



# 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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## Family Involvement in Expanded Learning Programs for High School Students

Research, common sense, and practical experience all make it crystal clear: *Family involvement is critical for student academic success.* Consider the following research findings:

- *Low parent interest in a child's schooling is associated with substandard student achievement (Steinberg, 1996).*
- *Bogenschneider (1997) studied 8,000 high school students in nine high schools in Wisconsin and California and found that when parents were involved in their teen's schooling, students reported higher grades in school. Parental involvement showed consistently positive results, regardless of the education level of the parent.*
- *Parents play a critically important role in their children's academic achievement and social-emotional development (Comer, 1980; Eccles & Harold, 1996).*
- *Various parenting, volunteering, and home learning activities positively influence student grades, number of course credits completed, attendance, behavior, and school preparedness, regardless of student background and past achievement (Simon, 2001).*

Family involvement is also critical to student success in expanded learning programs offered after school, on weekends, and during the summer. Moreover, many such programs offer literacy and other educational activities for the entire family, and these programs are, therefore, of particular importance to students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. According to Ellen Gannett, director of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, afterschool and summer learning programs “integrate the best of teaching and learning and engage youth in active, positive youth development and enrichment opportunities that will inspire them to become academically successful, good citizens, physically and emotionally healthy, artistic, social, problem solvers, and lifelong learners” (Gannett, 2012). In fact, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, the federally-funded expanded learning programs, have been shown to improve student grades and test scores, lower dropout rates, and generate a sense of competence among students (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

## Elements of Family Involvement

Most expanded learning programs include a family involvement component. At the most basic level, programs typically incorporate a system of communication with families, a plan for family involvement, and an inviting program environment for families. High quality programs, however, also include many or all of the following components:

- *They establish a parent/community advisory committee that meets regularly.*
- *They distribute a family handbook that can include such items as family support activities, a calendar of events and guidance in helping children in school.*
- *They offer educational experiences for families and share community resources with families.*
- *They collect informal and formal feedback from families and community partners to determine program strengths and weaknesses.*

Expanded learning opportunities at the secondary level for students can include, but are not limited to, work-based experiences, use of innovative technology, preparation for college and careers, community service, and/or personalized school plans. In the remainder of this article, we will explore the involvement of families in expanded learning programs for secondary students and offer recommendations in developing this component.

## Effective Strategies for Family Involvement in Secondary-Level Expanded Learning Opportunity Programs

A variety of family involvement strategies are available for parents of high school students participating in expanded learning programs.

**Homework/tutoring contracts.** One such strategy is a *homework/tutoring contract* for families, parents, and guardians, such as the one developed by the Center for Afterschool Education at Foundations (Weisburd, 2007). This model flexibly addresses whether the parent wants the student to do homework during the afterschool program, how the student works best, and when the student needs assistance.

**College application assistance.** Another effective strategy for involving families in expanded learning programs is to hold information sessions for parents and students to discuss the college application process. During these sessions, staff can also provide parents with information about financial aid (Peterson & Fix, 2007). Family tours of local colleges are also a helpful activity in the college preparation process.

**Alternative schools.** For academically challenged students, Big Picture Learning offers a promising approach. Established in 1995, this organization (<http://www.bigpicture.org/>) operates an alternative school model for unsuccessful students in 60 sites across the country. As part of the model, students create a personalized educational plan with their parents. Technology and community resources are important components of the program, and students take advantage of learning opportunities before and after school, at home, and within the community (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011).

### **Examples of Successful Secondary Expanded Learning Programs**

Among the many expanded learning programs designed for high school students, the following program examples are noteworthy for both their reach and their documented successes with older youth.

**After School Matters.** Successful secondary expanded learning programs often focus on careers and/or college preparation. After School Matters (ASM) is a nonprofit organization that offers Chicago teenagers high quality, out-of-school time opportunities in the arts, science, sports, technology, and communications at no charge ([www.afterschoolmatters.org](http://www.afterschoolmatters.org)). Its project-based programs introduce teenagers to careers in education and help them develop job skills. The program provides regular updates about student progress to parents, as well as offering community updates and regular e-newsletters. Results show that participants missed fewer days of school, failed fewer courses, and had higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates than their high school counterparts.

**Breakthrough Collaborative.** Another example of a successful expanded learning opportunities program for youth is the Breakthrough Collaborative ([www.breakthroughcollaborative.org](http://www.breakthroughcollaborative.org)). It has locations both domestically and internationally. Breakthrough Collaborative launches motivated middle school

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students on the path to college and prepares secondary students for careers in education. In 33 years, Breakthrough has assisted 20,000 students in preparing for college. This program is focused on preparing high-achieving middle-school students who are primarily of color and from low-income families to enter and succeed in college-preparatory high school programs. Breakthrough Collaborative also recruits and trains outstanding high school and college students to become teachers and to teach other students about careers in education. This program offers services to students and their families that include academic enrichment, one-on-one tutoring, and secondary and college preparation. For the Breakthrough Collaborative, family support is paramount in ensuring student success. Parents attend parent/teacher conferences, student orientation, and family reunions. Eighty-five percent of Breakthrough “teachers” show a strong interest in teaching following a summer internship.

**Young Audiences Arts for Learning.** This national not-for-profit arts-education organization recently celebrated its 60th anniversary ([www.youngaudiences.org](http://www.youngaudiences.org)). The organization is located in over 20 states. It includes in-school, afterschool, and family programs and allows young people to work with professional artists to learn, create, and take part in the arts. There are family nights that include arts appreciation, productions, and presentations. Over the years a correlation has been shown between student participation in Young Audiences and improvements in their academic performance and standardized test scores, increases in student attendance, and decreases in dropout rates.

A growing number of state afterschool networks are working to expand the connection between afterschool and summer programs and participation in careers and post-secondary education. Increasing family engagement is often an important part of the set of strategies discussed. Along those lines, in June 2012, a successful statewide forum on college and career readiness in Indiana was co-hosted by the Indiana Afterschool Network in partnership with the Commission for Higher Education/Learn More Indiana, American Graduate Initiative, Indiana Department of Education, and the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project (Indiana Afterschool Network, 2012).

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## Recommendations for School and Community Groups

As community or school groups implement family involvement activities in expanded learning programs provided to high school students, the following recommendations will help make the planning and development process easier:

- 1.** Sometimes the parents that need—and may even want—to be deeply involved the most in the success of their high school students, may themselves not have graduated from high school and/or may not have “good memories” of high school. Therefore, a critical starting point is to make family involvement activities relevant for family members. These activities should have a targeted educational focus and be fun. Afterschool, weekend, and summer programs can offer parents a more comfortable, flexible setting in which to engage with their young people and become involved in their education. Creating a program that reflects the desires of the families and the students themselves can lead to offering programming that better matches their interests and needs, helps with program improvements, and increases attendance and parental investment.
- 2.** Afterschool, weekend, and summer programs for secondary students are positive avenues to learn about and experience career and college possibilities. These important learning opportunities for students can be made more meaningful if they include engaging activities to help family members learn about those options, including about how to pay for future post-secondary education.
- 3.** Often afterschool, weekend, and summer programs for secondary students have a variety of school-college-workforce-family partnerships. So it is worth analyzing which of the partner organizations have particularly strong connections to families and then take advantage of those linkages to create the family involvement options. The majority of parents want to be involved in their young people’s current and future education, but many face barriers that prevent them from doing so. Many regular school day programs do not have the resources or the time to reach out to families who are interested but may be reluctant to participate. It is important to take time to identify what resources already exist in the community and enlist their help.
- 4.** Parents, school personnel, and community partners are all stretched for time and resources. Programs should be sure to eliminate duplication and maximize resources when developing the family involvement activities. Does a neighboring community group, 2- or 4-year college, workforce preparation program, or high school have a similar program? They should collaborate and share resources. Aligning the family component to educational goals is a must. Paramount goals are helping more students graduate from high school and preparing students for college and careers. Parents also enjoy activities, however, that offer a chance to socialize and discuss concerns with other parents and staff. So afterschool, weekend, and summer programs can also be an important forum for identifying and providing resources and services that strengthen families as well as connect them more directly to the educational goals.

## For More Information

The following publications are examples that offer suggestions for strengthening family engagement in expanded learning programs:

Ferguson, C., Jordan, C., & Baldwin, M. (2010). *Working systematically in action: Engaging family and community*. Austin, TX: SEDL.

Henderson, A. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family/school partnerships*. New York, NY: New Press.

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