



## 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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# The Potential of Quality Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs and 21st Century Community Learning Centers for Supporting School Success

It used to be simple: an elementary education in reading, writing, and arithmetic sufficed for the many; a secondary education sufficed for some; and a post-secondary education sufficed for the very few.

As a nation we began to see that this simple formula was inadequate. We have added the need for knowledge of science, technology, and the arts to our understanding of a basic education, along with the need for the 21st century skills of collaboration and creativity. We have also realized that everyone needs, and is entitled to, this basic education.

We have developed more sophisticated ideas about how to provide universal basic education. We now see the need to provide expanded learning opportunities for children and youth during afterschool hours and summers. We realize that home and community, as well as school, need to be part of a comprehensive plan for helping children and youth learn.

At the same time, we are learning a lot more about the key components that make these expanded learning opportunities work better and more effectively. The articles that follow provide concrete, detailed lessons from research and best practice about how to make afterschool and summer programming more effective in a number of key areas that help young people to be more successful in school and to graduate from high school—the first rung in the ladder leading to full participation in 21st century economic and civic life.

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative has kept pace since its initial authorization in 1994 by incorporating these understandings in its program guidelines (Penuel & McGhee, 2010). In its current form, the program is designed to provide opportunities for academic enrichment, youth development, and family learning (Harris, 2010). The program currently funds about 11,000 centers serving almost 1.7 million children and youth (Afterschool Alliance, n.d.).

In addition, in the decade before the Great Recession hit in 2008, there were efforts by some municipalities, foundations, United Ways, and school districts to provide resources to create and expand learning opportunities in the time after school and during weekends and summers. In the wake of the recession, the growth of this movement has slowed a bit, but there is an expanding chorus of voices calling for more engaged learning time, especially for struggling young people and those in low-income schools and neighborhoods.

With tight budgets, there is more interest in both improving quality and increasing access to expanded learning programs. While not all afterschool and summer programs have fully realized their potential to affect the lives of children and youth in the many ways suggested by the growing body of research in the field, the wealth of new information about what makes programs work well, as well as heightened interest in quality and access to programs, put us in a very positive place to make significant new advances.

The work done over the past decade by our two organizations— Foundations, Inc. and the Annie E. Casey Foundation— has taught us a few lessons about how thoughtful afterschool and summer experiences can make a difference in school success, especially in under-resourced communities and low-performing schools. The recommendations below suggest a few ways to maximize the potential that already resides in the 21st Century Community Learning Centers and in similar local and state initiatives to promote school success.

- **Align in-school and out-of-school learning.** *Afterschool and summer learning programs can do what they do best—offering homework help and hands-on, fun activities—in service to the same standards and objectives that students are expected to meet during the school day. Alignment does not mean doing more of the same beyond the school day and year. It typically specifies arrangements to ensure regular, two-way communication and coordination between teachers and afterschool and summer program providers. Such coordination may take extra effort when 21st Century Learning Centers are located outside of school buildings (Penuel & McGhee, 2010), but it is nevertheless possible, and indeed necessary.*
- **Identify and respond to individual learning needs.** *A key aspect of alignment is focusing out-of-school-time activities on individual students' learning needs. Afterschool and summer programs can usually accommodate more intensive interventions for striving readers—interventions that give striving readers more learning time in more individualized settings outside of the school-day classroom—and can be especially effective in stemming summer learning loss. Providing interventions especially requires close coordination with school-day and school-year programs as to individual students' current academic needs, appropriate materials, and progress. The construction and sharing of individual success plans, to which all pertinent staff contribute, can greatly facilitate this kind of coordination (Foundations, Inc., 2011).*

- **Pay attention to health and school attendance.** *Physical and mental health issues can interfere with attendance and keep students from learning in school-day and out-of-school-time programs, but these problems are often overlooked. Afterschool and summer program staff can share information with other education professionals about students' possible health needs and assist in addressing chronic absenteeism. In this regard, the community-school collaboration that is central to the 21st Century Community Learning Centers should pay more attention to these health and attendance issues, and other school- or community-based initiatives to expand learning should add them to their agendas.*
- **Partner with families.** *Afterschool and summer program staff often have more opportunities than school-day staff to interact and develop positive relationships with families. Out-of-school-time staff can be a critical link between families and the school, not only communicating about school matters but also gathering information about students' interests, coordinating services, and connecting families to each other for support.*
- **Partner with community groups and organizations, and treat school, home, and community as a unified system.** *Children learn wherever they are. To be strategic in helping them get everything they need to succeed in school, the many "educators" in each child's life can join forces. Unlike any other major education initiative, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative requires school-community partnerships, family engagement, and more and varied engaged learning opportunities for young people. As a result, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative invites systems-thinking, in which school, afterschool, and summer-program providers, homes, and the community create a system of supports that takes each partner's unique contributions and makes them add up to an integrated whole that paves the way to school success. Leaders at all levels of 21st Century Community Learning Centers programming should be at the forefront of systems-thinking. It also makes sense for leaders in other afterschool and summer initiatives to incorporate this type of framework in their efforts to help children develop and learn.*

These ideas illustrate and provide additional insights and examples for getting the full power out of 21st Century Community Learning Centers and similar afterschool and summer learning initiatives.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Rhonda H. Lauer** is president and chief executive officer of Foundations, Inc., a national nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization committed to improving educational experiences for America's most vulnerable children and youth—throughout the day, everywhere they learn. Prior to leading Foundations, she worked in the School District of Philadelphia, one of the nation's largest, as associate superintendent, principal, administrator, and teacher. She also served as superintendent of the Southeast Delco School District. She tours the country as a speaker and panelist to help inform policy and improve education quality. She received her bachelor's and master's degrees from Temple University.

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