and emotional capacity to use their skills and knowledge competently and compassionately. Indeed, our economic security, national security, and overall success as a democracy depend on our ability to educate our youth in ways that connect school learning to real-world experiences.

For over a decade, 21st Century Community Learning Centers have been providing a real-world context to learning and leading-edge learning opportunities in the afterschool hours and during the summer months. Strong, vibrant partnerships have been forged between schools and community agencies through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative to make learning relevant for students. In Rhode Island, these partnerships are playing a critical role in preparing our students for the workforce, college, careers, and success in life.

Last year I had the privilege of visiting the Chillin' and Skillin' Summer Program in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. Chillin' and Skillin' is the summer component of the local school district's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, reaching over 100 third- to sixth- grade students in one of Woonsocket's most underserved neighborhoods. When I arrived for the visit, I expected to take the typical tour of various classrooms in the school building. Instead, I was taken to a local park where students were observing and identifying various bird species and predicting why they found so many species at that park, but nowhere else in the city. I then witnessed another group of students who were taking water samples at the Blackstone River to test for pollution. Rather than

teaching only out of textbooks, Woonsocket teachers and their community partners were making learning relevant for the students, and this hands-on learning allowed students to better understand the concepts explained during the school year. The strong partnership between the Woonsocket School Department and its nonprofit partner, Connecting for Children and Families, provided students with high quality, engaging summer programming that reduced summer learning loss and did all of this in a cost-effective way that made sense for all of the organizations involved.

Woonsocket has also been leading the way in offering high school graduation credits for opportunities taking place outside of the traditional school day. During my visit to Chillin' and Skillin', I also had the opportunity to visit RiverzEdge Arts Project. RiverzEdge and other community-based organizations in the city have been partnering with the high school to create the Woonsocket Expanded Learning Opportunities Initiative. This initiative is designed to provide multiple pathways to graduation for high school students by creating rigorous, individualized, standards-based, student-centered projects that engage teachers, community educators, and students in learning.

In one example of a high quality expanded learning opportunity, two students from Woonsocket High School partnered with an American history teacher and the local Museum of Work and Culture to produce an exhibit for the museum comparing and contrasting the immigrant experience from the late-19th century with the immigrant experience of today. The students researched primary and secondary sources, conducted interviews with current immigrants, learned about curating museum exhibits, and met all of the state's American history standards in order to receive course credit. This experience provided them with a real-world application of their knowledge, allowed them to utilize critical thinking and other life skills, and was made possible through the strong collaborative spirit that exists between Woonsocket Schools and community partners such as Connecting for Children and Families, RiverzEdge Arts Project, and the Museum of Work and Culture.

The Chillin' and Skillin' program and the Woonsocket Expanded Learning Opportunities Initiative are just two of the many examples of the great results that we have seen from strong school-community partnerships in Rhode Island and across the nation through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative. Rhode Island currently has 21st Century Community Learning Centers in 56 schools, serving over 13,000 students after the school bell rings. These partnerships ensure that afterschool and summer learning programs reinforce school-day learning and strengthen understanding by making real-world connections for students.

Of vital significance to those of us responsible for the wise use of public resources, research shows that the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative is working. Recent surveys conducted by the Rhode Island State Department of Education show that 66% of the teachers of all participating students reported improvement in homework completion and class participation. Moreover, 61% of these students' teachers reported improvements in student behavior. Additionally, a recent study by Public/Private Ventures found that due to the efforts of the Providence After School Alliance, participation in afterschool programming increased student attendance during the school day by 25% (RI Dept. of Education, 2010). For those who were highly engaged in afterschool programs, there were also improvements in math grades, math achievement test scores, and social and emotional competencies (Kauh, 2011). All of these afterschool

benefits positively affect how students perform during the school day while at the same time providing learning opportunities that expand our young people's skills, knowledge, and experiences to equip them to handle these rapidly changing times.

Of equal importance, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative has led to greater collaboration between schools, cities, and community organizations, putting Rhode Island at the forefront of many national education improvement efforts. Chillin' and Skillin' and the Providence After School Alliance are wonderful examples of the many summer programs that are creating strong collaborations between schools and community organizations to reduce summer learning loss. Programs across the state have developed an innovative model in which school teachers and community educators cocreate and then codeliver a high quality, hands-on summer curriculum to students. These collaborations have strengthened relationships between schools, community organizations, and in some cases, city departments, and have led to further partnerships during the school year. In Providence, for example, the mayor and superintendent have become advocates and partners in the growth of 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs to help drive a number of youth outcomes—academic, civic, creative, social, and emotional. In addition, an independent evaluation of this summer model by Brown University found it to be replicable in other communities (Laorenza & Whitney, 2010).

21st Century Community Learning Centers collaborations have also resulted in partnerships that have increased the number of pathways that students in Rhode Island have for high school graduation. For the last several years, teams from Woonsocket, Central Falls, and Providence have been working to develop a system in which students receive high school credit for rigorous, student-centered, individualized learning opportunities that occur outside of the traditional school. These learning opportunities require extensive collaboration and coordination between teachers and community organizations, and they are achieving success. In Central Falls, for instance, students who had dropped out of high school have re-enrolled and are currently working towards their diploma, drawing heavily on these programs. In many cases, these learning opportunities are more rigorous than a traditional class; moreover, they provide students with real-world context for the concepts they are learning.

It is clear that these school-community partnerships benefit student learning and growth and therefore make sense from an educational standpoint. In these trying economic times, these partnerships also make financial sense, often saving school districts and community organizations money. For school districts, partnering with community organizations allows them to provide a service, whether it is a summer program or an afterschool tutoring program, at a fraction of the cost of expanding the school day. In many cases, schools provide in-kind support, such as keeping a building open later or shifting bus schedules to allow for a late bus; in return, students are provided additional academic enrichment. For community organizations, these partnerships allow them to achieve their mission and goals and often provide them with space and resources that they would not otherwise have. Put simply, partnerships make sound financial sense for all parties, and most importantly, they provide students with additional learning opportunities and social and emotional supports after the school bell rings, generating demonstrable results.

When I think about education improvements, it often implies that something we have tried is not working and that we must continue looking far and wide for the “silver bullet” that will solve the problem. I believe that such an effort is ultimately misdirected. Indeed, when I think about the tools our schools require to adequately prepare our children for a global economy, I look no further than the neighborhoods in which those schools are located. Every school is situated in a neighborhood with a set of community resources and organizations that interact with children every day and provide relevant connections to real world experiences and future career pathways. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative is proof that strong partnerships between schools and community organizations can lead to solid improvements in learning and significant benefits to children, families, and communities. To generate the improvements we seek in student achievement, we must remember that learning does not end when the school bell rings and that there are many ways to learn and many ways to teach. School-community partnerships offer a way to ensure that children’s learning and personal development does not end when the school day does. Indeed, experiential, inquiry-based learning is reinforced and addressed in new and unique ways in the hours after school and during the summer months. As policymakers, we must strengthen our support of these partnerships. In doing so we will be strengthening our support of our children’s academic growth and will ensure that our country remains the leader of the global marketplace.



Resources

Kauh, T. J. (2011). *Afterzone: Outcomes for youth participating in Providence's citywide after-school system*. New York, NY: Public/Private Ventures.

Laorenza, E. & Whitney, J. (2010). *Evaluation report: Summer learning project 2009 – 2010*. Providence, RI: Brown University.

Rhode Island Department of Education. (2010). *The Rhode Island 21st Century Community Learning Center Initiative: Supporting student success for nearly a decade*. Providence, RI.



About the Author

Lincoln Chafee is a native of Warwick, Rhode Island, where he served for four years on the Warwick City Council and nearly four two-year terms as Mayor of Warwick. He subsequently served for seven years as a United States Senator. A graduate of Brown University, he was elected in 2010 as the first independent governor of Rhode Island.

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