



# 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).

**Paul E. Heckman**

Associate Dean, Professor, and Co-Director of CANDEL (Capital Area North Doctorate in Educational Leadership), School of Education, University of California, Davis

**Carla Sanger**

Founding President and Chief Executive Officer, LA's BEST After School Enrichment Program

# How Quality Afterschool Programs Help Motivate and Engage More Young People in Learning, Schooling, and Life

As we move into the second decade of the 21st century, knowledge in all fields has expanded and yielded developments far beyond the imagined world of science fiction writers just 20 years ago—consider, for example, the iPhone and iPad, tablet computers, and the Android operating system. Even more amazing is the *access* that these and other devices allow to the vast amount of information and knowledge that exists today, as well as the *rapidity* with which that information and knowledge will continue to expand in the near future.

In this context, *how* we learn, especially as young people, matters. While children cannot possibly hope to acquire more than a fraction of the sum total of human knowledge, they should be involved in experiences that are most likely to help them learn and benefit from our extensive and ever-expanding knowledge base.

## Background Research

New insights from cognitive and neuroscience research into how children acquire knowledge should be inspiring dramatic new strategies and structures for learning in schools and other educational settings—unfortunately, this is often not the case. There are glimmers of hope, however, in the afterschool arena, especially in conjunction with efforts undertaken in the last decade through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative. Today, there are great examples of these insights that are being incorporated into afterschool practice, enhancing student engagement and creating the conditions that will lead to a greater likelihood that students will stay in school and graduate on time (Mahoney, Parente, & Lord, 2007; Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

## Research on Learning

Unlike earlier views of individual capacity—“some have it, some do not”—current research suggests a continuously learning mind, one that is plastic and adaptive into late adulthood and that has enormous capacity for storing memories and knowledge, unless serious brain damage has occurred. Even then, the brain’s plasticity asserts itself, as the heroic Gabrielle Giffords has demonstrated so well (Sacks, 2010).

Because individuals are learning continuously from infancy, they acquire insights about themselves and the world around them that influences the way they make sense of their daily interactions and the circumstances they confront. Moreover, prior knowledge forms the foundation for any new learning.

Recent research about learning has also identified intellectual curiosity and interest as essential for learning and intellectual development. Interest and curiosity are the basis for motivating the “hungry mind” (Stumm, Hell, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2011). The more a student exhibits curiosity, which is rooted in interest, the more he or she can focus on, bring effort to, and engage in meaningful tasks. This aspect of learning, while underutilized in many educational settings, has great potential and has been incorporated into quality afterschool and youth development programs.

Additionally, research also illuminates the importance of caring social relationships and the contributions that those relationships make to learning (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). Human beings exist in a world with other people. They are “hardwired to connect” (Commission on Children at Risk, 2003). Meaningful relationships with others matter to children, youth, and adults and to their learning.

The research on belonging in educational contexts is relatively new, and the direction of causality has not been definitively established. Nevertheless, many correlational studies have shown that students who report caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in school have more positive academic attitudes and values and are more satisfied with school. They are also more engaged in academic work, and they attend school more and learn more (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004).

This means that children and the adults with whom children interact in educational settings must have and avail themselves of opportunities to demonstrate that they care about each other in meaningful ways. In that process, children can more easily take risks, explore, express themselves, and learn.

## Research on Afterschool and Summer Learning

The general trends in the research literature about quality youth development, afterschool, and summer learning programs show the relationship between the reported engagement and motivation of children and youth and positive outcomes like school and program attendance and positive academic gains in reading and math, even when attendance is low (Hirsch, Mekinds, & Stawicki, 2010).

These general trends in the research literature about the positive consequences of quality afterschool and youth development programs are nicely summed up by the National Research Council’s report *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (2002). That volume expounds on the important qualities of educational activities that will likely engage children and youth in their learning, such as active construction of

knowledge; disciplined inquiry; relevance of material being studied to the student and his or her community culture; regular feedback on progress; opportunities to rethink work and understanding; recognition of and use of students' knowledge, interests, and dispositions; and students working together and tutoring each other. Children will be more likely to work well with each other and with their teachers when the adults demonstrate care and high regard for them.

In their meta-analysis of the research literature about afterschool, Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) found that "... participants demonstrated significant increases in their self-perceptions and bonding to school, positive social behaviors, school grades and levels of academic achievement, and significant reductions in problem behaviors." Moreover, "there were significant increases in youths' self-perceptions, bonding to school, positive social behaviors, school grades, and achievement test scores. Significant reductions also appeared for problem behaviors."

This and other research suggests that when designing afterschool and summer learning programs, community and education leaders must understand that disaffected and underserved children and youth will only attend noncompulsory educational programs if the program fosters high student engagement—that is, if students remain active, stay focused, and experience enjoyment throughout their participation in the program (Huang, Gribbons, Kim, Lee, & Baker, 2000; Shernoff, 2010; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Students' engagement requires developing program designs and activities that, at least in the minds of students, stands in stark contrast to the experiences of boredom, distraction, and apathy that typically characterizes their experiences with conventional academic tasks and/or settings (Mahoney et al., 2007). As a consequence, much of the design effort undertaken by program leaders should focus on creating and fostering highly engaging social settings/environments that will maintain student attendance and participation with the program each day.

## **Support for Practice That Works**

Many of these research findings have influenced one of the most important funding streams in this country developed to create vibrant learning environments for children after school: the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative. Through the funding requirements of this federal program, public schools partner with community-based organizations to create programs designed to connect students to their homes, schools, and communities. These programs have had more independence, leverage, and flexibility within school systems than most categorical programs had ever experienced before in the history of public education. High quality 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs emphasize creativity, crusade for fresh ideas, continuously energize and motivate staff, and combat any tendency toward bureaucratization.

LA's BEST, like a number of other high quality programs, welcomes the responsibility for training what is primarily a young staff with limited background knowledge and experience in working with children. Most staff members reside within 2 miles of the schools in which they work, and collectively they more closely reflect the ethnicity and daily experiences of the children who are enrolled in the program. LA's BEST works

to build a common understanding and common language about how children learn and what motivates them to learn. This helps create the kinds of learning environments that promote engagement and support the development of trusting, meaningful relationships.

Unlike the regular school-day program, based on predetermined curricula developed by those living far away from the neighborhoods served, programming in LA's BEST is developed at each site, starting with a focus on the students and their interests. Activities in program areas of enrichment, recreation, and nutrition are created based on the interests, curiosities, and even fears of the students. At the same time, the program at each site also complements and expands skills in literacy and numeracy that, in turn, support learning during the regular school day.

Distinctive youth development values are infused within the program culture at LA's BEST. All staff are encouraged and expected to embrace the principle "Nothing we do is more important than the effect it has on the child." Afterschool programs like LA's BEST have the luxury, for example, of not having to be on page 10 of any textbook by Tuesday at 4:00 p.m. If a planned activity does not have the respectful engagement of students, staff members are expected to change the activity. LA's BEST staff members at each site receive training to deliver engaging learning activities and to "monitor and adjust" as needed. Each site is assigned two itinerant support staff, who conduct frequent site visits to monitor program implementation. These traveling staff members also assist staff in achieving activity performance goals through the steps of *inquiry*, *observation*, *assessment*, *debriefing*, and *planning*. Traveling staff, generally more experienced than site-based staff, communicate clear, concise, and observable indicators of high quality practices at each step. Additionally, consistent collaboration and communication by site staff with principals, teachers, and other regular school-day personnel promote tighter alignment of program efforts in support of enhanced student learning.

Additionally, LA's BEST works annually with more than 100 community-based organizations to respond to children's interests and needs by providing opportunities to engage in seasonal sports and games, experience the visual and performing arts, participate in science and math activities, learn how to use new technologies, and acquire information about ways to improve health and nutrition.

The LA's BEST program is a clear and compelling example of a program that reflects quality engagement features. There are other programs that, similarly, have developed and enacted programs to engage youth deeply and meaningfully. Robert Halpern (2009) describes several apprenticeship programs involving young people in various settings, such as schools; youth-serving organizations; and arts, civic, and other cultural institutions. In these programs youth engage in meaningful "real world" activities related to the professional, artistic, and civic work that reflect their career interests. In such an "apprentice-like" relationship, the young person interacts with and learns alongside the adult, who has expertise in the particular area of interest. The student gains knowledge, skills, and habits of mind from the planned activities, social interaction, and performances undertaken with the adult(s).

In his Presidential Address at the Meetings of the Society for Research on Adolescence in 2010, Reed Larson describes a number of youth-serving programs involved in a study he is conducting. Each of these programs seeks meaningful engagement of youth in consequential efforts in which they can make a difference in their own lives and in their community. Larson shares the reflections of one student about the events: “I wasn’t super interested. . . [but when] I found out a lot of stuff about the schools, what they were doing, I was like ‘Hey, that’s wrong!’ because that [had] happened to me.” He then described becoming “really into it, really psyched” (Larson, 2011, p. 325).

### **Evidence of Success for LA’s BEST**

Through its long-time collaboration with UCLA’s National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing (CRESST), LA’s BEST has more independent, longitudinal evaluation data and anecdotal results than any program of its kind in the country. Research has found, for example, that students in LA’s BEST are 20% less likely to drop out of school than students who do not participate in the program (Huang, Kim, Marshall, & Perez, 2005). LA’s BEST students are also 30% less likely to commit juvenile crime compared to peers not in the program (Goldschmidt, Huang, & Chinen, 2007).

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Successful afterschool and summer programs should incorporate the following principles:

- 1.** Young people should be actively encouraged to share what is real to them.
- 2.** High quality, effective programs should work to forge strong connections between students and staff, reinforce connections between new knowledge and old, and strengthen connections between what a child already knows how to do and what he or she would like to learn.
- 3.** These programs should support the strengthening of life skills, such as resourcefulness, grit, and resiliency that are critical to a child’s whole development.

Ultimately, this site-based, personalized approach to children’s learning and engagement after school will generate positive outcomes that are observed not only within the context of the afterschool program itself but during the regular school day as well.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Paul E. Heckman** is associate dean, professor, and co-director of CANDEL (Capital Area North Doctorate in Educational Leadership) in the School of Education at University of California, Davis. His areas of expertise and research interest include curriculum theory and change; educational ecology of communities; educational leadership; school restructuring; organizational arrangements and structures; and educational change and invention in urban communities, schools, and afterschool programs.

**Carla Sanger** is the founding president and chief executive officer of LA's BEST After School Enrichment Program. Sanger has been a specialist in children's education policy and advocacy for more than 40 years in the public and private sectors. Over the course of her career, she has been a public school teacher, curriculum writer, supervisor of day care services for the state of New Jersey, executive director of LA Child Care & Development Council, president of the California Children's Council and co-chair of the California State Department of Education Task Force on School Readiness.

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