Equity & Innovation in Expanded Learning Systems

- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY -

2019
Introduction

Research shows that expanded learning programs (also called afterschool or out-of-school programs) have positive short- and long-term effects on children and adolescents’ academic, social, and personal development. Participation in high quality versions of these programs is associated with gains in academic achievement, attendance, and attachment to school, as well as positive social behaviors, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.

Despite these benefits, gaps in the quality, affordability, and availability of expanded learning programs affect many families and young people, particularly indigenous and communities of color, and those from low-income backgrounds. In part, such gaps reflect issues in the expanded learning field itself, which “has been decentralized and disorganized with different programs — and the government agencies and private groups that fund them — operating in isolation from one another” (Halpern, pg. 79-80). There has been “no one institutional locus…no widely accepted governance mechanisms, no overarching goals, policies or regulations” (Halpern, pg. 80). In order to address these issues, many communities have sought to adopt a systems approach to coordinate programs and funding streams.

“Expanded learning can increase your understanding outside your own culture… It is the bigger picture, what we hope to achieve.”

Ladan Ghedi, 23
Youthprise employee

“Expanded learning is challenging your mind to go beyond what you know, your own cultures and beliefs. It’s the learning you do outside of school.”

Anna Kochevar, 18
Arcadia Charter School,
Cannon Falls, MN
Toward a Minnesota Way

In Minnesota, as agencies grappled with the varied landscape of expanded learning opportunities, the intermediary Youthprise – along with Ignite Afterschool and other regional intermediaries – emerged as coordinating entities. Designed to increase equity with and for Minnesota’s indigenous, low-income, and racially diverse youth, Youthprise began its support of four regional intermediaries in 2012. It invested approximately $2 million in sites that represent a range of settings: the Youth Coordinating Board (YCB) in Minneapolis (urban); the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance (Alliance) for Youth (suburban); the Healthy Community Initiative (HCI) in Northfield (exurban and rural); and Sprockets in the capital city of St. Paul.

At the same time, Minnesota’s “opportunity gap” between white students and indigenous and students of color emerged as the nation’s worst. Education leaders recognized that they needed not only to change formal education strategies, but also to work more closely with the expanded learning field in informal settings to improve outcomes for young people.

In response to such needs, the four regional intermediaries profiled developed a variety of creative responses capitalizing on the assets of their diversifying communities. While the expanded learning literature supports the importance of strong leadership, coordination among programs, effective use of data, comprehensive attention to quality, improved program access, youth engagement, funding and sustainability, plus regional and statewide collaboration – two main areas emerged as promising practices in addressing Minnesota’s needs: equitable access to programming and youth leadership.

Included in the full report, we focus on these areas of innovation, and feature a salient attribute of each site to help paint pictures of approaches essential to the emerging “Minnesota Way.” This work is building from the Wallace model to enhance systems partnerships through the lens of equity and youth voice.

Acknowledgements

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“[Expanded learning] taught me how to break out of my shell and talk with people I don’t know. It also taught me what the community really needs.”

Shantill Ward, 20, Youthprise employee
Methods

The following section summarizes the results of the study according to the characteristics of effective expanded learning systems.

Two methods were used to obtain background information about the four regional systems (a.k.a. “intermediaries”) and data on their progress toward effectiveness: interviews with system directors and analyses of written information, including reports for Youthprise, grant applications, and website content.

1. Strong Leadership
All expanded learning systems studied have governing boards comprising local leaders, such as city or county officials, heads of school districts and/or other educational institutions, and leaders of business or medical organizations. Governing boards meet regularly and provide advice about systems’ direction, budgets, policies, and strategies. In most expanded learning systems, leaders play additional roles, serving on committees that provide leadership in essential areas such as development, finance, and communications.

2. Role as a Coordinating Entity
Tasks of these expanded learning intermediaries include organizing major players in the local out-of-school time arena, such as program providers, funders, and nonprofits into a central structure; building their commitment to the common goal of ensuring high quality opportunities for all youth; strengthening their capacity to achieve this goal; establishing regular communications; and aligning partners’ activities.

Coordination activities vary according to the local context for each system. For example, Sprockets, in the capital city of Saint Paul, has created a stable network with multiple partners, while in the smaller communities the Community Education Department of the local school district is often the main provider.

Despite these differences, intermediaries also engage in several common coordination activities. For example, leaders maintain regular contact with partners and provide various types of support to help networks carry out their work such as professional development, assistance in collecting and using data, featuring programs in online locators, and collaborative fundraising efforts.

3. Effective Use of Data
Accomplished use of data is critical to the success of an expanded learning system. To guide their work, systems need to have and use data on multiple levels, including citywide data which informs community-level changes, and program-level data such as youth participation, program quality, and youth outcomes, which informs programmatic changes.

Because intermediaries tend to play a central role in incubating new ideas and then replicating these ideas across their networks, most of the intermediaries have made substantial progress in advancing the use of data. St. Paul-based Sprockets has done extensive work not only to build a multi-level system for data collection and use, but also has facilitated the construction of data systems for other Youthprise-funded systems.

Northfield HCI and Sprockets have adopted the Cityspan system to gather information on youth characteristics and program participation for individual programs and systemwide. The Brooklyn Bridge Alliance developed a youth-to-youth survey, which helps them document who participates in expanded learning programs and who doesn’t, as well as motives and barriers to participation.
4. Comprehensive Quality Improvement
All of the intermediaries have collaborated with their programs to construct a shared conception of quality, and to agree on a common instrument for assessing it: the Youth Program Quality Assessment (PQA®). Furthermore, the intermediaries have gone beyond the PQA® to integrate four other data sets. They now meet annually to analyze participation, quality and outcome data, then plan based on the data during a “Making Meaning of Multiple Data Sets”® training developed by Sprockets. This training was recognized by others as an important innovation in continuous improvement, so Sprockets partnered with Ignite Afterschool (Minnesota’s statewide afterschool network) to improve and expand M3® to other regional intermediary partners.

Sprockets also has piloted and implemented an annual continuous improvement process, the “Activator Improvement Cycle” of assess, plan, and improve, then engages program staff in professional development to support them at each phase of the cycle.

In addition to supporting programs in using data for improvement, all intermediaries offer resources on quality expanded learning programming to others in their network including professional development, peer mentoring and coaching, and membership in related organizations.

5. Increasing Program Access
A fundamental problem in the expanded learning field is lack of equitable access to quality programs. In this study, issues of access differed by community, but all intermediary leaders reported challenges to ensuring widespread availability of quality programs.

Barriers mentioned included lack of knowledge of programs and activities among youth and families, transportation, program cost, and funding. The Alliance’s Director Rebecca Gilgen also noted that information about and enrollment processes for many programs were originally designed for English-speaking, middle class youth and families, and had not been adapted for more diverse populations — including immigrant youth and families.

To resolve the lack of knowledge the Alliance, Sprockets and the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board developed an online program locator. Through their collaboration they are improving this approach to share results with Northfield and other intermediaries who may benefit from these initial innovations.

All intermediaries work to address the barrier of transportation. The Alliance created “Rec on the Go” which takes sports equipment, art supplies, and games to young people during the summer. Similarly, Minneapolis partners with Parks and Recreation to dispatch pop-up parks throughout
“Expanded learning offers alternatives to the norms of school-based learning, beyond the ‘Rs of learning, based in your own experience and others.”

Neese Parker, 24, Youth Engagement Manager, Youthprise

the city. Northfield has organized buses to take low-income youth from their neighborhoods to expanded learning programs, while Sprockets supports circulator buses in St. Paul and has organized a guide to transportation. The Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board has experimented with bus passes for two different public transit systems.

Northfield’s Director Zach Pruitt pointed out that their system addresses the barrier of program cost by offering all expanded learning programs at no charge. However, he and other intermediary leaders described the strain imposed by a general lack of funding. As he noted, “That has gotten worse instead of better.” And, in an article in the Star Tribune, Executive Director of the Youth Coordinating Board Ann Degroot pointed out that four of the largest contributors to expanded learning time programs in Minneapolis have dropped their funding. As a result, “The programs that kids and parents depend on are being severely limited,” she says.

6. Youth Engagement

Interviews indicated that all intermediaries engage young people in leadership roles in their organizations. In the Alliance and Northfield’s HCI, young people serve on the Boards of Directors providing input about youth issues and also assisting with important Board activities, such as fundraising. In Minneapolis, a Youth Congress has power and influence on policies related to youth. Sprockets does not have youth members on its board, but engages young people in a number of activities, such as conferences. In three intermediaries, young people assist with evaluation activities, such as data collection, interpretation, and/or using data. Most organizations provide extensive support to program partners in engaging youth. For example, Northfield HCI, with support from Youthprise, has launched an initiative called “Youth on Boards” in which young people serve on the boards of governmental and community organizations. More than 90 young people now serve on the boards or committees of 28 Northfield organizations, including a youth advisory council to the mayor. All sites provide training and technical assistance to their local organizations in youth engagement. The Alliance also has developed a curriculum on the topic.

7. Funding and Sustainability

Expanded learning programs have faced precarious funding conditions since their inception. Recent federal administrations have proposed cutting funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers. While states, foundations, and businesses provide some support it is declining. The bulk of funding for expanded learning programs (76%) is supplied by tuition and fees from parents which is often a barrier for participation. As with expanded learning programs, intermediary organizations also face an ongoing struggle to capitalize their work.

The Alliance receives some funds from partners to its Joint Partnership Agreement, such as city governments, local school districts, and others. For Northfield HCI and Sprockets, some funds are provided by city governments, and they also regularly seek grants. In Minneapolis, a drop in funding from its two primary nonprofit funders has severely constrained its work, though it does receive some funding from city and county sources.
Intermediary leaders have responded to funding challenges with various strategies. Northfield and the Alliance have begun a fee-for-service initiative, in which programs pay for some services, such as assistance with program evaluation. Sprockets makes an extensive effort to communicate the value of expanded learning to potential funders and to the public. A key strategy for the Alliance is to support projects it proposes with evidence of their effectiveness, first assessing areas of youth need, then planning and implementing projects, and measuring their impacts. The Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board relies on in-kind services from jurisdictional partners and is developing a youth fund with the city.

In addition to seeking ongoing funding for their work, intermediaries support program partners in their efforts to gain funding. All intermediaries engage in advocacy to try to bring more state and federal resources into the expanded learning field, organize collaborative projects with partners to meet identified youth needs, inform program partners of potential grants, and write letters of support.

8. Regional and Statewide Collaboration

All intermediary leaders reported that their organizations collaborate with national, state, and regional expanded learning organizations, including Every Hour Counts (a national network), Minnesota’s Ignite Afterschool Network, and the Regional Quality Collaborative, an initiative to expand the number of youth program quality assessors from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

A peer learning community, funded and facilitated by Youthprise bimonthly, has been an essential collaborative for all involved in this project. Leaders attend the meetings to report on their current work, share challenges, and discuss ways to advance the expanded learning field. It has provided a space where they can learn from one another, gain new ideas and candidly discuss their local settings while strategizing their collective efforts to advance their objectives.

Next step recommendations emphasize the importance of this ongoing community, and also feature equitable access and youth voice as essential elements in expanded learning – in addition to maintaining a “systems mindset” to augment opportunities for all young people.

“Expanded learning is inclusive education that is diverse, going beyond societal norms of learning. It is being mindful of different viewpoints.”

Olive Omoro, 17, Northfield High School, Northfield, MN

~ By Dr. Susan Root, Ph.D.

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<thead>
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<th>By the numbers</th>
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