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Year-Round Learning: Continuity in Education Across Settings and Time Through Expanded Learning Opportunities

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This is the third and final brief in a series created by Harvard Family Research Project and the National Conference of State Legislatures to address topics in expanded learning opportunities (ELOs). This series highlights research evidence on ELO best practices and effects on youth and discusses the policy implications related to this research. For more information, visit www.hfrp.org/NCSL-Briefs.

What Are Expanded Learning Opportunities?

Expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) offer structured learning environments outside the traditional school day, through before- and after-school; summer; and extended-day, -week or -year programs. They provide a range of enrichment and learning activities in various subjects, including arts; civic engagement; and science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). They also offer academic support, mentoring and more. High-quality ELOs often engage participants through innovative learning methods and complement what students learn during the school day. ELOs are part of a range of supports that can help youth succeed, along with positive influences from family, friends, school and other enrichment activities.

Year-Round Approach to Expanded Learning Opportunities

A widening achievement gap and low rates of high school graduation in the United States[1] have led many educators and policymakers to rethink ideas about when, where, how and what youth are—and should be—learning. Many of these educators and policymakers believe that a traditional academic curriculum alone no longer is adequate to prepare young people to succeed in their careers and adult lives; in order to thrive, they also need 21st century skills such as problem-solving, collaboration and creativity. In addition, while education has traditionally been the domain of schools, there is increased recognition that students do not stop learning when they leave the classroom.

In this expanded vision of education, no single setting offers the diverse resources necessary for youth to gain all the skills and knowledge they need to become well-rounded, successful adults. Instead, youth receive access to a wide range of expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) that expose them to experiences that complement and amplify their education in the classroom. Collectively, these ELOs, in conjunction with schools, families and other community supports, can engage youth to master a broad set of skills that can set them on the path to high school graduation along with post-secondary and career readiness.

Year-round learning is one of the most promising approaches to addressing the full range of youth's educational needs. In this approach, community-based initiatives connect school, afterschool and summer learning to ensure that educational opportunities reinforce and build upon each other across settings, are seamless throughout the year and address a broad and diverse set of needs. This strategy also allows schools to leverage existing resources and programs in the community so that, even during tight budgetary times, they can offer students full, multifaceted learning experiences. Different year-round learning models are described in the Related Resource text box.

Related Resource

Harvard Family Research Project's research report, *Year-Round Learning: Linking School, Afterschool, and Summer Learning to Support Student Success*, describes a number of ways programs and initiatives have been structured to ensure that young people have the opportunity to learn and grow throughout the year.

Programs and initiatives highlighted include:

- Organizations that operate summer and afterschool programs with links to the school day,
- Community-based programs that work with the same cohort of participants over multiple years,
- School-led programs that partner with afterschool and summer programs to increase learning time, and
- District- and community-wide initiatives that link school and out-of-school activities.

Report available at www.hfrp.org/Year-round-Learning.

Benefits of Year-Round Learning Programs

By increasing student access to educational activities that are aligned with and complement the regular school day/year activities, year-round initiatives bolster learning in several ways. In particular, continuity across time and settings allows:

1. Shared resources among educational partners,
2. Family and youth engagement in learning,
3. Prevention of summer learning loss, and
4. Coordinated systems to track and use data

A discussion of these benefits and examples of programs follow.

1. Shared resources among educational partners

Year-round learning initiatives require a shared responsibility for education, so schools do not have to bear the full weight of this task. As part of this collaborative effort, schools, community-based organizations and social services often can pool their resources to help year-round learning initiatives coordinate services to improve overall efficiency. Such measures can be especially important in the face of shrinking budgets.

Collective resources also can allow the partners involved access to a wider range of funding sources than they otherwise would have individually. The resources available across partners often span public, nonprofit and private sectors. While many funders are interested in supporting only one component of a year-round learning initiative (e.g., only summer activities), careful planning can allow partners to coordinate and combine their resources to create funding that covers costs across all aspects of the year-round initiative.

The After-School Corporation's (TASC) *ExpandED Schools Program* is a network of New York City public elementary and middle schools that partner with community organizations to expand the schools' learning time. Students are provided with hands-on science, literacy, arts and recreation activities that may not be available during the school day. To date, these schools have received funding from federal, private and local school sources. While some barriers remain to effectively combining these funding streams into a unified system, the schools have demonstrated early successes in being able "to stretch the benefits and magnify the effects of each."[2]

2. Family and youth engagement in learning

Year-round learning initiatives encourage family involvement in children's education to keep youth engaged in the programs year-round and over time. As the "primary bridge between multiple learning settings, parents play an important role in helping to broker and foster their children's learning experiences."[3] By engaging in their children's education, parents can help children connect what they are learning across different environments—including school, after-school and summer programs and activities at home and in the community. Parents also can connect their child's learning over time—across the day, week and year and from one year to the next.

The structure of these initiatives also encourages youth engagement in learning. In particular, the scope and duration of these experiences can help sustain youth's interest not only by allowing them to gain knowledge that builds over time, but also by providing enough variety to avoid boredom. In addition, the initiatives often create personalized learning settings that respond to each child's needs, thus helping to encourage continued participation. For example, ELO program and school staff often work with families and children to create individual achievement plans that identify each child's specific needs and possible ways to address them. Program staff also can tailor activities to meet the needs of members of a particular group, such as those determined by demographic features (e.g., eighth graders, girls or English language learners) or by interest (e.g., science, sports or art).

The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) *Freedom Schools® Initiative* provides summer and after-school enrichment to help K-8 children fall in love with reading, increase their self-esteem and generate positive attitudes toward learning. The program's curriculum includes a focus on parent and family involvement. Recent data suggest the initiative is helping reduce summer learning loss. At sites in North Carolina, for example, nearly 90 percent of summer program participants maintained or improved their reading skills during the summer of 2010.[4]

3. Prevention of summer learning loss

If they are not able to participate in structured learning experiences during the summer months, youth suffer substantial losses in what they have learned during the school year.[5] On average, students end the summer a month behind where they were academically before the summer break.[6] To compensate for this loss, teachers and students often need extra time for review at the beginning of the school year, which detracts from current-year studies. In addition, summer learning loss tends to affect students unequally; those from disadvantaged families are much less likely to have access to educational activities during the summer than their

more advantaged peers. This discrepancy contributes to the achievement gap between low-income youth and their higher-income peers.[7]

To address this summer learning loss, year-round learning initiatives often attempt to connect school-year and summer learning experiences to reinforce traditional academic lessons. They also offer activities that teach new skills and broaden students' abilities using modes of learning that differ from those available during the school year. Providing these options helps to ensure that youth remain engaged in the learning process. Quality summer programs help youth maintain the knowledge gained during the school year; in some cases, participants show academic improvement.[8] An added advantage of these year-round initiatives is that all youth, regardless of their family's financial status, have access to high-quality educational experiences that extend into the summer.

Since summer programs often begin early in the day, they may have fewer time constraints than after-school programs. This additional time offers students several benefits. First, it provides opportunities to thoroughly engage in a topic or activity of interest to them. Such interest-driven educational activities not only help students realize that acquiring knowledge is fun, but also can help create a self-sustaining interest in learning.[9] Second, this additional time allows program staff flexibility to schedule more "fun" experiences such as field trips than can be offered during the school year. These activities encourage continued participation in valuable educational programming. Finally, summer may offer programs more time to engage families to help continue children's learning at home. For example, programs can recommend educational computer games parents can play with their children to help reinforce critical skills taught in the program. These activities also can encourage parents to learn along with their children.

Higher Achievement (HA) prepares Mid-Atlantic middle school students from low-income communities for acceptance into top high schools and keeps them on track to enroll in college. In 2010, 73 percent of school year HA participants continued in the program into the summer. Both HA participants and their nonparticipating peers exhibited learning gains. Nonparticipants tended to become involved in other summer learning opportunities, which likely helped them keep pace with HA participants. However, participants who had been involved in HA for two to three years scored significantly higher than nonparticipants on both comprehension and problem-solving standardized tests, suggesting that longer-term program involvement may be necessary for major learning improvements.[10]

4. Coordinated systems to track and use data

Teachers, families, agencies and other school staff have valuable information to share about the youth with whom they interact, including data about their interests and progress related to academic achievement, social functioning and problem-solving skills. The procedures for exchanging information must have stringent safeguards to protect youth privacy, including clearly defined restrictions on data access. Within these constraints, however, it is important for data to be shared so those involved in children's education—including schools, community agencies and families—can effectively use the information to consider all aspects of a student's needs and interests and identify how to best meet them. Access to this information also can help year-round learning initiatives identify successes and any gaps or areas in need of improvement.

This data sharing can take many forms, from informal discussions between partners to shared online data systems. Beyond simply sharing data, many year-round learning efforts are working to bring data from a variety of agencies, including schools, after-school programs and summer programs, into a single system to track youth's participation and progress in various services and activities. For example, schools can provide information about student grades and test scores to help ELO programs and parents understand children's academic strengths and areas in need of improvement. Streamlining these data systems creates a coordinated approach so access to information about the youth is as seamless as the services they receive.

The *DC SCORES* after-school program is designed to increase youth's school engagement, physical fitness levels and sense of self-worth through soccer, poetry and service-learning at middle and high schools in Washington, D.C. A customized tool allows DC SCORES staff to enter program data and generate automated analysis, creating charts and graphs of key data to view real-time results of the program's effectiveness. For instance, this tool, used in conjunction with a participant survey as part of a 2009 evaluation, revealed that DC SCORES participants showed improved school engagement, which correlated with increased feelings of belonging and self-worth.[11]

Policy Implications and Examples

- Efficient and maximum use of resources can occur when community-based organizations share and coordinate youth resources with schools and social services. Policymakers can help these efforts by supporting more flexible funding initiatives to cover year-round

learning strategies as a whole, rather than funding them individually. The Massachusetts legislature, for example, funds the After-School and Out-of-School grant program, which supports innovative out-of-school time opportunities, including after-school, before-school and summer programs. Preference is given to grant proposals that develop collaborations across settings through partnerships between schools and community-based organizations.

- State legislators also can look for barriers to braiding and/or blending across various funding streams. Combining state money with funds from various other sources can help maximize use of public money for youth programs. In a number of states, legislative task forces or coordinating councils help identify ELO funding streams and barriers to combining dollars from different sources. One such task force is the Illinois Youth Development Council, which was created in 2010 by S.B. 3543.

- As state policymakers look for ways to increase youth engagement in learning, they can consider policies that encourage schools and parents to work with summer and after-school programs to tailor out-of-school programming to youth's interests and needs.

- When states consider measures to help struggling students and close the achievement gap, state policymakers may want to take into account summer learning loss and the role summer programs can play in minimizing that loss by reinforcing what is learned during the school year.

- Sharing information among schools, parents, agencies and community partners can help coordinate efforts to support a child's learning and identify supports the child may need. As state legislators review existing state data systems, they may consider how partners can share certain information or data points in a secure manner.

Notes

1. Robert Stillwell, *Public School Graduates and Dropouts from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2007–08 (NCES 2010-341)* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Department of Education, 2010), 3–6.
2. The After-School Corporation, *A Fiscal Map for Expanded Learning Time (ELT): Second edition* (New York: The After-School Cooperation, 2012), 3.
3. Erin Harris, Heidi Rosenberg, and Ashley Wallace, *Families and Expanded Learning Opportunities: Working Together to Support Children's Learning*, ELO Research, Policy, and Practice, no. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Family Research Project, 2012), 1.
4. D. Bruce Taylor, Adriana L. Medina, and Sandraluz Lara-Cinisomo, *Freedom School Partners Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools Program Evaluation Report* (Charlotte, N.C.: The Center for Adolescent Literacies at UNC Charlotte, 2010), 23.
5. See, for example, Douglas B. Downey, Paul T. von Hippel, and Beckett A. Broh, "Are Schools the Great Equalizer? Cognitive Inequality During the Summer Months and the School Year," *American Sociological Review* 69, no. 5 (2004): 613–635.
6. Jennifer Sloan McCombs et al., *Making Summer Count. How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2011), 20.
7. Karl L. Alexander, Doris R. Entwisle, and Linda Steffel Olson, *Summer Learning and Its Implications: Insights from the Beginning School Study,* (New Directions for Youth Development, 2007), 11–32, quoted in Ron Fairchild and Gil Noam, eds., *Summertime: Confronting Risks, Exploring Solutions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2007), 33-43.
8. McCombs et al., "Making Summer Count,"25, 29, 71–72.
9. Brigid Barron, "Interest and Self-Sustained Learning as Catalysts of Development: A Learning Ecology Perspective," *Human Development* 49 (2006): 193–224.
10. Amy Arbreton et al., *Summer Snapshot: Exploring the Impact of Higher Achievement's Year-Round Out-of-School-Time Program on Summer Learning* (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 2011), 25–26.
11. America SCORES, *DC SCORES Program Outcomes Report* (Washington, D.C: DC Scores, 2009), 4, 10.

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