



Recommendations & Strategies for Expanding Learning Opportunities

Young people learn in a variety of places and contexts, including with family and friends, at school, at work and in the community. Youth need opportunities to volunteer, play sports, explore career options, experience the arts, and engage in civic and community activities. Too often, though, youth success is defined only by success in school.

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 success 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.

Research shows that youth reap the greatest benefit when intentional connections occur between cumulative learning experiences (Vandell, 2007). In response, we need comprehensive, integrated solutions that increase opportunities for youth to learn, grow and lead – in their school, community and home.

This graphic captures how communities, and the organizations that work with and for youth, can support youth success by increasing access, improving quality, maximizing all resources and increasing coordination of *Expanded Learning Opportunities*.

This model of supporting youth success is described in the 2011 report, *Supporting Youth Success: The Promise of Expanded Learning Opportunities*. Based on the input from Minnesota youth, experts and stakeholders, the report recommends creation of comprehensive learning systems in communities throughout the state. 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 relationship and resources necessary to provide expanded learning opportunities to youth — without service gaps or other barriers.

Expanded Learning Opportunities — provided through afterschool, youth development and summer programs — are critical to the success of all young people.



Recommendations

#1: Increase Access

Identify ways to work collectively to increase access to expanded learning opportunities that are developmentally appropriate and hold community stakeholders accountable for success and improvements.

Families and youth have traditionally struggled to understand what learning opportunities exist in their community. Sometimes there are multiple opportunities within a neighborhood or area. Sometimes, for communities, distance is a challenge.

KEY LOCAL STRATEGIES

- Provide access to school buildings beyond the school day or school year to offer expanded learning opportunities through community education, community organizations or school staff.
- Produce community-wide marketing materials that reach more families and help them make sense of disconnected program opportunities.
- Coordinate public and private resources for transportation.

#2: Improve Quality

Identify ways to collectively improve the quality of expanded learning opportunities and to ensure consumers are aware of which programs are of high quality.

The quality of programs, learning experiences and relationships with adults and peers contribute towards a young person's attitude and eventual success. It is essential that educators, youth development staff and decision makers work together to improve the quality of programs and practice through funding, training and knowledge sharing.

KEY LOCAL STRATEGIES

- Communities will convene public and private stakeholders to align and implement consistent measures of quality in afterschool, youth development and summer learning programs.
- Using research and frameworks, communities will create quality improvement plans.
- Communities will develop agreements and tools to share and coordinate data between expanded learning opportunities and schools.

#3: Optimize Public and Private Resources

Leverage and maximize existing human and financial resources to enhance the infrastructure and systems that support expanded learning opportunities within a comprehensive system.

Creating policies or mechanisms to allow the flexible use of resources can increase access, improve the quality of services and opportunities, and increase coordination.

KEY LOCAL STRATEGIES

- Identify and document local (public) resources for expanded learning opportunities to understand the flow of resources and possible gaps.
- Encourage staffing partnerships to support learning in the classroom and community.
- Identify barriers to leveraging resources for expanded learning opportunities for youth and work to collectively address them.

#4: Increase Coordination

Increase effective coordination of stakeholders in communities and among local and state decision-makers, and work to decrease unnecessary competition and avoid duplication.

Coordination is more successful when communities develop a plan and agree upon benchmarks of success outlining their own contributions.

KEY LOCAL STRATEGIES

- Encourage youth voice and participation in planning and decision-making efforts related to expanded learning opportunities.
- Encourage local leaders in public and private agencies (e.g., school boards, city councils, nonprofit boards, tribal councils) to coordinate and align decision-making bodies to provide shared opportunities to work towards common goals and utilize shared resources to support a community-level learning agenda and shared evaluations.
- Encourage shared professional development opportunities for practitioners in schools and expanded learning opportunities.

Recommendations & Strategies

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 programs.

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

Recommendation 1: Increase Access

Identify ways to work collectively to increase access to expanded learning opportunities that are developmentally appropriate and hold community stakeholders accountable for success and improvements.

MINNESOTA EXAMPLES

- The Greater Area Mankato United Way has created a Connecting Kids access and marketing effort, offering scholarships and negotiating sliding-scale fees for out-of-school programs.
- Some Twin Cities neighborhoods have used circulator buses to help youth overcome transportation barriers.
- Brooklyn Park has opened a new youth recreation center along a busy city corridor.
- The White Earth Reservation Boys & Girls Clubs have sought to open sites in more villages across the rural area.
- The Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board and partners sponsor a We Want You Back campaign, a door-to-door effort targeting youth who have dropped out of school.

“Really, we’re just trying to help people see things differently. How does our community come together to support kids?”

—Katie Boone, Greater Mankato Area United Way

Recommendation 2: Improve Quality

Identify ways to collectively improve the quality of expanded learning opportunities and to ensure consumers are aware of which programs are of high quality.

EXAMPLES

- Training for youth development workers is widely available in the Twin Cities and statewide, through such partners as University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Developments' Youth Work Institute.
- St. Paul's Sprockets initiative is developing a common data system with indicators of youth success that its network partners of some 70 organizations can track to gauge their effectiveness. Sprockets has adopted a common quality assessment tool that programs can use for improvement.

- A statewide Native American youth task force is championing the idea of a Native youth research and development center to study and promote what works with Native young people, especially asset-based and cultural approaches.
- Youth Community Connections is promoting learning and sharing of best practices across five communities statewide working to strengthen and expand their local out-of-school time systems or networks.

Recommendation 3: Optimize Public and Private Resources

Leverage and maximize existing human and financial resources to enhance the infrastructure and systems that support expanded learning opportunities within a comprehensive system.

EXAMPLES

- The Sprockets initiative in St. Paul is a public-private partnership that relies on loaned staff from city and nonprofit partners to support the citywide youth network.
- The City of Brooklyn Park has allocated some \$750,000 since 2007 to support youth-related strategies and programs.
- The Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board consists of partners including the City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County, the Minneapolis Parks & Recreation Board, the Hennepin County Public Library and the Minneapolis Public Schools that coordinate and leverage resources.
- The Minnesota Department of Education conducted a study of primary funding streams for out-of-school time opportunities.

Recommendation 4: Increase Coordination

Increase effective coordination of stakeholders in communities and among local and state decision-makers, and work to decrease unnecessary competition and avoid duplication.

EXAMPLES

- Encourage shared professional development opportunities for practitioners in schools and expanded learning opportunities.
- Brooklyn Park has a five-year action plan to guide youth engagement efforts. Launched in 2009, the Champions for Youth "Call to Action" was the product of a six-month planning effort by a diverse team of teens and adults. The first goal is "safe and fun places where youth belong that they feel belong to them."
- Since 2009, tribal leaders have led annual Native American youth summits to highlight youth voice and promote sharing across Minnesota's 11 reservation communities. In 2011, participating communities developed local youth action plans.
- The Greater Mankato Area United Way eventually plans to build on efforts to create parent-centered coordination of early childhood services, extending the support for families of school-age youth. Meanwhile, a full-time staff person links youth to out-of-school programs by providing scholarships and other support.
- In St. Paul, partners have piloted joint training involving both youth workers and public school teachers in order to share knowledge and build bridges of understanding.

"If we are going to strengthen and build strong nations, we have to invest in our youth."

—Tribal Chairwoman Erma Vizenor, White Earth Reservation

"[In] a series of community summits, a lot of kids (were) involved, which has been a big part of our philosophy. We're not going to do anything more about kids without kids being involved in the process."

—Jan Ficken, Brooklyn Park Recreation & Parks Dept.