

Coordinating Opportunities & Support for Youth to Learn, Lead & Grow



Americans spend about \$600 billion a year on public education and yet far too many youth are not engaged in productive learning. In fact, 40 to 45 percent of all high school graduates report significant gaps in their skills, both in college and the workplace.ⁱ And 91 percent of parents say the education system should make problem-solving, teamwork and critical thinking as high a priority as reading, writing, math and science.ⁱⁱ

As formal education, schools clearly have limited influence. Young people are in school for less than seven hours a day only 180 days a year. They are out of school for nearly 2000 hours annually, almost the same time as a full-time job. Most experiential learning, then, comes from families, friends and the surrounding community in a variety of non-formal, out-of-school and informal settings.

If all youth in Minnesota are to thrive, the solution does not lie in any single place. **Just as youth learn, grow and lead in multiple settings, solutions come from multiple sectors and systems.** In the current reality, schools feel overwhelmed. Community programs offering tutoring or enrichment can be hard to find or unaffordable. There is inadequate coordination between school-based and out-of-school programs. It's generally difficult to determine program quality. Many families need help identifying options. Youth do not feel their voices guide either program delivery or coordination.

In response to this complex landscape, we need comprehensive, integrated solutions that increase opportunities for youth to learn, grow and lead – in their school, community and home.

ⁱ "Closing the Expectations Gap," Achieve, Inc., 2008, <http://www.achieve.org/files/50-state-2008-final02-25-08.pdf>

ⁱⁱ *Key Findings on Attitudes Toward Education and Learning*, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2008, <http://www.newdayforlearning.org/docs/Key%20Findings%20Hart%20Research.pdf>

Building on the ideas and input of youth, the 2011 report, Supporting Youth Success: The Promise of Expanded Learning Opportunities, recommends creation of "comprehensive learning systems" in Minnesota communities. This involves coordinating efforts between existing systems like education and less developed networks like afterschool and summer youth programs. The new system (or network) consists of the relationships and resources necessary to provide expanded learning opportunities to youth – without service gaps or other barriers.



The Supporting Youth Success model (above) recognizes all youth need opportunities to learn, lead and grow in their school, community and home. The model also shows how communities, programs and systems must support youth development and learning opportunities by increasing access, improving quality, maximizing all resources and increasing coordination.

Mirroring the work in Minnesota, national funders such as the C.S. Mott and Wallace foundations have supported development of local youth networks in major urban areas. The National League of Cities and individual mayors have sponsored similar youth initiatives. Promoting a paradigm shift for learning that can happen everywhere and any time, a national effort called “A New Day for Learning” describes the five elements of a comprehensive learning system this way:

1. **Expand the definition of student success.** Reading, math and science are crucial to an educational foundation but must be bolstered by applied skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork.
2. **Use research-based knowledge about how young people learn best.** Students cannot learn if they are not engaged. Educators and community stakeholders must use research-based knowledge about how students learn best to guide programs and instruction.
3. **Foster collaboration across all sectors.** To focus all resources on supporting academic and developmental goals for students, new collaborative structures must be built across sectors in communities and up and down government hierarchies. Involvement of community, business, civic and municipal leaders, parents and social service providers is vital to student success and pays economic, civic and social dividends to all.
4. **Integrate various learning approaches and places.** Engaging strategies that incorporate the arts, technology, service learning and apprenticeships can amplify core academic learning and provide students with opportunities for enriching their education and connecting it with the adult world that they will enter. Schools are just one of many places where learning and student success can happen.
5. **Provide new opportunities for leadership and professional development.** While most current professional development programs are school-based, the importance of community-building skills is growing. Teachers and youth workers can forge mutually beneficial partnerships that enhance their own skills and result in better outcomes for students.

BUILDING CAPACITY

In 2011, Minnesota’s Statewide Afterschool Alliance began supporting five communities across Minnesota in building local capacity to deliver high-quality learning experiences for children and youth beyond the classroom. The ultimate goal is to build or expand a community-wide, out-of-school time system. The communities are Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center, Mankato and North Mankato, Minneapolis, Minnesota’s 11 tribal communities, and St. Paul. Much of their efforts involve building champions, creating and sharing knowledge, and building public will for increased out-of-school time resources and program.

Why support afterschool programs and expanded learning opportunities?

They support YOUTH by providing academic support and enrichment opportunities, supporting positive youth development, and increasing student engagement, which keeps youth in school.

They support FAMILIES by preparing youth for school, work, citizenship and life, and by addressing child care, youth safety and learning when school is out.

They support SCHOOLS by rallying community resources, aligning with school-day learning goals, and providing applied learning opportunities.

They support COMMUNITIES by building a stronger workforce of adults, reducing risky behaviors, and connecting youth to communities (and vice versa). Unsupervised youth are significantly more at risk between 3 and 6 pm than are youth in high-quality afterschool programs.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.nysan.org/files/3226_file_NYSAN_Afterschool_Policy_Agenda_2011.pdf. New York Afterschool Network (2010)

Coordination in Minnesota

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Recognizing that youth reap the greatest benefit when **intentional** connections occur between **cumulative** learning experiences (Vandell et al., 2007), these Minnesota communities are aligning resources and efforts for youth in these kinds of ways:

- As the Minneapolis Youth Congress, 55 youth meet monthly, developing leadership and civic engagement skills, and regularly meeting with elected leaders. Consisting of 10 elected officials from key city and county jurisdictions, the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board brings greater attention and focus to youth needs.
- Tribal leaders across Minnesota have joined with Native American youth in holding annual youth summits since 2009. A key result is endorsement by all 11 Minnesota tribes for a common Native youth research and development center, as well as for reservation-based youth councils. Linked with tribal councils, youth councils would formally promote youth voice and leadership.
- Brooklyn Park has created a youth coalition and new youth recreation center, developed new programs that tap the interests of police officers in volunteering with young people, and actively engaged youth in decision-making. Targeting increased resources and coordination, the intergovernmental Brooklyn Bridge for Youth Alliance involves neighboring Brooklyn Center, four school districts and two community colleges.
- Mankato/North Mankato is increasing access by connecting kids to out-of-school programs, offering scholarships and negotiating sliding-scale program fees for families.
- Minneapolis is broadening access for youth facing transportation barriers through a pilot partnership with public transit.
- In St. Paul, a public-private partnership uses staff on loan from the city and nonprofit organizations to build a provider network, offer training and professional development for youth workers, and create a shared data system to track a range of indicators of effectiveness. A pilot project with the school district is exploring new ways of offering "Saturday school" in alternative, community settings.

Promoting collaboration across multiple systems, programs, and sectors like city government and business isn't simple. It involves aligning policies and resources at multiple levels, as well as bringing together leaders and decision-makers.

"We can't do our work without partnerships," says Ann De Groot of the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board. "It's critical. We have to make sure everybody is on the same page."

It's easier for multiple city and county partners including schools, parks and recreation departments, and libraries to focus on common goals that are actually driven by youth. The slogan of the Minneapolis Youth Congress is "No decision about us, without us."

Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center also have worked hard to engage youth in setting goals. Both sponsor the Brooklyn's Youth Council. "We really bring youth in and let them be a part of the planning process," says Pat Milton, Brooklyn Park Youth Planning Coordinator. "It involves them, and we want them to help craft what we do. It makes a difference to youth to know they're not just going to be [directed by adults]."

Since 2007, the City of Brooklyn Park has dedicated nearly \$750,000, resulting in formation of a youth coalition, new recreation center, creative violence prevention approaches, and partnerships involving the parks and recreation and community policing departments. Not only has crime rate in the main city corridor gone down, but youth engagement also has gone up.

Matt Norris epitomizes youth empowerment. Hired as a city youth planner at age 17, he stayed involved after enrolling at the University of Minnesota, eventually co-founding a youth nonprofit organization based on a youth-inspired idea of a teen-run snack shop. Billing itself as "a place for jobs, homework, talent," The A-List uses the snack shop and a t-shirt business to help pay for programming in youth development and entrepreneurship. Businesses like Best Buy and Cargill are investors.

"You had all these things that came from the fact that we got people together and said 'here's what we want to work on,'" says Norris, who's now enrolled in law school while helping manage The A-List. "How are we going to [keep working] together to turn aspirations into reality in our community?"

In Mankato, they also talk about creating a "collective youth movement" that is formed by youth, for youth. Katie Boone of the Greater Mankato Area United Way recalls a participant's quote during a recent meeting: "Young people are the keepers of the dream, and elders are keepers of the collective memory." She adds, "By integrating the youth voice, (we're) going to help develop a system that provides for the real needs of youth."

In June 2011, several groups of Native American youth worked on "victory circles" in which they imagined an ideal picture of their community. A group from the Bois Forte reservation in northern Minnesota said they want to see news lights on the basketball court, an animal shelter and more youth leaders taking action. The youth said their vision of success is to feel "proud, honored, respected, accomplished, happy, excited, ecstatic and independent."

An adult participant, Bois Forte Tribal Council Member Cathy Chavers, told the group, "We know that there are a lot of issues affecting you today. We're here to listen to you and give you support. We're not going to let this [effort] drop, and we're not going to disappoint you. We are determined...to make this work...because of you."

The overall vision of the *Supporting Youth Success* initiative is Minnesota's youth thrive because they are engaged in opportunities to learn, lead and grow in their communities, schools and families. To accomplish this, the public-private Sprockets initiative in St. Paul is developing an out-of-school network citywide. To date, there have been community listening sessions, development of a logic model that shows how network partners will address outcomes, and work to identify measures of success encompassing academic and other areas.

The Sprockets director says there's a difference between how existing systems tend to think of services as one-way transactions, as opposed to a two-way exchange that results in something new. "What will a co-creative partnership look like when you unpack everyone's assumptions, and design something that really rethinks young people's experience in learning?" asks Kari Denissen. "The process must bring in the knowledge of youth and the knowledge of youth workers."