



Beyond the Classroom: Expanding Opportunities for Youth to Learn, Lead & Grow

Youth have always learned in different settings beyond the formal classroom: from family and friends, as workers and apprentices, and while taking part in community and cultural activities. In recent decades, the fields of education and youth development have come to see greater value in learning occurring in different places.

As students become more diverse and society continuously changes in terms of new technology and information, schools can't do the job alone of preparing young people for 21st century success. After all, youth spend twice as much time out of school as they do in school.

Research has shown that youth reap the greatest benefit when **intentional** connections occur between **cumulative** learning experiences – formal, informal and non-formal (Vandell et al., 2007). Across these settings, there are key questions. How can educational content be more relevant to all learners? How do learning experiences build positively on the knowledge and assets that already exist with youth and families? How can learning at home and in the community provide hands-on opportunities to apply book learning, so that it sticks for more students?

When youth have access to expanded learning opportunities at school, in the community and at home, they are more likely to gain the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary for life in the 21st century. This is not just about reading and math skills measured by standardized tests.

The applied skills cover a range of things including critical thinking, problem-solving, communications and the ability to work in teams. Beyond merely teaching students these skills, we must find ways to thoughtfully assess them to ensure that youth are fully prepared for college, work and life.

	Formal	Non-formal	Informal
Learning Approach	Learning is content centered.	Learning is youth centered.	Learning is experience centered.
Definition	Content-centered instruction; offered in structured environments; leads toward certification, diploma or degree; where participation by the learner is generally compulsory (Siurala, 2006 & Rogers, 2004)	Structured and highly contextualized learning; where participation by the learner is voluntary and personal development is emphasized (Siurala, 2006 & Rogers, 2004)	Learning in everyday life; opportunities may or may not be intentional (Siurala, 2006 & Rogers, 2004)
Examples	K-12 education, higher education or vocational education	Expanded learning opportunities, including afterschool, summer programs, community programs, sports programs or youth councils	Learning to cook with a parent, learning to fix a car with a neighbor or participating in family activities

The 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.

