

Learning Opportunities for Children and Youth: Expanding Commitments, Blurring the Lines

Prepared by the Forum for Youth Investment

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core operating division of impact strategies, inc.

The Community Partnerships strategy is based on a radical approach to improving educational opportunities in a city. It acknowledges that the traditional boundaries between the public school system's responsibilities and those of other community agencies are themselves part of the educational problem...the strategy opens new options for education, asking "How can this community use all its assets to provide the best education for all our children?" The Community Partnerships strategy would include multiple public and private providers. It would in addition be a genuine community-wide system in that all the community's resources, not simply its schools would be available in an organized way to meet children's educational needs and their general well being.

— Paul Hill, Christine Campbell, James Harvey
It Takes a City, 2000

Paul Hill and his colleagues have studied successful school reform efforts in numerous cities, looking for commonalities, gaps and clues. Their conclusion, and the title of their book, is that it takes a city to educate children. Their boldest proposal for reforming K–12 education is to create community partnerships that tap into and organize the full array of educational resources available in communities — in libraries, museums, faith-based institutions, community based organizations and nonprofits. Beyond their responsibility for contracting for publicly funded schools, these partnerships would “encourage nonschool educational resources” to enrich the school day curricula, leverage public and private dollars for community-based organizations in order to “preserve a portfolio of educational alternatives for the disadvantaged,” and “broker health and social service resources to meet children’s needs.”

The authors of *It Takes a City* reinforce the fact that there are numerous community resources that can and should be enlisted to support young people’s education and development and make two distinct but complementary points: These institutions can help strengthen learning during the school day, and reinforce learning and contribution in the many hours when young people are with their families, with their friends and in their neighborhoods.

Hill and his colleagues are ahead of many in proposing that Boards of Education be replaced by bold new community partnerships charged not with maintaining schools but with promoting community-wide supports for learning. But they are anything but alone in their conclusion that what exists for young people outside of the school building matters hugely. Nor are they alone in arguing it will take community-wide commitments to learning — blurring the lines to connect learning experiences in and outside of the school day, in and outside of the school building — in order to ensure that young people are problem free, fully prepared and fully engaged. The nation’s leading education reformers have been making similar arguments for more than two decades:

The school is not and cannot be an institution apart. Nor is it, nor can it be, the exclusive provider in a community's educational system...The school may be the only institution charged exclusively with the educational function, but the ability and responsibility of others to educate is recognized and cultivated. There is not one agency, but an ecology of institutions educating – school, home, places of worship, television, press, museums, libraries, businesses, factories and more.

— John Goodlad, *A Place Called School*

More than ever, schools and districts seem ready to act on these proposals – while recognizing that there is serious work involved in implementing such a vision:

I think it's a real challenge for cities to get to the point where they can claim a coordinated effort in support kids' out of school and in school learning. That's the goal that people should try to reach – but it's not easy. That takes infrastructure, and also a common framework. Without the framework, it ends up being piecemeal, or there are gaps. Without a common dialog and frameworks across school and community, and among community interests, things just remain fragmented.

—Tom DelPrete, Director, Worcester Schools for a New Society High School Reform Initiative

Perhaps most importantly, young people themselves are looking for ways to weave together learning experiences in and out of school. In particular, high school students whose schools and organizations blur these boundaries speak compellingly of their educational experiences:

My school is called School Without Walls. A big part of our school's philosophy is that we use the community as a classroom, which means we have a partnership with George Washington University. At our school, we have maybe 20 classrooms. We have no auditorium. We have no gym. We have no lockers. We have no playing field. We have none of that. We use all of GW's, and it makes our students much more resourceful in the way that they go about things. We use a lot of museums. We use GW's facilities. I think it makes people in our school a lot more independent and focused. And, with a block schedule, we have more time to go to museums, to sit down and listen to all the audio-visuals inside the museums.

Another thing that makes my school work: At other schools there seems to be a lot of competition between the after-school program and the school near the end of the school day when programs want the students to go out in the community and do other things. That partnership at my school is a lot stronger than at other schools. Instead of the after-school program fighting to get students let out 15 minutes early so that they can be at their internship on time, there's give-and-take between community partners and schools.

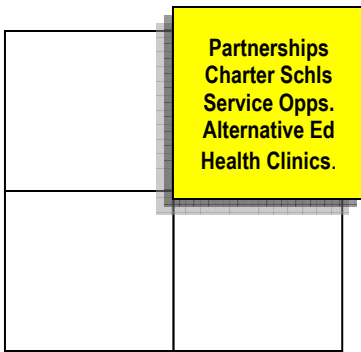
I think the reason why I like the schedule is because our school is humanities-based. We always have a connection back to reality, back to life, back to the other disciplines inside the school. That makes a big difference. If you don't have something tying it all together, it just seems like you're going to eight different teachers, learning eight different lessons.

— Delonte Briggs, High School Senior, Washington, DC

We quote Delonte at such length because his words contain all the critical elements of the vision we are putting forth. Schools have always had functional partnerships with nonprofit organizations, businesses and public service agencies that can supplement school personnel and resources and, in some cases, take advantage of school facilities. Any school principal worth their salt can provide a long list of partners. But what Delonte describes is far richer and more expansive than what is in place in most schools. Community resources have become a critical part of learning during the school day itself. In-school learning experiences push the boundaries of the school day, so that young people have time for deeper, more deliberate experiences. School-based learning experiences are connected with those that take place in community organizations — there is a “give and take,” a recognition that both serve important and linked functions. In the process, the learning experience inside the school day and school building is transformed — genuine, deep and lasting school reform occurs. Let us look at the parts of this vision one at a time.

School Community

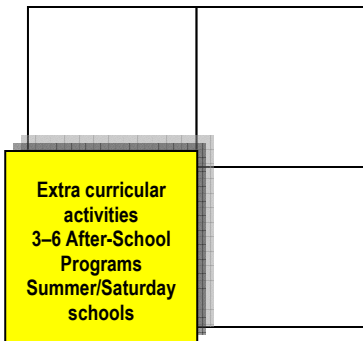
Beyond School Day



To enrich students learning opportunities during the school day, schools are forming partnerships with businesses, colleges and universities, artists and craftspeople, health and social service agencies and nonprofits to bring additional expertise and services into the school building and offer students off-campus opportunities for learning, work and service and preventive supports. In some cases, these partners are delegated primary responsibility for academic education through charters or have assumed responsibility for educating students who have dropped out.

School Community

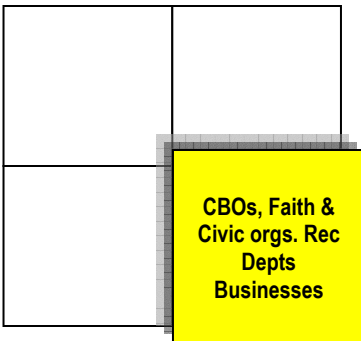
Beyond School Day



To create additional opportunities for learning, especially for those who have fallen behind, schools are also moving beyond traditional commitments to provide extra-curricular activities and summer schooling to house, if not provide, formal after-school programs for students, particularly those in the elementary grades. This trend builds on educators' desires to address students' remedial needs as well as respond to parents needs for after-school care. There is no doubt, however, that it has been motivated by an infusion of 1 billion of new federal dollars through the 21st Century Learning Centers Program.

School Community

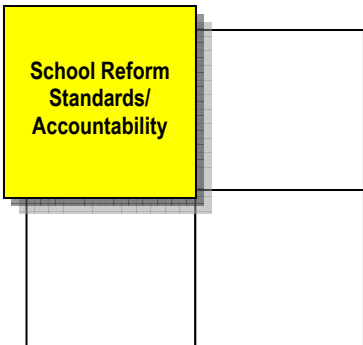
Beyond School Day



To build alignment and connections with the other places where students learn, schools are creating stronger partnerships with a broad array of organizations that offer formal and informal opportunities for learning and engagement. These partners include youth-serving organizations, civic and human services nonprofits, faith-based organizations, recreation departments, libraries, museums, businesses and others, supported by public and private dollars. These organizations complement schools' focus on academic competence by providing opportunities for civic, social, physical, vocational and spiritual supports, learning and engagement. Increasingly, they are not only sharing space with schools, but receiving referrals, and creating joint ventures such as community schools.

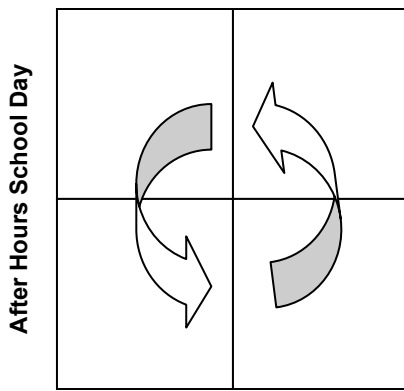
School Community

Beyond School Day



To better fulfill their core commitment to support student academic achievement, schools are building more connected and aligned learning experiences within the school day — through new forms of accountability, as well as efforts to integrate curriculum and shift instruction. The standards movement has, in many ways, narrowed how schools think about “learning,” causing them to focus their concerted energy on the reading and math skills for which they are held accountable and, even more dangerously, on improvements in the standardized tests that purport to measure success. But it has also resulted in a new openness. Schools recognize that they cannot go it alone – that more time and resources are necessary in order to meet higher standards, and that they will need the help of families and communities to do their job. And particularly at the high school level, they recognize the fact that creating environments in which young people feel safe, known and respected is a precondition to learning. This has fact has created a new willingness to see youth development professionals as experts.

In School In Community



The most critical element of the vision, however, is how to connect these pieces into something coherent. This connection is critical for individual young people —so that they understand disparate learning experiences as part of a larger whole, so that we achieve the ideal of young people continually learning. It is equally critical at the community level, where shared accountability for learning outcomes, consistent community-wide engagement and commitment, compatible definitions of effective learning environments, and ongoing ways to ensure alignment and connection are the critical issues. The challenges involved in building connections at the community level are enormous, to say the least. Why bother?

Why Expanding Commitments is Critical

There is broad agreement that all young people need to be fully prepared workers, citizens, parents and partners. Public opinion and developmental research agree: Academic competence, while critical, is not enough. Critical outcomes span a range of functional areas, pushing beyond academic knowledge or cognitive development to encompass broader moral, physical, civic, social and vocational goals. This is the bigger picture of learning and engagement on which we need to set our sights: All young people problem free, fully prepared and fully engaged across a range of basic functional areas.

Key Functional Areas: Beyond Academics

- Cognitive
- Social/Emotional
- Physical
- Civic
- Moral
- Vocational
- Cultural

If all young people are to be problem free, fully prepared and fully engaged, we need more time, more people and more places. Schools do not have the capacity, on their own, to ensure that all young people are prepared for the transition to careers, citizenship, and family and community life. They cannot and should not be the only learning organization in young people’s lives. From a time perspective, schools fill at best a quarter of young people’s annual waking hours. From a mandate perspective, schools have primary responsibility for young people’s academic learning, not for the full range of areas in which young people need to be learning and engaged. They simply cannot go it alone.

Schools are only one of a range of learning environments that share responsibility for helping students learn and achieve mastery. Community-based organizations, museums, libraries, parks, workplaces, community health centers, families, etc., are not simply places to keep young people safe when they are not in school. Nor are they simply providers of basic services that ensure young people are ready to learn. They are also settings for learning and engagement, appropriately focusing on issues connected to but beyond academic success.

Across these settings, there is broad general agreement about what it takes to ensure that young people are fully prepared and engaged. The supports, services and opportunities that young people need in order to attain the goals associated with productive adulthood reflect critical components identified again and again in the literature: Stable places, basic care and services, positive relationships, role models, high expectations, high-quality instruction and training, challenging roles and responsibilities.

Key Developmental Inputs

- Stable places
- Basic care and services
- Positive relationships
- Role models and networks
- High expectations
- Challenging roles, responsibilities and opportunities to contribute
- Personalized, high-quality instruction across functional areas

And there is even growing consensus about what these inputs look like when they are offered in settings — schools, families, youth organizations, recreation centers, work settings — that support development. The National Research Council has done the country an enormous service in reviewing the research across fields and compiling a generic chart on the characteristics of effective settings for learning and development. The new report not only lists the characteristics, it defines the ends of the continua, describing practices that can do harm, as well as those that do good.

While the core characteristics of effective learning environments are similar across settings, learning experiences outside the school day and the school building offer an important complement to school-based experiences. Research suggests that students are more likely to be engaged — cognitively and emotionally — in learning environments outside of school. This means that non-school environments, working in partnership with schools, are perhaps the most effective settings to build non-academic skills for career and life. It also means that other learning environments have something to teach public school educators — and that building connections between schools and community-based learning partners is likely to improve the quality of instruction inside schools.

Despite current lack of connection and continuity, the groundwork is in place for much greater levels of alignment and shared accountability. Learning experiences in and out of school are currently anything but blended. But with community organizations recognizing that they are in the “learning business,” schools realizing they share responsibility for career and life skills, and policy makers pushing this connection, the time is right for alignment.

Understanding the Challenges

There is nothing easy about the task of building community-wide commitments to learning. The challenges involved on the school side of the equation are familiar. They are the persistent challenges of school reform: Changing long-standing systems of accountability, building constituencies for change, aligning state and federal policies with local whole school change efforts.

Whereas the challenges for schools relate to meaningful reform, the challenges for out-of-school and community-based learning are creating “form” in the first place. Two years of work with four cities around the country have convinced the Forum that a common set of infrastructure-building tasks face communities committed to expanding out-of-school opportunities for young people. At the most basic level, *quality, quantity and K–12 continuity* are pressing challenges. Most cities do not have enough opportunities available for young people. These slots are unevenly distributed across neighborhoods, are in particularly short supply for adolescents and older youth, and almost nonexistent except in the hours directly after school. Even if there were sufficient quantity of out-of-school learning opportunities in place, issues of quality are still outstanding, as most cities are just now facing issues of quality standards, assessment, and capacity building. And just as schools are not linked with community-based learning experiences, there is not yet a system to lend coherence to the enormous range of community-based opportunities currently available — the challenge of K–12 continuity.

If cities are to make progress on quality, quantity, and continuity — the bottom-line issues in the out-of-school hours — they must face a tangled set of challenges related to community-level infrastructure, as well. They face challenges related to *capacity* — building a capable, stable workforce and addressing issues of standards, professional development and networking. They must build adequate and stable resources to support programs, including adequate transportation infrastructure and physical space. *Public engagement and vocal demand* — from young people, parents, community members — are essential to long-term sustainability. *Mapping, tracking and monitoring* are key not only to increasing demand but also to ensuring accountability. Leadership and linkages among a range of stake holders and key constituencies is equality vital. Creating and sustaining public and political will, in turn, requires creating and sustaining a vision of what is desired.



The challenges of building a new system of out-of-school learning opportunities are compounded by the fact that, to be sustainable, the system has to link to but not mirror the hundred-year-old system of public education that is slowly but visibly changing. This is the equivalent of telling an architectural firm to 1) design a multipurpose building complex that will meet the needs of multiple tenants that want to share a common space but have separate entrances, separate structures and looks; and 2) make the look and layout of this new complex flow seamlessly into the all of the floors of the massive historic building that is under renovation on the adjacent lot.

The challenges faced by those reforming schools and those transforming community learning opportunities differ enormously in size and scope. So too do the financial, policy, and institutional resources involved with each. But the challenges center around the same issues: Redefining and improving practice, strengthening the capacity of those who teach and lead, and creating structures and policies that support rather than thwart student learning and ground-level leadership.

It is clear that, at the end of the day, there have to be bridges between the formal educational system and the more informal community learning opportunities system. Like Minneapolis and St. Paul or Kansas City, Missouri and Kansas City, Kansas have interlocking economies that require cross-city negotiations on issues that range from transportation to human services, in-school and out-of-school learning are interlocking environments for development. The questions, however, are:

1. *should* these challenges be tackled together – is there reason to believe that outcomes would be better if schools and community actors planned and trained together or at least were informed by each other’s work?
2. *can* these challenges be tackled together — are the differences in size, budget, structure, accountability simply too great, even if the reasons for connecting are valid?
3. *have* these challenges been tackled together — are there examples of cities in which the school district and the community have come together to forge joint responses?

These are serious questions that deserve serious answers — a task that is beyond the scope of this paper. We would argue, based on what we know that the answers are: 1) absolutely; 2) with difficulty; and 3) in a few places.

Should the systems work together? Absolutely. We have already explained many of the reasons why this connection is vital. The language is different, but the changes in practices being discussed in school reform parallel closely the practices that are being encouraged and codified in the out-of-school learning arena. Practices such as team teaching, project-based learning, student advisories and block classes all have counterparts in the more informal learning environments created by alternative schools, nonprofit youth organizations, museums, community recreation centers and faith institutions. Resource and requirement levels are different, but both systems are struggling to make in-service training more relevant, to create better environments for supervision and peer support, to link performance to pay, and to revamp (or create) pre-service credentialing. And at the leadership levels, it is difficult to imagine how changes will be sustained if policies are not agreed to and institutionalized across systems. (In New York City for example, the Beacons Schools have thrived, but the early relationship between the city’s Department of Youth and Community Development and the Board of Education was never institutionalized and, subsequently, not maintained across changes in leadership.)

Can the systems work together? With difficulty. Sharing space would seem to be a straightforward process, yet even this task has raised legitimate concerns about liabilities, facilities overuse and shared costs. One of the most logical and important places for the systems to join forces is around training and staffing. Yet these will probably be some of the most contentious issues to tackle. Teachers and youth workers have different pay scales, benefits, contracts and very different bargaining power. Even in cities without strong teachers' unions, debates over who provides the programming can cripple expansion efforts because of the cost of hiring tenured teachers vs. part time youth workers. At the leadership level, principals and program directors have to deal with the fact that the principal has the lion's share of power. This is even more exacerbated at the district level, where the superintendent does not have a counterpart unless the city has created not just a task force, but a fully authorized, fully accountable department that handles all public dollars related to community programming for children and youth

Have these systems work together? Yes. As noted, leadership came together around the Beacons Schools in New York City. The Mayor and the Superintendent in Boston have worked closely in creating literacy programs that blur the school-community lines. Several of the districts participating in the Carnegie Corporation's Schools for a New Society Initiative (most notably Worcester, Massachusetts) have ambitious plans for linking school and community learning opportunities through joint planning, training and programming.

Securing the Commitment

The time is right to create strong public/private partnerships and to leverage a sustained commitment to community-wide learning that is as unwavering as the country's current commitment to traditional K-12 education and is linked to public education through a bold new definition of learning.

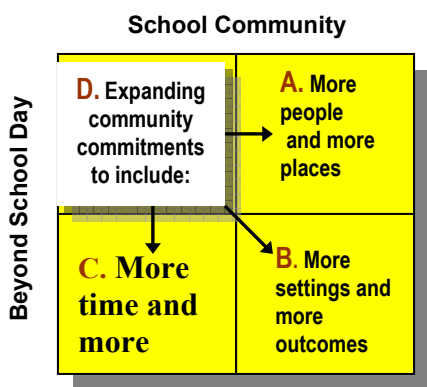
Nothing less than this will afford communities the mandate and resources to a) weave a web of learning opportunities that can withstand the inevitable fiscal and political pressures that threaten sustained support and growth; and b) create the professional and organizational supports necessary to ensure their continued quality. This is not a simple challenge, but progress is being made.

The hours between 9 A.M. and 3 P.M. are the focal point of this country's public commitment to learning. Every child is entitled to a K-12 public education that prepares him or her for post-secondary education, work and citizenship. Annually, states and localities spend an average of \$6,600 per student on public education — six to seven hours per day, 180 days per year.

Two decades of school reform work have netted significant progress. School districts galvanized by clearer academic goals and lines of accountability have moved test scores and begun to close persistent achievement gaps. Targeted efforts to reduce school size, recruit better-qualified teachers and re-focus on higher academic standards have resulted in genuine, measurable improvements in student learning. Major public and private initiatives — while not equally successful in every city — have resulted in improved schools in some of the nation's largest and traditionally lowest-performing districts. Just as important, these efforts have focused the nation's attention on urban schools. The question will never again be whether to invest in these schools, but how to best target that investment.

But these efforts have fallen short, and will continue to do so. Why? Because schools cannot go it alone. However diverse their strategies and targets, school reform efforts are only a piece of what is needed in *education* reform. Learning is a community matter — something that goes on out of the school building as much as inside its confines, outside the school day as much as between 8 A.M. and 3 P.M. Unless schools are embedded in communities rich in learning opportunities and supports, unless communities as a whole have committed themselves to quality education for all their young people, schools cannot hope to succeed. That is the challenge before us: a community challenge.

Communities need to demonstrate a strong and integrated commitment to:

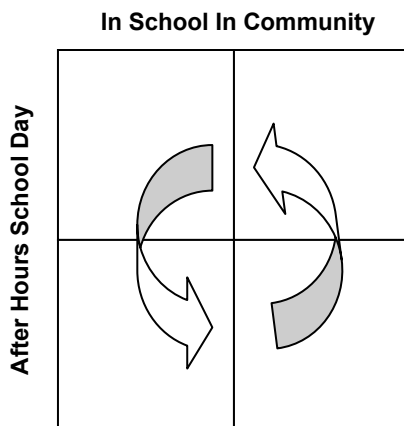


- A. *Forge formal learning links between school and their communities*, bringing more community learning resources into school and linking students to more places (e.g., universities for advanced courses; museums for hands-on learning; businesses for career education and structured work experiences; nonprofits for arts, service and, increasingly, alternative educational opportunities).
- B. *Strengthen and expand the capacity of public and private organizations in the community* that offer civic, social, vocational and health-related supports and opportunities offered primarily in the out-of-school hours.

- C. *Expand school-linked after-school opportunities* including traditional extracurricular activities, but also explore options for increasing more formal after-school programs, creating community schools that operate after 3 pm, on weekends and during summers.
- D. *Continue to strengthen traditional classroom instruction* (addressing issues such as curriculum, professional development, resource allocation).

Everything that we know about learning and development suggests two things:

1. No one quadrant can compensate fully for inadequate learning opportunities in another, especially if the weak quadrant is school; and
2. Other things being equal, more opportunities in more quadrants yield better outcomes.



And everything we know about equity and access suggests that young people with weak learning opportunities in school often have weak learning opportunities out of school.

These realities combine to suggest that we have to be equally intentional about creating learning opportunities in schools and in communities, during the school day and in the afternoon, weekend and summer hours, and that we do this in a way that blurs rather than solidifies the dividing lines that now exist because of funding and accountability decisions. The good news is that the lines are beginning to blur.¹

¹ One example of a city that has tried to increase student outcomes by breaking down some of the traditional walls between school and community, school day and beyond is New York City. Over the years, the City has developed a combination of initiatives and programs that range from the Beacons, to charter schools to strong networks of CBO's that have deep roots in the community and strong ties to schools.

Again, Paul Hill:

It is precisely because they do not get the out-of-school experiences middle- and upper-middle-income children receive that low-income students rely so heavily on the public schools. Formal learning opportunities for low-income minority young people are largely restricted to what they have the opportunity to learn in school, unsupplemented by museum trips, access to computers...And the evidence is by now abundant that urban students are not learning what they need to know — and that student learning and achievement are not improving in response to the reform efforts that have been mounted. It is time to get serious about what these challenges mean.

There is no doubt that improving the life outcomes of America's neediest children and youth will require major improvements in the schools *and* the community institutions that serve them. The data speak for themselves: Young people spend only 25 percent of their waking hours in school. There is no doubt that transforming a patchwork of out-of-school programs, however rich, into a real system of out-of-school opportunities will take sustained attention, political leadership and reprioritized resources.

There is increasing certainty among key education reform leaders that completing the job of reforming schools hinges on the rapid build up of the community based learning systems:

If the non-academic system had been organized in a coherent, researched-based way, we might not have had to depend upon educators alone for school reform. They would have represented a level of community pressure, because they are closer to the community than schools are. You would have had another equal force at the table. Their questions would have been heard. Part of the reason it has taken so long to get school reform to move is that the pressure has had to come from a handful of well-organized advocates. Imagine if Boys and Girls Clubs and others had said, "we need a system of public education that enables kids to learn and develop."

— Wendy Puriefoy, Public Education Network

The challenge, it seems, is to rally local intermediaries, community foundations, community development corporations, youth advocates, school reformers and others to aggressively blur the lines between systems and time-slots as a deliberate strategy for expanding community commitments to learning writ large.