



# 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](http://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](http://www.expandinglearning.org).

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# **Achieving, Connecting, Thriving: Afterschool and Summer Learning in Collaboration With Schools**

Too many young people struggle in school and need more targeted and engaging learning opportunities to succeed. Afterschool and summer programs provide such opportunities to learn and grow, both in a formal school setting and in the community beyond the school walls. For low-income families, however, such programs are in short supply and are typically inaccessible for a variety of reasons (for example, high cost; lack of transportation; or the use of different programming schedules for children of various ages, making coordination of child care difficult).

Research supports what educators and parents have long known: strong afterschool and summer programs produce results for children and youth. There is growing evidence that quality afterschool programs make a positive difference in the areas that contribute to school success—higher attendance, better grades, and improved behavior (Huang et al., 2007; Goerge, Cusick, Wasserman, & Gladden, 2007; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). There is substantial evidence that summer learning loss is a serious problem that disproportionately affects low-income students (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007; McCombs et al., 2011). Equally compelling is the mounting evidence that quality programs can stem, or even reverse, summer learning loss and prepare young people to begin the next grade ready to learn and build upon their previous success (Borman, Goetz, & Dowling, 2009; Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000).

Unfortunately, in the search to find the “silver bullet” for American education, afterschool and summer learning are often considered optional and, in a time of tight budgets, frequently pitted against each other in competition for scarce resources. A more productive approach is to explore afterschool and summer learning as complementary strategies that can combine to strengthen instruction during the regular school year. Understanding and leveraging this connection will enable greater numbers of students to experience academic and developmental success.

Community organizations increasingly have the “people power” to help more young people keep up, catch up, and get motivated to stay in school and learn. These organizations often find it difficult, however, to link their services to struggling students or schools, and vice versa. How can we better harness these expanded learning opportunities to stimulate students’ interest and success? What would a well-coordinated, integrated, and sustainable system of afterschool and summer supports look like?

This paper explores how Boston is working to connect afterschool and summer learning, uniting schools and community partners to help more young people achieve, connect, and thrive. Other similar efforts are also emerging across America. Several will be cited near the end of the article, but many more are needed to meet the demand.

## **A Vision for an Integrated Learning System**

Under the leadership of Mayor Thomas M. Menino, Boston has doubled the number of young people in afterschool programs over the past decade. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers program has been a vital source of funding for this expansion in Boston. Recently, major funding from other public and private sources has also been invested in these programs. As a result, nearly every elementary and middle school in the district now offers its students some form of afterschool program. More than 700 organizations offer over 1,700 afterschool and summer programs for Boston’s children. This proliferation of programs and community partnerships brings extraordinary potential to address students’ academic and social-emotional needs and to stimulate their interests and motivation.

Afterschool and summer learning programs are critical to supplementing instruction and meeting the educational and developmental needs of our young people. They help provide students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences that are critical to success in school, college, careers, and life. They bring resources and approaches that no one school, or even school district, could provide on its own. Moreover, they are generally cost effective when compared to other models because they can take advantage of a wide array of school and community resources that often are underutilized in the afterschool hours and during the summer.

Boston stands as one example of a district that is creating a unified and integrated learning system that addresses the whole child, throughout the whole day and the whole year. This system embraces a comprehensive approach to student learning, drawing on the strengths of a variety of community partners, from sports and the arts to social justice, leadership, and environmental education.

## **A Framework for School-Community Collaboration**

In order to align school, afterschool, and summer, we developed a common vision and shared vocabulary for the skills that students need to succeed in school, work, and life. Boston stakeholders are uniting around a framework to support the implementation of this vision. Derived from the best of the youth development field and afterschool program providers themselves, the Achieving-Connecting-Thriving Framework is informing how schools and community organizations collaborate.

This framework highlights the skills that research from a number of fields, including education and developmental psychology, suggests are important for success in school, college, and 21st century careers.

- *“Achieving” is about self-management skills—the skills necessary to succeed academically, including critical and creative thinking, flexibility, and planning—that help students master an objective or complete a task.*
- *“Connecting” is about relationship skills—including teamwork, communication, and respect—that help students form supportive, positive relationships.*
- *“Thriving” is about perseverance skills—including drive, efficacy, self-awareness, and self-regulation—that help students maintain the effort required to become successful.*

These skills must be nurtured in supportive environments, and afterschool and summer programs represent a valuable opportunity in this area. Successful partner organizations have the ability to provide these skill-building experiences, and their capacity stems from their flexibility in staffing, use of time, and even location. For example, through the Boston Summer Learning Project (which involves selected Boston schools and community partners), students take advantage of the city’s broad array of resources, including leading universities, cultural institutions, and natural spaces.

Afterschool and summer programs activate academic content through hands-on, project-based learning. These experiences allow students to apply academic content in tangible ways and to build background knowledge they may have been lacking. They can make learning and school feel more relevant to a student, helping both students and adults answer the age-old question, Why do I have to know this? At the same time, students’ interests and aspirations are stimulated by better access to the world around them, and new contexts and styles of working strengthen relationships with adults and with peers.

Collectively, afterschool and summer programs engage and motivate students, build community, and allows teachers and youth development staff to work together focused on the needs of young people. The persistent achievement gap is all too often an access gap because students and families are not sure how to easily find the resources they need. Furthermore, the variety of approaches allows schools and community organizations to test new ideas and understand what works and what needs to be adjusted. Information of this sort is valuable to policy makers, funders, school leaders, and parents.

This kind of learning happens best as part of a citywide agenda, rather than school by school or nonprofit by nonprofit. Boston's partnership agenda is driven by an approach that is student centered, standards aligned, and results focused. The Boston Public Schools and Boston After School & Beyond, an intermediary that catalyzes partnerships among schools, city agencies, community groups, and philanthropy, coordinate strategies at the district level. Funders recognize the power of collaboration, evidenced by the Boston Opportunity Agenda's commitment to summer learning as part of cradle-to-career strategy.

Other cities across America are also working to forge stronger connections and alignment among schools, afterschool, and summer learning. Interested readers should explore how the following cities are making better use of time, partnerships, and public and private funding streams:

- *The Providence After School Alliance ([www.mypasa.org](http://www.mypasa.org)) and Nashville After Zone Alliance ([www.naza.org](http://www.naza.org)), which are structuring geographic hubs of learning and development focused on middle school students*
- *The After-School Corporation (TASC) in New York City ([www.tascorp.org](http://www.tascorp.org)), which is expanding the school day, drawing a variety of financial and community resources*
- *After School Matters in Chicago ([www.afterschoomatters.org](http://www.afterschoomatters.org)), which is providing high school students with apprenticeships to develop marketable skills*
- *Big Thought in Dallas ([www.bigthought.org](http://www.bigthought.org)), which is making "imagination part of everyday learning" by integrating the arts with education*

## **What's Next?**

A full decade into the 21st century, it is well understood that responsibility for educating children cannot reside with just one sector of society, especially if we are to realize our national potential on the global stage. Schools cannot do it alone—and neither can parents. Even together, schools and parents are not necessarily equipped to overcome the pernicious effects of poverty. To develop our students to their full potential, we must harness talent and resources from across multiple sectors—from schools and community organizations to businesses and institutions of higher education. But schools and community organizations cannot work in isolation. The systems must be aligned and the learning goals in schools must be reinforced at home and in the community.

As federal policy makers look to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, they should recognize that the achievement, connection, and opportunity gaps are inextricably linked. Low-income students fall behind their higher-income peers because they do not have access to the same opportunities, many of which afterschool and summer programs can provide. Also, these students often do not have regular connections to community organizations and resources that can help them learn, set goals, and develop aspirations. Public policy should promote nimble, flexible, and cost-effective approaches that help school districts work closely with community partners to address the specific needs of students in targeted ways.

As we build on more than a decade of growth and success in afterschool and summer learning, we look forward to advancing this agenda and addressing the challenges that face all of us. For example, how do we make sure there is equitable distribution of these programs? How do we ensure program quality and connect students with the opportunities that best meet their specific needs and interests? How do we ensure that they serve students who could benefit most, including English language learners and those with disabilities? How do we create sustainable and affordable partnership models?

The answers to these challenges are well within reach. Working together, school districts and their nonprofit partners are establishing citywide agendas that merge the best of afterschool and youth development with public education. Funding opportunities for strategies to expand learning and development are in short supply. That is why municipal and school district leadership must work together. Intermediaries also can play a pivotal role in leveraging and coordinating resources and organizations to link school, afterschool, and summer learning strategies.

Limited funding also means that the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program remains an essential resource, perhaps now more than ever. It is the only large-scale funding source for expanding learning afterschool and during the summer that catalyzes school-community partnerships and family engagement around a locally designed agenda of learning improvement. It is critical to realizing our vision of an integrated learning system that applies the strengths of schools and community partners—after school and during the summer—in ways that build the skills necessary for school, work, and life.

Local school, community and municipal leaders can take a number of actions to grow and improve expanded learning opportunities after school and during the summers:

- *Set community goals under which various partners can organize themselves, play to their strengths, and measure progress. In Boston, the Superintendent's Acceleration Agenda has been adopted by private funders and community partners.*
- *Establish a regular venue where coordinated strategies are devised and implemented across sectors with monitoring to ensure mutual accountability. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino appointed a Partnership Council, managed by Boston After School & Beyond, for this purpose.*
- *Build a data system that catalogues opportunities, allows parents and other caring adults to find appropriate program matches for students, and supplies information for analysis of the afterschool sector.*
- *Document the lessons learned between schools and partners, as well as across sectors, to maximize quality and build on success.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Chris Smith** is executive director of Boston After School & Beyond, a citywide intermediary dedicated to increasing learning opportunities for Boston's youth by aligning school, afterschool, and summer efforts. Prior to joining this organization in 2008, Smith led partnership, policy, and measurement strategies in the areas of K–12 education, high school and college completion, and workforce development for the Boston Private Industry Council and for the U.S. Department of Education.

**Carol R. Johnson** has served as superintendent of the Boston Public Schools since 2007, having been appointed by a unanimous vote of the Boston School Committee after a national search. Under her leadership, the 57,000-student district has focused on closing achievement and access gaps as well as graduating all students prepared for college and career success. Johnson previously served as superintendent in Memphis, Tennessee, and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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