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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Technology Makes Learning Available 24/7: Digital Learning in Expanded Learning Spaces After School and During the Summertime

- Students in a shopping mall office space, retaking courses they previously failed
- A group of inner-city students producing a high-quality music video that features poetry, sociology, and urban development
- Teens participating in nationwide arts events while developing graphic design skills or learning video gaming technology
- Students gathering to compete in robotics competitions
- A school district increasing student achievement over the summer while tightening its budget

These are all examples of how digital learning can have a powerful impact on the lives of students outside the regular classroom. Such opportunities are increasingly within reach for schools, districts, and communities.

The need for these opportunities is great. The future of the American economy increasingly depends upon students graduating from high school ready for college and a career. Momentum is building to expand learning time for students to help meet these challenges, but most efforts have been focused on elementary and middle school students. Meanwhile, many of the nation's high school students are still struggling. Schools now have an opportunity to accelerate the pace of improvement by taking advantage of the learning opportunities offered by the effective use of technology in afterschool, weekend, and summer learning environments and by building new or better partnerships with community organizations, employers, and 2- and 4-year colleges.

Almost three out of ten students fail to graduate from high school within four years, and the number of over-age, under-credited students continues to plague American secondary education. There are many reasons why students drop out: boredom, lack of motivation, pregnancy, or the need to work (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). Even among those who do graduate from high school, only about one in four students is deemed college-ready in all four tested subjects on the ACT, and one in three students will need to take at least one remedial course at the postsecondary level. Together, these challenges have significant implications for the nation's economy (ACT, 2011; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011).

Despite ongoing efforts to improve public K–12 schooling, this lack of progress is not entirely surprising. The American high school experience, despite enormous changes in the global economy and advances in technology, has remained largely the same over the last 50 years. Schools are still confined to the 180-day school year and the 6-hour school day. At the same time, dwindling budgets have become commonplace in most states and districts.

Multiple forces are converging to create a significant opportunity to influence education powerfully within the next 2–3 years. The technology available for instruction continues to improve, while the cost of that technology continues to decrease. More and more students today are digital natives, already accustomed to the rapid feedback, collaborative nature, and ease of use of many digital technologies. Schools are ramping up for the online assessments linked to the Common Core State Standards adopted by most states (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012). Additionally, recent federal regulatory trends are freeing states and districts to innovate with greater freedom and flexibility. To accelerate the pace of progress, every institution focused on the education of youth should have a comprehensive strategy for the effective use of digital learning tools to improve career and college readiness or risk continued stagnation.

Successful Technology Strategy Elements

Leaders looking to expand learning opportunities through technology and digital learning should begin with a strategic review of their goals, challenges, and current settings. There is no one right solution or strategy, and the effective use of digital learning outside the regular classroom can look very different in various learning environments. It is also critical that leaders focus on the instructional needs of students first and then look at the ways in which technology can be used as a tool to meet those needs. Local and state education leaders need to redefine their roles in order to function as "orchestra conductors of learning." They should tap the rich array of available and reliable community, business, and college partners to deliver and support digital learning during the afterschool hours, weekends, and summers, rather than rely exclusively on a single instrument for delivering instruction—the traditional school (that is, the traditional 6 hour school day, the 180-day school year, and school spaces) that have defined and constrained formal learning opportunities for children and youth for generations.

Expanding learning time is a key strategy for schools and districts desiring to be more innovative and economically efficient in how they structure and deliver teaching and learning. The idea of anytime, anyplace learning has especially strong potential for high school students, whose unique needs and challenges are often best met outside the traditional high school structure. Consequently, school and community leaders should consider a range of options for expanding learning time.

Summer programs

Summer is a critical time for districts hoping to make progress in closing the achievement gap. Summer learning loss is well documented, and many districts struggle to fund or support summer learning programs. Technology can make these programs more accessible and affordable. At Rawlins High School, in the rural town of Rawlins, Wyoming, students have access to many summer school options through a blended-learning program in which they spend some time in the school and some time participating in the courses online. Because of the reduced costs to the district, Rawlins is able to provide access to many more courses for the same total price while keeping at-risk students on track for graduation (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011).

Walled Lake Consolidated School District, in Oakland County, Michigan, has been implementing a one-to-one laptop program (one laptop per student) since 1999. The district began offering summer school programs online in 2008, starting with 300 students. This approach has helped the district cut per-student summer school costs nearly in half. The program utilizes a blended approach, with an online course combined with biweekly face-to-face interactions with a teacher (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Afterschool programs

There are also many examples of the successful use of technology-based learning programs that operate during the hours after school. In Wichita, Kansas, the school district operates dropout recovery centers in which students can take computer-based courses in office spaces in local malls and community centers and on high school campuses. Licensed teachers are onsite, and the hours are flexible. Credit recovery centers located inside high schools serve students who have fallen behind but not yet dropped out by allowing them to take courses after school. The cost of these centers is just one-third of the district's per-pupil expenditure (Mackey, 2010). Another center, LifeSkills, of Orange County, Florida, is a public charter school located in a shopping center. Many of LifeSkills' students had dropped out or were failing when they came to the center. Students advance based on demonstrated competency. Many of these students hold jobs and, therefore, need a flexible school schedule; the school's design and technology meet that need (Wise, 2011).

The Thurgood Marshall Academy for Leadership and Social Change is a Harlem middle school. As a member of The After-School Corporation's (TASC's) network of expanded learning time schools, the academy partners with the Abyssinian Development Corporation (ADC) to expand the learning day by 3 additional hours. Terrance Roumph, a math teacher, uses the Khan Academy's online video library to provide students with interactive practice exercises, immediate assessment, and feedback after 3:00 p.m. Students view tutorial videos and practice at their own pace while they review the day's concepts and preview the next day's topics. Embedded assessment and tracking components provide the teacher with immediate feedback, allowing him to plan face-to-face interventions with students. Thanks to the school's shared staffing with the ADC, Roumph is joined by an AmeriCorps member, who helps students with everything from logging on to socio-emotional issues. Roumph also found that using online tutorials engages parents and guardians, who log on to help their children at home and track their progress (Curry & Jackson-Smarr, 2012).

Expanding the times during which high school students can access learning can promote college and career readiness through increased time for core academic subjects, more personalized and customized learning, and on-call tutoring services. Some school districts have also found that when they implement one-to-one technology initiatives or bring-your-own-device programs, supported by adequate Internet access and learning management systems that are available 24 hours a day, they are effectively lengthening the school day. In Forsyth County, Georgia, Chief Technology Officer Bailey Mitchell found that the district's bandwidth use increased dramatically during the afterschool hours and in the evenings as students logged on to the district learning system to continue their work (Mitchell, 2012).

Expanded Learning Time at a Crossroads

The research supporting the use of technology in expanded learning time is still in its infancy because the pace of technological innovation is so rapid; however, an analysis of multiple high-functioning afterschool programs shows that students in technology-rich programs attend for longer amounts of time, and that staff in those programs receive more professional development and have higher expectations for their students. Additionally, technology-based programs are more likely to present material in relevant and engaging ways (Huang et al., 2010). An analysis of one technology-based literacy program, Scholastic's "Read 180," shows that computer-based programs can be successfully implemented in out-of-school settings with proper planning and accommodations (Hartry, Fitzgerald, & Porter, 2008).

Expanded learning programs now stand at a crossroads. Over the next 2 years, as states work to implement college- and career-ready standards along with online assessments, there are opportunities for expanded learning programs after school and during summers to step up and partner with communities, 2- to 4-year colleges, schools, and states to provide strategic, integrated, and powerful learning opportunities. It is imperative that schools and communities come together to develop plans and action steps for how they can not only better utilize technology to accelerate the pace of improvement, but also do so outside of the traditional classroom—after school, during the summer, and in ways that make learning truly a 24/7 experience.

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