



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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Engaging Families in Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs for Middle School Youth

For over 30 years, research evidence has been growing that engaging families in children's learning has a powerful, positive, and lasting impact on students' academic outcomes and life prospects (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jaynes, 2005). Most of this research has been done in schools, but there is ample reason to consider applying what has been learned to programs that provide expanded learning opportunities to children and youth after school hours and during the summertime.

Research and Background

Consider the important new study *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). This study identifies "close ties with families and the community" as one of five "essential ingredients" that characterize schools that have improved significantly compared to schools that have stagnated or declined. The others are strong leadership, high professional capacity, instructional guidance, and a student-centered learning climate.

In schools that have turned around, teachers are familiar with students' cultures and backgrounds. They spend time in the community, invite parents to observe in classrooms, try to understand parents' concerns, and embrace parents as partners. Parents respond by becoming involved in school activities and addressing teachers' concerns about their children's schoolwork.

Not only can community-based programs benefit from incorporating these same elements, but in turn, they can help schools develop closer ties with families and surrounding community. Afterschool programs make it a priority to create a welcoming environment in which parents can feel comfortable engaging in their children's education (Strickland & Jean, 2005). When community organizations work inside schools, they can create a gateway for parents to become more involved in their children's learning.

Conversely, community organizations that operate such programs can provide an opening to the neighborhood for teachers. For example, a local program could sponsor a "community walk" for school and program staff to tour neighborhoods and identify local assets. Family members and local residents can serve as tour guides.

A key difference between high- and low-achieving students is how they spend their out-of-school time. Afterschool and summer programs often cultivate links with community partners and school programs, such as AVID and Gear-Up, to expand resources available to students and their families. Through these connections, families can have access to a variety of academic and extracurricular activities, such as tutoring, martial arts, music, drama, and dance, as well as education classes for parents. These opportunities allow and encourage adolescents to explore the larger world with guidance from their families (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007).

In a study of 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Strickland and Jean (2005) reported on promising practices that promote family participation in children's learning. The six programs in the study—half of which served middle school students—employed a variety of strategies to engage parents. In all sites visited, children generally responded positively to their parents' presence. Parents of students in the middle grades noticed improved behavior, attitudes, and communication at home, as well as greater attention to schoolwork, all of which they attributed to their children's participation in the program.

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*Corwin Middle School 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program
in Pueblo, Colorado*

The afterschool program at Corwin Middle School maintained both informal and structured communication with students' families. Whether face-to-face exchanges at pick-up time, or through monthly newsletters the site coordinator published with student help, families were made aware of what was happening with their students (Strickland & Jean, 2005).

Families liked the way parent-teacher conferences were coordinated with the afterschool program's family night. During the Family Night/Conference, teachers were in the gym during the afternoon and early evening, and a simple dinner was available. Parents said they could easily find and talk with teachers, then make follow-up appointments if needed. Because several teachers worked in the afterschool program, parents were familiar with them, which also helped create a welcoming feeling for families.

A key to the program's success was hiring "community advocates" to focus on families whose children were struggling in school. The advocates built relationships and offered assistance without "meddling" in families' lives. In home visits, the advocates listened to what parents wanted then connected families to resources and made referrals to counseling. The advocates also built rapport with students and teachers and helped "work things out" to avoid suspension. When the program began in 2000, attendance at parent-teacher conferences averaged about 23%. During the second year, parent participation shot up to 90% and remained at that level.

While the Corwin afterschool program ceased operating at the end of the 2008 funding cycle, the program's foundational commitment to family engagement continues to exert major influence to the present day. Corwin has been restructured as a magnet school that requires 18 hours of volunteering per family each year, thus ensuring that parents are significantly involved. The former director of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program at Corwin Middle School is now in charge of the Upward Bound program at Pueblo Community College. She has cultivated significant parent participation in that program, which serves some of the same families whose children attended the afterschool program at Corwin Middle School. Corwin's legacy of strong family engagement endures!

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Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School in Nassau County, New York

Communication with parents is an integral part of Elmont's before-school and afterschool support programs for 600 seventh- and eighth-grade students. Parents and teachers collaboratively design academic intervention plans that give personalized support for class work and the New York State Assessments. Teachers follow up by tailoring instruction to meet students' needs. The program is staffed entirely by teachers from the school, allowing close alignment with what's being taught in the classroom (National Education Association, 2011).

Almost 100% of the students enrolled at Elmont are children of color, and many are from immigrant families and single-parent households. The school had, however, a 94% graduation rate in 2011, exceeding the state standard of 80%. Over 90 % of its graduates attend college. In 2006, when the program began, only 31% of Elmont students earned an advanced Regents diploma. In 2010, it rose to 49% (New York State Education Department, 2011).

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Salomé Ureña de Henríquez Campus in Manhattan

Salomé Ureña de Henríquez is a community school developed by the New York City Department of Education and the Children’s Aid Society, a local nonprofit organization. The campus serves a low-income Latino population and includes three middle schools and a high school. A full-time parent coordinator arranges for adult education (including ESL, GED, computer, financial literacy, and citizenship classes), as well as parent support groups, clubs, and advisory councils.

Through leadership training, parents learn to advocate for themselves and their children. They go to City Hall to promote afterschool and school-based health centers, launch letter-writing campaigns for immigrant rights and youth summer work opportunities, and do community organizing for housing rights. In addition, they learn how to navigate the education system, how to make the best use of parent-teacher conferences, and what to do to get a child admitted to college.

A recent evaluation of afterschool programs at six Children’s Aid Society middle schools shows that students made significantly greater gains in math, reading, and positive behaviors than students who did not participate in these afterschool programs. Finally, the evaluation noted that the Children’s Aid Society’s community school model contributed to a positive school climate and enhanced support structure not usually found in stand-alone afterschool programs (Krenichyn, Clark, & Benitez, 2007).

What Do Families Want?

A study in four U.S. cities asked African American parents about what they want in afterschool programs (Robinson & Fenwick, 2007). For participating parents, “afterschool programs are more than a place for homework, a snack, and basketball,” they offer hope for improving their children’s life chances. In the parents’ opinion, the following features are what make a high quality program:

- **Commitment to learning:** *Achievement, motivation, homework completion, school engagement, reading for pleasure, and math competence*
- **Constructive use of time:** *Participation in creative and fun activities*
- **Support:** *Personal attention, positive family communication, a caring environment, and positive adult relationships*
- **Social competence:** *Interpersonal and cultural competence, decision making, and conflict resolution*
- **Boundaries and expectations:** *High expectations and adult role models*
- **Positive identity:** *Self-esteem, personal power, and a positive view of the future*

Effective Strategies

Middle school students experience significant and often difficult transitions. Providing young people with expanded learning opportunities afterschool and summers, while simultaneously engaging families in those programs and in the regular school day, creates a “win” for everyone involved. These programs, including those supported through the 21st Community Century Learning Centers initiative, should take advantage of their less formal settings and frequent connections to community partners to reach out to families. By linking families more closely to afterschool and summer learning programs, as well as to schools and other supportive community institutions and organizations, they can improve student success. Below are several strategies that merit attention and inclusion:

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Focus school-family-program partnerships on improving student outcomes.

Link the content of afterschool classes and tutoring to the school curriculum, and use student achievement data to hone in on skills that need strengthening. Be sure to deliver the actual programming in hands-on, interesting, and engaging ways because doing more of the same is unlikely to boost student achievement. Helping families stay current with their students’ progress keeps information flowing full circle. Families are much more likely to understand, accept, and accommodate suggestions if educators and staff of community partner organizations work together in afterschool or summer settings to explain data and provide recommendations.

Communicate frequently with families about their child’s progress and about ways they can address their child’s unique learning interests and needs.

Adolescents will profit by personal attention from adults, including their parents, in afterschool and summer programs. Adults in these programs should meet regularly with parents before and after school hours to discuss student progress, share information, and confer on strategies to support learning. Programs should involve parents, as well as use classroom teachers, staff of youth development organizations, and well-organized volunteers from cultural and scientific professional associations and other community groups, to increase the amount of personal attention accorded to youth to help more of them succeed.

Collaborate with parents to develop individualized intervention plans for students.

Classroom teachers, community teachers, and youth development staff in the afterschool and summer programs should use meetings with parents to provide recommendations of specific academic support programs for students at risk of falling behind. Teachers and program staff subsequently should develop instructional strategies based on feedback from parents and should incorporate those strategies

in the expanded learning settings and during the regular school day. These planning sessions are also useful venues for identifying student and family interests (for example, music, sports, fitness, robotics competitions, technology, languages) that expanded learning programs can then include in their offerings, weaving in needed basic skills and social and emotional development.

Build relationships and a sense of community with families.

School-community partnerships can employ “community advocates” who develop rapport with families whose children are at risk of failure or dropping out of school. Advocates can help bring about positive changes in their children through sharing both good and bad news and helping them to understand their children and communicate with them better. This rapport can, in turn, be used to develop more relevant and engaging afterschool, evening, weekend, and summer programming and opportunities for families (for example, sessions on the requirements for attending and succeeding in college, joint family-student art or math nights, and cooking and family gardening classes).

Provide a safe space for families and school staff to connect.

Comprehensive afterschool programs, including 21st Century Community Learning Centers—along with their community partners—should turn their schools into hubs of community life. They could, for example, create a “family room” on campus that provides a welcoming space for parents and other caregivers to attend workshops. The room can be staffed by a parent coordinator or a community resident whose children graduated from the school. Community partners can sponsor community-building events, such as an annual heritage or neighborhood celebration, that bring hundreds of families and other community members to the school.

Build parents’ capacity to participate in multiple ways.

Expanded learning programs, including 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, can develop and help coordinate parent leadership institutes. (See for example the Parent Leadership Institute offered by the Children’s Aid Society in New York City.) This type of leadership training can advance parents’ capacity to contribute to the life of their children’s schools (Epstein et al., 2009). In a yearlong institute, for example, parents could learn many ways to foster their own and their children’s education, support their families financially, develop social capital, and advocate for high quality schools for their own and other people’s children. Leadership development can also include showing parents how to secure more expanded learning opportunities for their children and how to identify community partners needed to improve the afterschool and summer programs that their children attend.

Both research and practice make clear that neither schools nor afterschool programs will succeed in improving student outcomes without engaging families. *If families are out of the loop, there is no loop*, and the focused energy that is needed to make and sustain gains will dissipate. Fortunately, there is much good information on how to do this effectively if we will just make use of it.

For More Information

Family-School-Community Partnerships 2.0, a new report from the National Education Association, offers many examples of wrap-around and community education programs that collaborate with families to support student achievement. For a free copy of the report, go to www.neapriorityschools.org/family-school-community-partnerships.

Afterschool Programs as an Oasis of Hope for Black Parents in Four Cities is a 2007 report from the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) that includes detailed information about family engagement in afterschool programs. It is available online at www.baeo.org/files/mottSummary.pdf.

Focus on Families! How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After School is a 2006 report from the Harvard Family Research Project that profiles programs that engage families and offers information about strategies and approaches. To download a free copy, go to www.hfrp.org/out-of-school-time/publications-resources/focus-on-families!-how-to-build-and-support-family-centered-practices-in-after-school.

The Harvard Family Research Project website has an entire section on out-of-school time, with several publications, evaluations, and recorded webinars available for free download. See www.hfrp.org/out-of-school-time and www.hfrp.org/complementary-learning.

The Coalition for Community Schools has published a number of reports and studies on the benefits of community schools for students and families. The most recent is *Community Schools Research Brief, 2009*. To download a free copy, go to www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/CCS%20Research%20Report2009.pdf.

The Children's Aid Society's National Center for Community Schools recently published a user-friendly manual entitled *Building Community Schools: A Guide for Action*. To download a free copy, go to www.nationalcenterforcommunityschools.org.

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