



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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Upgrading Afterschool: Common Sense Shifts in Expanded Learning for a Digital Age

The days when summer and afterschool learning programs that only offered “safe custodial care” were considered fine are thankfully behind us. Tectonic social changes—including demographic shifts that have placed most women with school-age children in the labor force, research breakthroughs in the learning sciences and in socio-emotional and brain development, and daunting national achievement worries—have all converged to place a major new emphasis on the quality of a child’s learning experiences throughout the typical school day, after school, weekends, and across the year, including summers.

Over the past decade the C. S. Mott Foundation, the Wallace Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and others have conducted groundbreaking programmatic and research initiatives to expand learning time after school and during the summer. These initiatives have defined “a new day for learning” (Herr-Stephenson, Rhoten, Perkel, & Sims, 2011; Time, Learning, and Afterschool Task Force, 2007). The recent convergence of scholarly research, program development efforts, and policy advocacy work have all pushed in the direction of a fresh “ecological” framework for learning that nests more responsibility in the nonschool hours. This “mind shift” has been helpfully characterized by scholars at the National Science Foundation’s Learning in Formal and Informal Environments (LIFE) Center as the “life-long, life-wide, and life-deep” approach to learning (Banks et al., 2007). Such a shift characterizes a natural progression in how we should think about learning in the 21st century.

It is now broadly understood that expanded learning programs can and must be much more than “graham crackers and basketball”—that is, they can play a critical role in young people’s lives. But what does a real mind shift look like? Currently, there exist dramatically different visions of the desired outcomes of expanded learning time programs. One vision is that afterschool and summer learning programs should be aligned with current education reform efforts—high-stakes testing, narrow accountability, and the Common Core State Standards that are directed at just two subjects. Another view—and the one we argue for here—is that expanded learning-time programs should exist as part of the larger ecology of a young person’s 21st century existence. This ecology is framed by the digital, interconnected world in which we all live and should, therefore, incorporate systemic links between what are now disparate venues of learning. Thus, we place great priority on youth participation and productivity in learning opportunities that burnish their civic and collaborative skills through the creative, evolving digital technologies so ubiquitous in the world.

Research shows that the past decade’s focus on accountability and high-stakes testing is leading to a more intensive emphasis on reaching all children, but it is inadvertently resulting in a curriculum for many low-income children that is narrower, fragmented, and oriented towards “direct instruction” instead of student-driven inquiry (Au, 2007). The Common Core, while arguably a strong baseline for student learning in the United States, are rightfully being criticized for a weak emphasis on 21st century competencies like creativity, collaboration, and communication (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2010), as well as for a narrow focus on only reading and math.

A New Vision for Learning

Expanding learning-time programs that focus with all good intentions on remediation and tutoring, but that extend traditional school structures into afterschool time, may experience weak attendance and missed opportunities because these efforts are too often disconnected from the rich learning lives of today’s youth. The Kaiser Family Foundation’s “Generation M” research and the qualitative work of Mimi Ito and colleagues (2009) document the explosion of interest in digital technologies that allow youth not only to “media multitask,” but also to explore, create, and share knowledge around their personal interests and across many knowledge domains. We believe that these experiences can be significantly leveraged and augmented in expanded learning-time environments.

We advocate another vision for out-of-school-time organizations—one that positions young people as creators, makers, and innovators. Our vision will allow youth to go deep into 21st century learning by focusing on *knowledge production* with the technologies pervasive in our world. Youth are increasingly doing incredible things through their engagement with digital media. For example, in online multiplayer games, they are collaborating with sometimes hundreds of people around the world to tackle complex challenges in the form of dragons to be slain. In fan communities, they write and rewrite favorite books like *Harry Potter*, extending plotlines and creating alternate endings, all the while engaging in rigorous feedback and revision processes that English teachers would admire.

Key Principles for Program Design

There are several outstanding models of innovation in the expanded learning-time domain that suggest a set of key principles to guide afterschool and summer learning leaders in designing new, digitally savvy, and integrated learning environments. The principles offered below are based on an examination of three exemplary innovators in expanded learning time: the YouMedia network, spearheaded by the Chicago Public Library; Global Kids, an afterschool leadership organization based in New York City; and the Computer Clubhouse network, which was developed originally by the MIT Media Lab and now includes approximately 100 community centers in over 20 countries (Kafai, Peppler, & Chapman, 2009).

- 1. Provide technological infrastructure that supports media design and production.** Providing access to technology is essential, of course, but this should be seen only as a first step. Programs should ensure that access to the Internet is relatively unrestricted, that files and programs can be downloaded, and that youth have ways to save personal work and access it using any computer. These elements are all essential to creating a space in which design and production activities with media can promote robust learning. Additionally, program developers should ensure that production-and design-oriented software and hardware are available. At the Computer Clubhouse, and in over 3,000 “Club Tech” centers operated by the Boys and Girls Clubs, software is available that supports computer programming, game design, graphic design, and audio and video production; moreover, hardware, such as video cameras, sound recording equipment, and digital cameras, can be checked out at some centers.
- 2. Create a culture of sharing meaningful media creations.** Some of the most important learning outcomes associated with digital media are tied to creating, sharing, and getting feedback from peers on projects that youth care about. This can happen through gallery showings, performances, screenings, “critique” sessions, and the creation of localized online spaces in which youth can review and comment on each others’ work. In 2009, Global Kids co-founded Emoti-Con, the annual New York City youth media and technology festival that brings together hundreds of youth from across the city to exhibit their digital creations in a public forum, get critiques from both peers as well as professionals, and connect with a larger community of media creators. These kinds of meaningful contexts for sharing work encourage youth to go deep and develop expertise through iteratively improving their projects.
- 3. Provide skilled mentors to support and respond to youth interests.** Adults, as always, have important roles to play in afterschool and summer learning programs. In connected, expanded learning programs, adults often provide mentoring around technology use and promote good citizenship practices associated with new media use and production. At YouMedia, skilled artists serve as mentors, leading workshops on specialized topics and helping youth organize projects around emerging interests. These highly skilled adults provide youth with role models and powerful images of engagement in expert practice and mastery of fundamental skills needed to do well in school and in life.

4. **Create mixed-age spaces.** One of the key aspects of 21st century learning environments is that they feature participants of many ages that have a range of experiences, backgrounds, and areas of expertise. Schools typically maintain the increasingly outmoded practice of grouping children by age, while most other successful learning environments leverage the strengths of mixed-age populations. At the Computer Clubhouse, groups diverse in age and experience ensure that participants can sometimes be learners and sometimes be leaders, with reciprocal benefits accruing on both ends of those relationships.
5. **Design spaces to build relationships!** Peer relationships matter most in effective expanded learning communities. Youth will rarely persist in an activity or remain a member of an organization if they do not form strong relationships to peers or mentors. YouMedia’s model incorporates both unstructured time for developing such relationships, as well as a conducive physical space in which youth can hang out, socialize, and develop bonds.

Recommendations for Extended Learning Practice and Policy in Afterschool and Summer Programs

In a digital age in which technology is a central part of kids’ lives, leaders in the expanded learning-time movement need to embrace a “mind shift” so that the United States can make dramatic progress by building a system of expanded digital learning, one based on pragmatic changes that acknowledge the ways learning is happening in the 21st century. In the next 5 years we recommend the following priority areas for expanding learning investments:

1. **Modernize places in every community.** With the goal of creating a new expanded digital learning road map in every community, each of the nation’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers should undertake its own “digital learning inventory” to determine what is currently being done to advance digital learning in local afterschool and summer programs. These inventories should identify the funds that are currently available, the barriers to using new resources for digital learning in these programs, and the capacity of local partners to contribute tools that are needed for technology-based innovations.
2. **Create professional learning communities.** Youth-serving professionals are too often behind the curve when it comes to understanding the capacities of new media for learning. They should look to models of new online professional communities that are forming across key professional associations and networks, such as the National Writing Project (NWP), Consortium of School Networking (CoSN), and city-based affiliations like the Hive Learning Networks. The expanded learning community should take up the challenge of creating a digitally savvy mentors corps to identify a cadre of capable leaders who can train and support youth-serving professionals, based on a blueprint for teachers offered by Levine and Gee (2011).

- 3. Build capacity and awareness.** A cadre of pioneering expanded learning organizations has already begun program development work around anytime, anywhere learning, including Think Together in California, the Digital Youth Network in Chicago, the Digital On-Ramps initiative in Philadelphia, the Kids and Creativity Coalition in Pittsburgh, and numerous others mentioned throughout this article. They are updating or creating new program materials and projects on digital media and expanded learning themes. We should support these leaders with research and development funds to document successes and failures, invite them to national conferences to share these, and use their models as the focus of the advocacy work of state afterschool networks to expand quality programs for a digital age.

Future investments in local program capacity can be advanced by recruiting champions for expanded digital learning, including governors, mayors, businesses interests in economic development, as well as chief state school officers, state boards, school districts, and influential nonprofit partners. Policy leaders, in particular, can (1) support initiatives that expand broadband availability in all of the federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers and in state and locally-funded afterschool sites; (2) encourage robust experimentation with digital platforms that allow expanded learning organizations to collaborate, share practices, and connect experiences that kids are having at various expanded learning sites; and (3) support pilot experiments in up to 10% of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers that focus on integrating evolving technologies.

Over the next 5 years, major innovations in digital technologies and learning are not only possible, but almost inevitable. Investment in educational technologies by venture capital is at a 20-year high (Ash, 2012), and many cutting-edge community educators are fashioning ways to connect the learning happening on youth's own time to what is happening in school and in out-of-school environments. Expanded learning time initiatives, including afterschool and summer programs, should help lead our nation out of its narrow educational mindset by promoting communities in which children and youth are positioned as "makers and creators," based on what they are passionate about. By unlocking new opportunities for "modern" learning, we can drive a pragmatic mind shift that will generate great benefits for our nation.

For More Information

- YouMedia - YouMedia.org
- Global Kids - GlobalKids.org
- Computer Clubhouse - ComputerClubhouse.org
- Club Tech of the Boys and Girls Club of America - myclubmylife.com/clubtech
- TASC's Where the Kids Are - tascorp.org/content/document/detail/3656/
- Digital Youth Network - DigitalYouthNetwork.org
- Common Sense Media's Digital Citizenship Curriculum - www.common sense media.org/educators/curriculum

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Rafi Santo is an educator, researcher, technologist and activist currently pursuing his doctorate in the learning sciences at Indiana University. His research and professional interests focus on the intersection of new media, educational design, interest driven learning, and online participatory cultures with a particular eye towards how to leverage these areas to create greater equity and democratization in society. He specializes in the design and implementation of digital learning projects and in understanding innovation in the education sector.

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