



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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Leaf Palaces and Illustration Worlds, or Why the Arts Belong in Out-of-School-Time and Afterschool Programs

As I worked on this article, Hurricane Sandy blew through New York. In my part of Brooklyn, school children had a full week of “out-of-school” time. In those long days I saw cardboard-box houses, gory detailing on Halloween costumes and ghostly front porches, Lego empires and Minecraft worlds, and leaf palaces in playgrounds. It has been a kind of natural experiment—and testament to the very human urge to create, make, and imagine.

Educating imaginative students will require in- and out-of-school opportunities, the rigor of classroom explorations, and the informal investigations that out-of-school time can nurture.

So it is sobering to think about what has happened to the opportunities to create during the school day. Since accountability for student achievement in math and reading has climbed, and budgets for public education have shrunk, time in the school day for what many people deem “noncore” courses like art, music, and even science, has been shaved. We can—and should—protest this loss. First, federal education laws actually include the arts in the definition of “core subjects.” Second, as a nation, we can’t afford not to turn that very human urge to create into educated imaginations. At the same time, these constraints should also spur us to seize the opportunities of out-of-school time and in afterschool and summer learning programs. Educating imaginative students will require in- and out-of-school opportunities, the rigor of classroom explorations, and the informal investigations that out-of-school time can nurture.

Think about it this way: Expanded learning opportunities in afterschool and summer programs may provide a setting particularly suited to arts learning. Educators can do more with these ungraded, uninterrupted blocks of time:

- **Offer longer stretches of learning.** *In the school day, time is frequently carved up in 40–50 minute segments. This is hardly enough time to set up, paint, and clean up—or compose—or rehearse.*
- **Introduce children to all kinds of teachers.** *In engaging afterschool and summer learning programs, arts specialists can teach new types of classes, classroom teachers can show off their arts skills, teaching artists can be instructors, and community volunteers can share their skills.¹*
- **Permit cross-age grouping.** *With no age- and grade-based structures, young people can work across ages and experience levels in ways that permit mentoring, modeling, and apprenticeships.*
- **Foster cross-disciplinary projects.** *Without the subject-matter strictures and structures of the school day, a theater project can be equal parts local history, interviewing skills, and theater production.*
- **Be porous.** *Well-designed afterschool and summer programs, because of their flexibility, allow for more travel and excursions. This could be a quick trip to collect leaves for a printing project, time in the school auditorium to watch the high school step team perform, or a more structured outing to a museum that includes learning to use public transit.*
- **Send the 24/7 message.** *When arts learning extends into out-of-school time, it communicates the message that the arts are not just a “class” but an avocation—even a way of being. A child can carry a sketchbook anywhere; (s)he can write lyrics on the bus.*

A Case in Point: Providence ¡CityArts! for Youth

Located in Providence, Rhode Island, ¡CityArts! is a community arts organization that has been providing free professional arts education to local young people ages 8–14 since 1992. Acknowledging the need for arts learning out of—as well as in—school, ¡CityArts! has joined forces with the Providence Afterschool Alliance (www.mypasa.org), a citywide effort to create “after zones,” areas of the city served by a common campus where young adolescents can engage in an elective set of courses that range from athletics to arts. At one participating middle school, Roger Williams, ¡CityArts! supports classroom teachers in integrating the arts, partners with arts specialists, and teaches free standing arts classes in out-of-school time both on campus and at its own studios.

Arts and Evidence-Based Practices

The staff at ¡CityArts! think long and hard about designing and implementing the courses that they teach in extended learning time, drawing on a range of evidence-based practices. Just a few examples illustrate how much more than “make and take” these 10-week courses are:

1. For two examples of this in action see www.bigthought.org/BigThought/SubNavPages/ThrivingMinds and www.citizenschools.org.

- *Each course is an exploration of major arts skills and techniques folded into a major project where students apply those capacities (Burnaford, Aprill, & Weiss, 2009). For instance in the course Illustration World, 11- to 14-year-olds explore a variety of 2D media, from paint to pastels to pen and ink, and learn the art of bookmaking. They also learn how to create characters and worlds to tell a story, creating books of their own. In the course Community Mural, 8- to 10-year-olds conceive, plan, and paint a giant mural for a community health clinic and plan for its opening.*
- *Each course develops life skills, like communication: iCityArts! teaching artists make time for discussion and reflection, interviewing and presenting in ways that build young people’s language skills—a particularly important part of learning in a neighborhood where as many as one in three families speaks a language other than English. These are exactly the kinds of oral language outcomes that are featured as an integral part of the English language arts standards in the Common Core.² For example, in a current course on heritage, students and teaching artist Victoria Ray have vigorous talks about what makes someone who they are—bringing in everything from accent to dress to what foods they like. At the end of the course, they exhibit and explain their work.*
- *Each course recognizes that family engagement can significantly amplify learning. At the end of every session, youth plan a “Teach Back” session where they become the instructors, make a lesson plan, and invite whomever they want. In that session, they teach the lesson to their guests. Families get an evening out, they experience of the pleasure of being a learner, and they get a deeper understanding of their children’s talents and interests. In a neighborhood where many families struggle economically, these events are also a chance to celebrate families’ hopes and aspirations for their children.*

The presence of these strong and evidence-based practices is beginning to have a clear impact on Roger Williams students’ learning and behavior. As of the 2011–12 school year:

- *chronic absenteeism has dropped from 42% to 29%,*
- *discipline referrals have decreased by 10%: and*
- *since 2009, the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on state tests of student achievement has risen by at least 10 percentage points (from 31% to 41% in reading; from 19% to 32% in writing) (Wolf, Farbman, & Sherlock, in press).*

Developing Human Capital

iCityArts! staff knows that these positive outcomes only occur with high-quality teaching and learning. As a result, the organization invests heavily in building the human capital it takes to do this work well.

Sustaining experienced teachers and teaching artists. The organization created a position for a director of education, who has the explicit assignment of building a culture of learning and reflection for adults as well as young people. In this position, Adrienne Gagnon observes every class and talks with each instructor about its design and implementation. At the end of each course, Gagnon holds a focus group for young people in which they talk with

2. See www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf.

her—without their teacher—about what they wanted to do, what they learned, and what they think could be better. Building on this knowledge, Gagnon designs regular workshops in which teachers explore the needs and questions identified through those observations. This year, for example, the teaching artists are looking at how they can support student collaboration, having seen how much support young people need in this area and how individualized many of their course projects were. Every Thursday night, the studios are open after the last class so that teaching artists can stay on to do their own work in a collegial atmosphere.

The organization makes a similar investment with their partner teachers at Roger Williams. In August, before school started, ¡CityArts! brought researcher Eileen Landay from the ArtsLiteracy Project to talk about her new book, *A Reason to Read: Linking Literacy and the Arts*. The second half of the day they spent in the studios working on arts-integration projects that could fuel English language arts learning throughout the year.

Expanded day teaching artist project: Building the next generation. Executive Director Barbara Wong knows, however, that she also has to build the skills of the next generation of teachers and teaching artists. Three years ago she and her staff wrote and won a 3-year AmeriCorps grant to fund the Expanded Day Teaching Artist Project (EDTAP). This project supports five full-time (1,700 hours/year) and 21 part-time (300 hours/year) members working as teaching artists in the two middle schools that are partnering with ¡CityArts!. Team members apply and are selected for a combination of their arts skills and commitment to service in the public schools. Once they are accepted, team members receive an extraordinary level of professional development throughout the year that they serve with EDTAP:

- *They teach side-by-side with skilled arts specialists during the school day, learning many of the important strategies for being effective teachers in an urban middle school that is striving to improve.*
- *In the afterschool hours they work in a the well-run PASA program, staffed with a skilled site coordinator, where they are able to observe and learn how other arts and youth development organizations design and deliver programs.*
- *In addition, every Friday, team members have an entire day devoted to their professional growth. In the mornings they meet together to go over the triumphs and challenges of the past week, discuss major issues, and attend meetings and events relevant to their practice. (For example, they recently went to hear Milton Chen from the George Lucas Foundation and Edutopia speak.) In the afternoons, they curate and post student work, write individual blogs about student learning, and plan for their courses.*

The Need for Policy Supports and Funding to Provide Access to Quality Afterschool and Summer Learning Infused With the Arts

Giving all children the chance to grow up imaginative means that we have to keep a variety of art disciplines within the regular school day and year. At the same time, those hours will, for the foreseeable future, be limited. So there is an equally important need for accessible, quality afterschool and summer learning that features the arts and other forms of creative work. This demands, however, that communities make exactly the kinds of commitments that Providence has:

1. funded options for expanded learning days with teaching artists who work both in the school day and in well-run afterschool programs and include time for elective and sequential arts learning for all children;
2. municipal and state funding for free and affordable high quality afterschool programs;
3. eligibility for experienced local cultural organizations to be partners and providers; and
4. continued federal funding for public service options, like Americorps, which make it possible for talented individuals to be supported and trained while they offer their time and energy.

Without such commitments, access to high quality imaginative activity could become a luxury good open to only those children whose families can locate and afford fee-based extended learning opportunities. Without those commitments, children growing up in the contemporary United States, particularly those who live in poor neighborhoods, will experience an imagination divide perfectly aligned to the income divide their families struggle with.

For this reason, we should take our commitment to growing up imaginative even further. While most afterschool and summer learning programs already embrace—and some vigorously advocate for—the notion that out-of-school learning programs should be more than additional hours of homework and tutoring, the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative should strengthen this program requirement so that it is universally accepted and applied. Afterschool and summer learning programs must *enrich* and *extend* learning, including the arts. Similarly, arts and cultural groups must continue to be eligible providers.

Continuing professional development must be built into those same programs. In fact, we need Artistcorps—a national program offering an affordable way to train a new generation of skilled and experienced teaching artists coupled to a set of public service opportunities for any adults who want to do the work of passing on imagination.

Those leaf palaces towering in Brooklyn playgrounds? Those illustration worlds coming to life in Providence—one day they might be buildings, bilingual children’s books for the next generation of young readers, or novels that delight and console—but only with universal opportunities to play, make, and invent.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dennie Palmer Wolf is a researcher and writer who has long argued for the role of the arts in development and education. Her current work focuses on the research, policies, and initiatives that would guarantee all children the opportunity to develop their creative capital. For current colleagues, projects, and writing see www.wolfbrown.org.

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