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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The Promise of Extended Learning Opportunities: New, Powerful, and Personalized Options for High School Students

As we prepare our communities and our nation for a future that is increasingly complex and global, our education system—a relic of a bygone era—must shift dramatically to ensure that all of our citizens can thrive in the 21st century. New models are emerging that may help move our educational system from the "one-size-fits-all" practice we have known it to be, to a design that might well be described as an orchestra. This image of a well-tuned and aligned orchestra conjures up notions of coordination, variety, and harmony—with many parts of the system "in concert" with each other.

One model that is showing particular promise in this regard provides high school students with access to well-facilitated, high-quality, real-world experiences in which they can acquire essential, complex skills and knowledge by studying, collaborating, and doing.

A case in point: Andy is a high school student with an interest in exploring a career in health care. He spent some of his school year in an internship under the guidance of an infection control nurse on-site at a regional medical center, learning how diseases spread and what to do about it. As part of his "coursework," Andy helped design, organize, manage, and analyze results from a study on hand washing as a way of limiting contagion. The study consisted of close observations of doctors, nurses, and staff and the development of an original benchmarking system to monitor the effectiveness of hand-sanitizing stations within the facility.

With guidance from teachers and an on-site mentor, Andy gathered, synthesized, analyzed, and compared his local data to Centers for Disease Control (CDC) data and then developed a set of findings. He then presented his research to the medical center's Infection Control Board—staffed by certified experts in the field.

This would be an exciting opportunity for a college student, let alone someone in high school. What makes it even more valuable is that it is credit-bearing. With the support of rigorous assessment processes, students like Andy can now have these powerful experiences while doing something that "counts" in addition to, and in some cases instead of, time spent sitting—and mostly listening—in a classroom. In Andy's own words, "I think this was a very powerful learning experience. I practiced a lot of working skills… including my presentation skills…self-direction and critical thinking… (and) graphing and map skills. This internship really brought my learning together."

In addition to Andy's own obvious appreciation of this kind of learning experience, evaluation and research findings validate that these kinds of efforts are worthy and feasible. New research from neuroscience suggests that these types of engaging experiences contribute to the ongoing development of the brain and a literal strengthening of its synapses. Contrary to earlier notions that significant brain development is limited to the preschool years, we now know that the very nature of learning activities themselves as we experience them throughout our lives—their complexity, their relevance, their vitality—have a positive result on exercising and strengthening our brains in ways that help us do similar tasks. Doing, it turns out, helps prepare us to do better (Hinton, Fischer, & Glennon, 2012).

Youth development research also reminds us that the higher the relevance and interest quotients, the stronger the motivation. We know that tapping learner motivation is a key to persistence and success. Combining classroom instruction with hands-on learning experiences facilitated by community mentors gives us another way of aligning education with what we know about young people and how they learn best (Halpern, 2012).

More good news is that the kinds of skills and knowledge that are developed through these complex, applied real-world experiences are consistent with what employers want and what global competition demands. "Organize, research, analyze, synthesize, write, and present are all words that describe the challenges of Andy's work. These are not 'soft skills'; they make up the 'new basics' to which we must attend if we are to adequately prepare our society for the future" (Rennie Center, 2010).

The evaluation of this type of learning opportunity tells us that Andy and his peers enjoy this kind of learning and want more of it. Teachers, while challenged at first, will eventually embrace these approaches with the right support. Designing and delivering real-world learning with community mentors allows teachers to tap their own creative juices by developing learning opportunities, demonstrating their expertise about content, and exercising their professional judgment concerning performance. Evaluation also tells us that the credits earned are worthy in terms of the strength of learning they represent (Zuliani & Ellis, 2011).

Evaluation results also point to the many challenges that come with this work. Teaching in a classroom is hard enough; developing criteria for a credit-worthy experience in a real-world setting and setting the thresholds that signify proficiency are even more difficult—particularly since most educators who are currently in the workforce were not trained for such 21st century experiences (Zuliani & Ellis, 2011).

While we refer to the type of expanded learning opportunities described above as "ELOs," they link teachers and community mentors more intensively and are often much more robust and engaging than other programs that use the same term. As effective and supportive as the ELO efforts described here are, they currently only exist in small patches across the country. However, there are many possibilities for enriching the way we currently extend learning through creating and strengthening school-community partnerships and simultaneously deploying teachers and hands-on-learning with mentors.

How do we bring such efforts to scale so that ELOs are not just high quality add-ons to traditional school practices, but so they find their way to eventually defining educational practices more fully? What are the barriers to doing so? Seat-time requirements known as "Carnegie Units" may stand in the way of making ELOs a creditable norm. High stakes assessment rarely focus on the complex skills and knowledge that define high quality ELOs. If dollars follow the learner instead of supporting the classroom directly, will school budgets shrink even further? The public policy and practice challenges are daunting. Yet the political, educational, cultural, and economic tides may be turning in the direction of these ELO-like approaches.

The advent of the Common Core State Standards—a nearly universally adopted set of learning standards in the United States—is a step forward for those who seek a greater and better focus on complex skills and knowledge within applied settings. The development of next-generation assessments will also allow for more performance information than bubble filling provides. While far from perfect, these two improving aspects of standards and assessment—more amenable outcomes and better measures—are more aligned with what ELOs need to be successful.

From an economic vantage point, school is not getting any cheaper and the window is wide open for more cost-effective approaches to learning. While ELOs at scale have costs associated with them, the returns on investment in terms of retention, lower drop-out rates, and levels of skill attainment make them an attractive option to educators and taxpayers.

Culturally, technology is bringing such terms as customization and personalization into our social and business lexicon. Witness the advent of the PC, playlists, Amazon.com, Netflix, and the ubiquitous smartphone. In education, this wave of change has resulted in an explosion of tech-driven educational opportunities that is accelerating as fast as the appetite of younger, tech-savvy educators for modern ways of teaching. The burgeoning field of K—12 online learning that now defines some of our nation's largest stand-alone "school districts" is proof of technology's impact. How long will it be before modularization of educational opportunities gathers steam and squeezes out traditional school designs, much as iTunes has replaced CDs and record albums?

These exciting developments reinforce the notion that we are fast moving to a time when educators, parents, guardians, and/or students will be able to package learning based on need and interest—if they can afford it. If the attractiveness and quality of ELOs continue to grow, these inventive approaches will find learners who want to prepare for their future and who will stay authentically engaged as they do so.

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The opportunity for out-of-school-time, afterschool, summer learning, and extended- learning time providers is enormous; however, infighting currently defines much of this relationship. Maybe it is time to call a truce in the name of survival—or even move to a self-interested collaboration.

Leaders in these various movements could, for example, work together to design new types of learning modules and other learning opportunities that could be used in a variety of settings beyond the school day and school year. They could also work together to advocate for enhanced public funding to support ELOs, including freeing up funds that support existing federal programs (like Title I) so that ELOs are an allowable expenditure; enlarging the funding pool from the state (for example, creating a state innovation fund for credit-worthy expanded learning time); or increasing federal sources (for example, increasing the 21st Century Community Learning Centers funding).

One way forward in terms of deep collaboration is modeled in New Hampshire. As part of the evolution of ELOs in the Granite State, Learning Studios (developed through a partnership with the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future) are sprouting up, staffed jointly by teachers and afterschool providers. In these labs, students engage in real-world challenges in workplace settings.

At one Learning Lab, managed by Lebanon High School in the middle of the state, students identify problems to solve, make a plan to solve the problems, enlist community experts, identify specific learning outcomes that align with academic standards, and then execute their plan. Their projects, presentation, and videos are screened and discussed. The effort is linked to the emergence of new school accountability designs so the work "counts" and credits may be awarded.

Bullying, student-teacher relationships, and academic favoritism are some of the topics chosen by students. Researching, writing, collaborating, and making a solid argument are some of the student outcomes that are assessed.

This year in Providence, Rhode Island, 35 students have been actively engaged in a pilot initiative off-campus that involves a community-based ELO connected with the Providence Public Schools' (PPS) Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex. The management structure of this effort is a model for inter-sector collaboration, with some interesting implications for how all sides think about available funds. As part of the

pilot process, the director of the school's 21st Century Community Learning Center has worked closely with the Providence After School Alliance, or PASA (a long standing community entity that coordinates out-of-school-time work in the city), and school staff who have been coordinating and advancing the ELO initiative with students, faculty, and community partners.

The center director considers ELOs to be a connected part of the center's program at the school and has helped recruit students to take part in the ELO pilot. For the coming school year, the director has asked PASA to provide technical assistance to other 21st Century Community Learning Centers program providers to help guide them on developing eligible, standards-aligned programs that PPS could approve to be future credit-bearing ELOs. Additionally, the center director is encouraging programs from the ELO pilot to apply for grant funding through the existing pool of federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers funds in order to further connect the ELO initiative with the school's effort.

The director of expanded learning, who works jointly at PASA and PPS, has been working with district leadership to plan an expansion of the ELO initiative to other schools, in which the relationship with 21st Century Community Learning Centers will again be a hallmark of the initiative. PASA and PPS view these federal resources as part of a braided funding strategy, along with federal Title I, School Improvement Grants, and private funding, to support community-based staff who lead ELOs. These community partnerships are an essential component of the high school ELO work in Providence.

Furthermore, the collaborative work of the Providence out-of-school-time community already connects a number of high quality 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs and providers serving high school youth. In addition to the Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex program, many of the providers—including many of the 12 who are part of the ELO pilot—also provide programming through 21st Century Community Learning Centers structures at other high schools. This cross-fertilization of programs through this network will allow for an easier and faster replication of the ELO strategy at the new partner high schools in the coming academic year.

These and other stories tell us that there are more than enough opportunities, intelligence, experience, and talent to move ahead to collaborative work on a new learning ecosystem. 21st Century Community Learning Centers providers have a long, solid history of responding to market demands. Those programs serving high school students could right now begin to provide more high quality, real-world learning that links creative teachers and community mentors. School folks have long experience with standards and higher stakes assessments. Their leadership in meeting the challenges of the Common Core would be invaluable.

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Why not work together on the development of rigorous, interesting, and credit-worthy ELOs? As the location and time for learning becomes more varied, we should develop high quality ELOs that "blend" virtual experiences with rich student/teacher/mentor relationships. In these and many other ways, ELO designs become better, and natural allies find common ground.

The only thing standing in the way of a potentially historic collaboration is the deep commitment on both sides to sustaining themselves; however, in a wired, hyper-connected, ever-changing world, a joint reinvention for these education sectors is absolutely necessary. So, instead of modeling the losing battle between newspapers and magazines fighting for disappearing "eye-balls," these educational players could be more like fierce collaborators developing our education industry's "new media," finding ways to keep the customer engaged—and willing to pay.

The opportunity to move into this new learning time and space is enormous for the range of groups working on expanding learning, afterschool programs, summer initiatives, and out-of-school-time efforts by extending real-life learning through school-community partnerships. ELO work provides a true "sweet spot" for collaboration and learning from each other. Partners can develop low-cost, sustainable options that engage struggling students and better connect real-world, hands-on learning in the community with modern educational expectations. Such efforts can also involve families more in their students' successes.

The risks are considerable, but the rewards and opportunities are far greater. Just ask Andy and his peers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicholas C. Donohue, president and CEO of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, is leading efforts to reshape New England's public education systems to be more equitable and more effective for all learners. Previously, Donohue was a special master at Hope High School in Providence, where he oversaw implementation of the Rhode Island Commissioner of Education's order to reconstitute the school. Before his tenure at Hope High School, Donohue was commissioner of education in New Hampshire.

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