Equity & Innovation in Expanded Learning Systems
- 2019 REPORT -
Acknowledgments

This report required the commitment of many partners.

First and foremost, we wish to thank the regional intermediaries: St. Paul’s Sprockets, Northfield’s Healthy Community Initiative, Minneapolis’ Youth Coordinating Board, and the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth (of Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center) for their insights, expertise, and commitment to the young people of Minnesota. We appreciate their willingness to share their processes and discoveries with the larger field.

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A special thank you to young people who lead many of these initiatives, contribute to their communities, and who never shy away from keeping us accountable to this work. Without you there would be no report.

And last but not least we wish to thank our researcher, Dr. Susan Root, copy editor Maddy Wegner, and designer Adeeb Missaghi, whose successful interpretation of the themes of this report brings the Minnesota model to life.

Youthprise’s mission is to increase equity with and for Minnesota’s indigenous, low-income, and racially diverse youth.
Foreword

With this report, the Minnesota-based nonprofit Youthprise shares the results of its three-year initiative to catalyze expanded-learning system building: new approaches to organizing and delivering high-quality expanded learning opportunities for young people across the state.

Notable in the “Minnesota approach” is an emphasis on youth voice across all sites and throughout all levels of governance and implementation. In one of the smaller exurban communities, 94 young people serve on more than 40 boards, and participate in ongoing trainings to equip them for these roles.

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In a program that committed nearly $2 million to four intermediary systems in the Twin Cities metropolitan and exurban areas, networks of community partners looked anew at their methods for assessing and addressing youth interests and needs and innovating to make systems of support more equitable, efficient, and effective.

Every Hour Counts, a coalition of expanded learning organizations that increases access to quality learning opportunities for underserved students (of which Youthprise is a guiding force) applauds Youthprise for its steadfast commitment and investment in sparking system building efforts in regions across the state.

This report highlights essential building blocks of designing and supporting expanded learning systems that mirror core ingredients identified by the Every Hour Counts coalition: strong leadership, role as a coordinating entity, effective use of data, comprehensive quality improvement, increasing program access, youth engagement, funding and sustainability, and regional and statewide collaboration.

Also noteworthy are the efforts to expand equity, through trainings of diverse practitioners in data analysis, outreach to recent immigrant and refugee families via translated materials, creative transportation solutions, and matching funding initiatives to ensure free programming.

Effectively using data for continuous improvement is complex and challenging for many communities. This report illuminates the work of Sprockets in Saint Paul to build a multi-level system for data collection inspired by the Every Hour Counts Measurement Framework.

In this pivotal report, you’ll find ideas for communities large and small, and for those who understand that expanded learning is often the key to bridging the opportunity gap.

Jessica Donner
Executive Director
Every Hour Counts
Introduction: Toward a Minnesota Model

More than a decade ago, the Wallace Foundation issued *A Place to Grow and Learn: A Citywide Approach to Building and Sustaining Out-of-School Time Learning Opportunities* (2008). Its precepts were simple: with coordination, committed leadership, multi-year planning, reliable information, participation, and quality programming, there would be clear benefits for children and a sustainable “expanded learning” system would result.

Eleven years later, implementation of such an ideal — in the face of flagging funding — has proven challenging. But the intermediary Youthprise, based in Minneapolis, has been piloting and supporting the growth of such regional efforts since its beginnings in 2010. As a resource to youth-serving organizations and systems throughout Minnesota, its mission is to increase equity with and for Minnesota’s indigenous, low-income, and racially diverse youth.

From the start, the McKnight Foundation, which founded the intermediary and is one of its primary supporters, was interested in building an expanded learning (also called “out-of-school” or “afterschool”) system that integrates funding, coordination, measurement, and policy. As the Every Hour Counts website describes: “An expanded-learning system replaces a patchwork of fragmented service providers with a cohesive team that includes public agencies, service providers, businesses, funders, and schools. This team engages students in high-quality learning and enrichment through afterschool, summer, and other initiatives. It emphasizes improving access for underserved students, using resources efficiently, improving quality, and delivering results” (retrieved from https://www.everyhourcounts.org/our-vision)

Youthprise staff aimed to build not only an effective system, but also to focus on all young people and the systems that impact them — including, for example, schools and the juvenile justice system. “We didn’t want to create a system that was in competition with other organizations or wasn’t responsive to all youth settings,” says Wokie Weah, Youthprise’s President.

So Youthprise staff chose to focus on the centrality of youth voice and equity, involving what they consider central elements in the “Minnesota Model”.

They identified four regional intermediary organizations as pilot programs, selecting both systems in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, as well as an inner-ring suburban site in the northwest metro area of Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center, and the town/rural community of Northfield considered “exurban” to the Twin Cities.

Over three years (2012-2015), Youthprise invested approximately $2 million in these entities, which are designed to:

1. Improve access to expanded learning opportunities for underserved youth;
2. More efficiently use existing resources by coordinating services and reducing duplication;
3. Improve the quality of programs; and
4. Raise awareness and build public support to increase public and private investment in these programs.

In addition to funding, Youthprise offered these systems staff professional development opportunities, including trainings in organizational effectiveness and in assessing and improving program quality.

It also supported the development of a Peer Learning Community of representatives from the agencies, who continue to meet bimonthly to:

• Share resources and promising practices in building effective expanded learning systems;
• Discuss practice dilemmas in supportive environments;
• Decrease the learning curve for new initiatives;
• Accelerate the creation of systems infrastructure;
• Spark new ideas; and
• Diffuse knowledge from local and national systems while advancing a Minnesota systems model

At the state level, Youthprise partners with Ignite Afterschool to amplify the impact and potential of this Peer Learning Community. As Minnesota’s statewide afterschool network, Ignite builds partnerships that close race and income-based access gaps by focusing on education, policy, advocacy, and systems building for continuous program improvement.

Through this coordination, the systems deepen their engagement and influence in statewide policy efforts and incubate and expand good ideas. For example, Sprockets was the first expanded learning network to develop and implement a continuous program improvement resource called M3®, Making Meaning with Multiple Data Sets. The success of the process created demand for M3® beyond the scope of Sprockets, so Sprockets partnered with Ignite Afterschool (which now owns the process) to house and support its expansion to other communities and statewide expanded learning systems.

At the national level, Youthprise also partners with Every Hour Counts, a national coalition dedicated to increasing access to quality learning opportunities — especially among underserved young people. This national group also elevates local innovations, shares intermediary practices, and leverages funding.
Equity and Access

With the twin lenses of youth voice and equitable practices framing the work, Minnesota’s regional intermediaries continue to pursue locally grown solutions to expanded learning — with implications for replication.

As Youthprise President Wokie Weah attests, seven years ago the youth development field was predominantly white, and the beneficiaries were largely people of color. Since then, more balance has entered the picture. “It matters who you hire and who you put in positions of leadership,” she says. In assessing the Twin Cities landscape, she sees that equity and access have become more central to all workplaces. “There is more progress, more understanding that Minnesota won’t be a strong state if we don’t look at equity.” For Youthprise, this means an emphasis on involving young people in all aspects of their work and seeking a diversity of backgrounds in filling positions.

Despite these foundational values, the work has not been without challenges. Melissa Mitchell, Social Innovation Fund Director, notes a state-level decline in non-fee-based services offered to young people — from drivers’ education to music lessons. As she says, “Much has been relegated to the private sector, so again, we have to look at equity.”

To address the opportunity gaps that result from such funding changes, the regional intermediaries have been crafting partnerships that leverage Youthprise investments with local funding sources. The Minneapolis Youth Congress, for example, is working to develop children’s savings accounts and a “Children and Youth Fund” to help supplement funding losses from both public and private sources, exploring options such as a tax increase, a possible fee on parking, or levy. The Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth is exploring partnerships with the private sector.

Meanwhile the, Northfield Healthy Community Initiative is experimenting with an initiative that leverages state funding. This collaboration between Youthprise and the Venn Foundation helps low-income families utilize the Minnesota K-12 Education Tax Credit to pay for educational, fine arts, and performing arts afterschool programs. Thanks to donors, Minnesota Afterschool Advance (MAA) makes no-interest, no-fee loans to families, helping them to pay for the activities up front. The loan is repaid when the family receives the tax credit as part of their tax refund at the end of the year.

MAA is expanding to communities across the state and aims to unlock the nearly $250 million of potential annual funding for afterschool programs available through the tax credit. As Weah notes, this public funding could far outweigh that of any private foundation’s assets.
Youth Voice

A constant in Youthprise’s work, and that of the regional intermediaries, is an emphasis on youth voice. Youthprise considers young people critical to transforming educational, economic, and other youth systems. Neese Parker, Youthprise’s Youth Engagement Manager explains, “In order to give authentic opportunities to young folks, we have to create positions that provide leadership roles and pathways to success.” Young people are hired as staff, and half of the 20-member board is between the ages of 16-24. A young person and adult co-chair the board to ensure that Youthprise’s strategy is set by those most impacted.

Similar innovations characterize the four regional intermediaries, where young people are supported to serve citywide on Boards (in Northfield); conduct youth-to-youth surveys to reach those young people who are disengaged (in the Brooklyns); inform policy (in Minneapolis); and collect and evaluate youth data (in St. Paul). (For more details on the regional intermediaries’ work with young people, please see the individual site profiles.)

In summary, Weah asks herself: “Do we build systems to innovate? Or do we innovate to build systems?”

“We do both,” she says, answering her own question and charting an enterprising course for Youthprise’s ongoing work.
Research Summary

Short-Term Effects of Expanded Learning Programs
The results of expanded learning research are resoundingly positive. Studies show that these programs have positive short- and long-term effects on important developmental outcomes (Vandell, Resiner & Pierce, 2007; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). Youth who participate in afterschool have higher academic achievement and grades than those who don’t (Vandell, Resiner & Pierce, 2007; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). In fact, research shows that the gap in math achievement between high- and low-income children can be eliminated by consistent participation in afterschool programs (Pierce, Auger, & Vandell, 2015). Students who participate in afterschool programs also have higher rates of attendance, stronger attachment to school, and better work habits (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Vandell, Resiner & Pierce, 2007).

As with academic development, participation in afterschool programs is associated with positive social development, including improved social behaviors and reduced conduct problems and drug use (Vandell, Resiner & Pierce, 2007; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). Furthermore, students who take part in afterschool programming also have higher self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Vandell, Reisner & Pierce, 2007).

Long-Term Effects of Expanded Learning Programs
In addition to these short-term effects, studies also show positive long-term benefits of involvement in expanded learning programs. In follow-up research to a study of promising programs by Vandell and colleagues, (Vandell, Reisner & Pierce, 2007) students who initially had been part of high quality programs showed improved task persistence and a reduction in school absences five years later, while students whose afterschool time had been mainly spent in unsupervised activities with peers showed a decline in grades and increased school absences after five years. An extensive evidence base also shows beneficial effects for youth participation in extracurricular activities, including higher levels of education and increases in future income.

The Role of Quality
Quality programming is key to the positive impacts possible in afterschool programming. A study by Durlak and colleagues (2010) found that only a subset of programs (those with sequential, active, focused, and explicit activities) had positive effects on participants, while programs without these features had negative or no effects. Similarly, Vandell and colleagues (Vandell, D., Reisner, E., & Pierce, K., 2007) found that programs with the high quality features of positive social relationships with staff and peers; engaging, skill-building content and activities; and content delivery that included high and low structure and opportunities for choice and mastery – had more positive impacts than programs without these features.

Access
In the late twentieth century, evidence of the benefits of quality expanded learning opportunities made access to these opportunities for all children and youth a public imperative. Previously, “Most efforts to improve afterschool opportunities focus[ed] on strengthening the effectiveness of individual programs … [and] afterschool providers tend[ed] to make plans focusing on their own organizations and immediate partners and on the expected progress of their own … participants” (Reisner, Vandell, Pechman, Pierce, Brown & Bolt, 2007, p. 1) As Browne (2015) explains, “Historically … the field has been decentralized and disorganized with different programs – and the government agencies and private groups that fund them – operating in isolation from one another.” There has been “no one institutional locus … no widely
accepted governance mechanisms, no overarching goals, policies or regulations” (Halpern, pp. 79-80).

A consequence of the fragmentation and lack of cohesion in communities’ expanded learning programming has been a gap in access. For example, research by Robert Putnam (2015) showed that young people in poverty are three times less likely to participate in afterschool sports and clubs than those from more advantaged backgrounds.

Furthermore, the gap in engagement in extracurricular activities has been growing. “Since the 1970s, upper-middle-class students have become increasingly active in school clubs and sports teams, while participation among working class students has veered in the opposite direction” (Snellman, Silva, Frederick & Putnam, 2015, p.1).

As system building has grown, researchers have been able to identify features of effective expanded learning systems.

**Strong Leadership:**
Direction and support from community leaders, such as mayors, are critical in the successful launch of an expanded learning system. However, leadership from a single leader is not enough. “For an afterschool system to thrive long-term ... major players need to ‘own’ the effort to some degree” (Browne, 2015).

**Coordination between Programs:**
A successful expanded learning system depends on alignment and cooperation between programs and other interested entities to achieve systemic change. A key element of system building is a coordinating entity, such as a nonprofit intermediary. The intermediary unites stakeholders around a shared mission, coordinates and maximizes resources, and drives improvement throughout the community.

**Effective Use of Data:**
Data are essential to expanded learning systems’ effectiveness. Community leaders must know about needs of families’ and the availability of programs; families must be able to find quality expanded learning opportunities; intermediary staff must know which young people are participating in which kind of programs; and data must inform the improvements in the quality of programs. Systems must be able not only to collect these data, but also to interpret and share the information.

**Comprehensive Quality Improvement:**
Effective expanded learning systems must have a process for continuous improvement that includes:

1. Assessment, using shared quality standards;
2. Planning for improvement, based on feedback; and
3. Technical assistance and coaching.

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System Building
Awareness of the unevenness of quality and access in afterschool programming led to an understanding of the need for system building. Policymakers, providers, and experts in child and adolescent development increasingly acknowledged that if all young people were to experience positive expanded learning opportunities, coordination across entities was vital. Schools, programs, funders, and youth-serving organizations needed to “work together toward increasing access, quality, data-based decision-making and sustainability” (American Youth Policy Forum, 2015).

In the 21st Century, commitment to building expanded learning systems has grown. A study by the Wallace Foundation (Simkin & colleagues, 2013), found that by 2013, 77 of 275 of the largest U.S. cities had adopted one or more strategies for organizing their afterschool programs.
Regional Intermediary Site Profiles

The following site profiles illustrate the key elements of the “Minnesota Model”: youth engagement and equity/access as they play out across four settings – from the capital city of St. Paul to the exurban town of Northfield, and its surrounding service area.

1. Sprockets
(urban, located in St. Paul, Minnesota’s capital city of approximately 300,000)

Background
Sprockets is an afterschool intermediary in which young people “develop their abilities as learners, contributors, and navigators so they can recognize and achieve their greatest potential.” Sprockets launched in 2010 out of a mayoral initiative that included the City of Saint Paul, Saint Paul Public Schools, and various community organizations. The citywide network is guided by a leadership group that leverages each partner’s assets and nurtures their continued engagement. As Director Erik Skold says, “We want all organizations to be supportive of youth in St. Paul.”

Youth Engagement
Sprockets’ philosophy of engagement is focused on program quality. At the highest level, youth are “fully engaged in influencing programs,” says Skold. “By supporting our programs to focus on quality, we’re also encouraging our programs to focus on youth choice, youth voice, and youth engagement.”

The regional intermediary also engages young people in evaluation activities, collecting data, facilitating meetings, and hosting data release events. It is starting a new project in which young people also will be connecting with youth who are not otherwise involved in programming. Furthermore, it provides trainings to partners about strategies for engaging young people at multiple levels of participation, from young people on boards, to youth-led evaluation and research efforts, to youth-led programs.

Equity/Access
Chief among the strategies for improving access in St. Paul is communicating the value of afterschool learning opportunities, “trying to get people to think afterschool programs are something they want for their children,” says Skold.

Another form of outreach is Sprockets’ “Program Finder,” an online locator featured on their website and other community partner websites, which recently grew to include a mapping feature.

Sprockets staff also have improved transportation to increase access for underserved populations. They support circulator buses in St. Paul neighborhoods and have developed a toolkit of transportation resources for program providers and families, including safe biking and walking routes.

To reflect St. Paul’s increasingly diverse population, Sprockets has been helping to diversify the pool of youth workers. The agency offers free training and resources — “in a very under-funded field,” as Skold notes — and focuses on recruiting youth workers of color. Since 2012, they have offered 136 trainings and trained 17 external assessors in the Youth Program Quality Assessment® tool, all of whom are people of color. “Everyone has biases, so having a diverse pool is important,” he adds.
Featured Element: Advancing a Data System

Sprockets has contributed significantly to advancing the use of data to inform its practices and those of related programs. “We wanted to create a system that would help programs collect reliable data about what was happening. But we also wanted a system that would allow us to aggregate, to understand what was happening across the city,” says Skold.

So, they built a data system and created a data-sharing agreement with the Saint Paul Public Schools, which was “a really challenging thing to arrange,” says Skold. It allows Sprockets to access some measures of academic achievement and outcomes at the district level.

Initial data collection efforts also involved identifying a common observational tool for measuring program quality (the Youth Program Quality Assessment, or PQA®). Knowing that research shows that only quality programs have a lasting effect, Sprockets began supporting the use of multiple assessment tools, and added the Survey for Afterschool Youth Outcomes. They started the data system with a pilot of 10 organizations and 7,800 youth, and now are using it with 40 organizations serving 23,000 youth.

The need to integrate these multiple data sets to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of citywide needs led to Sprockets’ current annual evaluation system, the Activator Improvement Cycle. “We realized that in the way we were using the [instruments], we were siloing data collection efforts,” says Skold. “We wanted to develop an integrated quality improvement process” that would combine participant and demographic data; program quality information; participant outcomes results, and participant experience data.

The Activator Improvement Cycle provides participating programs access to the tools necessary for all these elements, at no cost. Currently, 30 programs are Sprockets Activators. As an “activator” a site:

1. Assesses: collects data on program quality and impacts;
2. Plans: develops an improvement plan based on findings; and,
3. Improves: implements the plan.

In the fall, program staff are trained in data collection tools and participate in workshops on topics related to quality programming. Programs then collect data, preparing them for the next step in the cycle, in which they analyze data and plan how to improve their work.

The heart of Sprockets’ quality improvement process is a daylong workshop they developed: M3® (Making Meaning with Multiple data sets), in which programs identify areas of strength and improvement based on the data they’ve collected throughout the year. They then develop an improvement plan to begin making changes as they wrap up the Activator Cycle and prepare for the upcoming program year.

In addition to facilitating evaluation of programs in its network, Sprockets assesses its own effectiveness as an intermediary, measuring its vibrancy as a network, this includes “whether participants feel we are achieving our mission and vision,” says Skold.

“We think a lot about how we can continue to do the important work we were created to do, but also how to bring ideas and concepts to the field work, with a process to innovate and change,” he adds.
2. The Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth
(northern suburbs of Minneapolis)

Background
The Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth (BYC) was created through a joint powers agreement among the inner-ring suburbs of Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Park, Hennepin County, and the school districts of Osseo, Brooklyn Center, Robbinsdale and Anoka-Hennepin, plus Hennepin Technical College and North Hennepin Community College. Its purpose is to bring providers and young people together to promote the development of integrated systems that enhance youth success and well-being. “We’ve sustained this effort, and we have a reputation for measuring and delivering,” says Mayor Lunde, current Board Chair for the Alliance.

The cities have a total population of 105,875, of which approximately 10% are ages 10-19. “Our strength is our cultural diversity and our public systems that have made progress in responding to the needs of youth and families,” says Executive Director Rebecca Gilgen. Brooklyn Park is now a majority-minority suburb of 78,000 people, with significant communities of Africans, African-Americans, Hmong, Vietnamese, and Latinxs. Nearly half of Brooklyn Park students and 88% of Brooklyn Center secondary students qualify for free/reduced lunch.

Youth Engagement
Young people are engaged as leaders with the Alliance “all the time, everywhere,” says Gilgen.

Central to youth engagement is the Brooklyn Youth Council (BYC), who the Alliance trains to facilitate and gather the voices of other young people. Consistent with the goal of ensuring the integration of youth input, young people are members of the board and committees. “We believe if young people are involved, we can disrupt inequities and find new solutions,” she adds.

As youth council member Jalila Hill stated, the BYC is “a good way to be a part of the community: getting to know everyone, understanding the processes [for decision-making].” Sister Jacoya Hill adds: “It was really big to sit next to the mayor and to be a part of [board meetings]. As teenagers we aren’t really a part of that.”

Young people also are central in the Alliance’s data work. In its Youth-to-Youth survey, which focuses on young people who are not currently participating in expanded learning programs, youth researchers gather data and analyze results. They also contribute to the broader conversation about measuring the mission.

The Alliance also provides technical assistance to partners on youth engagement and has created a curriculum for youth to support one another in high school through a “Peer Support Group Model.” Young people have designed, piloted, and are measuring the results. The end goal is to ensure that peers can connect to address challenges. As Gilgen says, “This is a powerful reframe from adult-centered supports, toward youth leadership and strengthening pro-social peer networks.”

Equity/Access
The Youth-to-Youth survey surfaces collective concerns about equity and access. While partners are aware of the usual barriers – transportation and cost – Gilgen says that “We have come to understand that the biggest barriers are the underlying mindsets about who gets...
access and to what extent we design programs that ensure access for each young person.”

As a prime example, she cites youth sports. The survey showed that most non-participating young people are interested in sports, but most sports are run by schools and athletic associations where access is hindered due to fees, scheduling, marketing, and/or lack of relationships. Athletic associations can be expensive, and scholarships are often difficult for parents to navigate. “This system is full of caring and passionate people, but these programs were built for a community 40 or 50 years ago. We are ready to make changes as a community,” says Gilgen.

In the process of considering youth access to sports, racial equity became a central issue as did parents’ knowledge of options, so a racial equity statement was developed:

“Through this work we (Alliance members) intend to create the conditions for program providers to try new things, and to become open, flexible, and intentional about delivering programs and services in NEW settings, in NEW languages, and with NEW customers.”

Parents also said that the entry point for sports activities should be within schools and the activities should be free. So, one access solution was for the school district-based Community Education program to create a “sports sampler” to include high interest sports like basketball and soccer, while partners raise funds to buy equipment to share across four school districts.

Other access strategies include an online program locator (BrooklynsConnect.org) coupled with one-to-one outreach to parents to identify quality youth programs.

Featured Element: Sustainability

The Alliance’s main approach to securing funding is to demonstrate effectiveness. Gilgen emphasizes the importance of “evidencing what you’re doing: tell the story and build the political will.”

She cites the example of their youth employment program, BrookLynk. The cities had not historically led youth employment programs, so they were initially apprehensive and agreed to a pilot. Since the pilot, they’ve tripled the number of young people participating in the program, and mobilized support from the business community and both cities’ mayors. The two cities now have an agreement to continue to operate and fund BrookLynk.

Gilgen is passionate about what the Alliance partners are doing: creating public-private partnerships focused on systems change to more effectively use public funds. As an example, she notes that the Alliance brings leaders at all levels together to engage in building a racial equity culture, to share successes and lessons learned. “If we want our communities to thrive, this work will continue to be at the epicenter for generations,” she adds.
3. Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board

(Twin City to St. Paul, population approximately 400,000)

Background

Nearly 30 years ago, the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board (YCB) was developed when then Superintendent of Public Schools Richard Greene encouraged Mayor Don Fraser to improve collaboration between the City and its public schools. State-level legislation subsequently authorized a joint powers agreement between the City, its public schools, Parks and Recreation, and Hennepin County, cementing the participation of these separate jurisdictions, and mandating that they each contribute a designated sum of money.

The YCB has taken a variety of forms over the past several decades. Although it originally managed programs directly, in 2002 it chose to capitalize on its strength as “the table where deals [on youth services] are hammered out,” says Executive Director Ann DeGroot, and took on a more policy-focused role.

In 2012, the YCB developed a Call to Action which includes the goal to ensure “All Minneapolis children and youth, ages 5-21, have access to safe, high-quality opportunities to learn outside of the classroom.”

Beginning in 2014, the Minneapolis Afterschool Network, an initiative of the YCB, began building a citywide afterschool system to achieve this goal. It continues to act as a coordinating entity between jurisdictional partners, nonprofit organizations, and community leaders to:

- Increase champions and advocate for equitable access to afterschool and summer programs.
- Improve the quality and strength of afterschool and summer programs.
- Collaborate and coordinate with nonprofit youth-serving organizations, schools, government, and young people to use resources more effectively.

Youth Engagement

The YCB has been engaging young people in leadership roles through its Minneapolis Youth Congress (MYC) since 2007. The Youth Congress is a group of approximately 50 diverse young people, grades 8-12, who meet three to four times each month under the tagline “No decisions about us without us.” They engage with and contribute to their communities, and are compensated for their time and expertise.

Members are selected through a process that mimics job hiring: Young people must apply, be interviewed, and be sworn into the Congress by a judge. They then receive training in the skills that help them meaningfully engage with and contribute to their jurisdictions.

In addition to serving as a sounding board for the members of the YCB, these young people have lobbied the Minnesota Health Department to change tobacco ordinances and developed a psychological first aid mobile app called “MYCepaz.”

Youth Congress members are trained in facilitation, so that they can effectively convene other youth, ask questions, and provide meaningful perspectives to the YCB, elected officials, and to the community at large.

In 2019, the YCB involved more than 300 young people in the development of a Youth Master Plan, which mobilizes an agenda on behalf of youth in Minneapolis. The YCB co-hosted youth ward meetings with a local elected official in each city council ward. MYC members used their “Youth as Facilitative Leaders” training to lead their peers in exploring aspects of Minneapolis that they enjoy and/or would like to see changed in the next five years. This youth input will inform policy and programmatic recommendations in the final Youth Master Plan report.
Equity/Access

The YCB staff and Youth Congress acknowledge the forces that exist in the lives of youth, including racism, sexism, xenophobia, economic inequality, homophobia, and the intersections that limit young people’s ability to reach their goals, including the goal that “All Minneapolis children and youth have access to safe, high-quality opportunities to learn outside of the classroom.”

The YCB thus focuses their efforts on equity and justice by:

• Listening to the MYC and our community youth, and acting on their ideas, input, and feedback.
• Pursuing ongoing, reliable funding sources to increase the number of high-quality opportunities for young people to learn outside of the classroom.
• Promoting quality frameworks and supports for programs to continuously improve and strengthen their youth programs.
• Providing a “one-stop shop” online program locator for families and youth to access information on afterschool opportunities in Minneapolis.

Featured Element: Role as a Coordinating Entity

In a city rich with jurisdictional entities and youth-serving nonprofits, the YCB embraces its role as the coordinating hub for children and youth development, policy alignment, information, and collaborative action in Minneapolis through their “5 C’s”:

1. Convene partners and facilitate youth and community involvement in the process.

2. Collaborate to establish vision, goals, and strategies, and increase collective effectiveness.

3. Champion policy issues, leadership, and action to benefit young people.

4. Communicate progress, issues to be addressed, and outcome indicators.

5. Create new pilot programs, information resources, and tools beyond the scope of the individual partners.

Examples of YCB’s collaborative action include the creation of Way to GROW for early childhood development and a STEP-UP program for summer youth employment, now both administered by independent agencies. Additionally, the annual We Want You Back campaign helps identify and reconnect Minneapolis Public School students who had dropped out before they graduated from high school, to provide a customized pathway to graduation. The YCB works closely with the Minneapolis Public Schools and with all YCB partners to provide summer-long outreach and a full-day of community-wide door-knocking to get hundreds of students back on paths to graduation.
4. Northfield Healthy Community Initiative  
(exurban area, southeast of St. Paul, serving a town of about 20,000 and its neighboring rural communities)

**Background**

Since 1992, Northfield’s Healthy Community Initiative has been providing “backbone” supportive services to a broad range of agencies in southeastern Minnesota. The partnership with Youthprise in 2012 helped to expand this work and extend the impact.

Living its tagline “Thriving youth; thriving community”, HCI coordinates the PRIMEtime network, which includes nine free afterschool and summer programs for young people ages 5-20. Last year, the network served nearly 2,000 local young people.

Executive Director Zach Pruitt says that the partners who offer expanded learning programs to elementary through high school youth work well together. “Part of this is the intentionality of the network, creating space for people to come together, work together, and share resources. The importance of the network is in keeping the ball moving forward even as people transition in and out.”

**Youth Engagement**

HCI is known for its comprehensive involvement of young people across the city’s boards and governance structures. For nearly 15 years, the intermediary has not only had young people on its board of directors, but also has had a high school student serve as co-chair.

Five years ago, the idea of youth board involvement spread to city governance when the mayor got excited about the concept, says Pruitt. Buoyed by support from Youthprise, this enthusiasm then “snowballed” to include schools, nonprofits, and other city agencies. Now, at least two young people serve on most city boards including the Northfield Public Library Board, Human Rights Commission, and Parks and Recreation Board. In the schools, students participate on governance boards that include the district youth council (the Superintendent’s youth cabinet), a curriculum committee, and the school wellness committee. In total, 96 youth served on 31 different boards last year.

To address questions and increase skills, every other week, an adult adviser checks in on each young person who is serving on a board. As a group, the young people also meet twice monthly to receive training and technical assistance. (Adults who serve as partners also receive training through this HCI-led and Youthprise-funded “Youth on Boards” program).

HCI has received state and national recognition for this work. As Pruitt attests: “It’s about authentic youth engagement … We didn’t want to have just one or two youth sitting on the school board to speak for all youth. Our goal is to get lots of youth in lots of places, sitting at the tables where decisions are made that impact this community.”
Equity/Access
For Northfield, equity and access begin with communication — an area of increasing need as the region has grown to include more Spanish-speaking families. Extensive outreach efforts to involve families and young people in low-income housing include translating materials into Spanish and hiring bilingual staff.

Similarly, transportation, especially for programs that draw from a rural community that has limited public transit, is critical. According to Pruitt, “All the programs disproportionately draw low-income youth and young people of color. Issues of transportation especially affect those youth.” As a result, HCI contracts with buses that go to locations where underserved youth are likely to live, such as mobile home parks and apartment complexes. As a next step, the network is developing a transportation co-op that will make minivans and buses available to local youth development programs.

As one measurement of efficacy, high school graduation rates among Latinx young people have increased from 36% 14 years ago to 90% last year. Pruitt points to the development of Northfield’s collaborative TORCH (Tackling Obstacles, Raising College Hopes) initiative as paramount to this change. With the support of HCI, TORCH now provides academic counseling and wraparound services to nearly 500 low-income and minority youth in grades 6-12 each year.

Despite these successes, and growing participation rates, Pruitt says that “Transportation and funding remain our biggest challenges.”

Featured Element: Committed Leadership

A salient feature of HCI is its long-term committed leadership among key stakeholders. As Pruitt says, “We have been true to our mission of authentic collaboration — not running programs — over the course of our history.” HCI’s governance is the responsibility of a board of directors, which meets monthly. The board includes five youth members, as well as local K-12 administrators; business people and medical professionals; representatives of two local colleges; and the Latino Youth Coordinator from the Office of Latino Ministry for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Committees, which include board members as well as non-board community members, also provide assistance with the management and direction of HCI, ensuring broad local involvement. These committees include an executive committee with representatives from the city, school, and medical community, as well as a communications committee, development committee, and finance committee.

Last year, 752 community members (unduplicated count) volunteered with HCI’s work.
Conclusion: Cross-Site Analysis

In profiling these sites, the findings of the study affirm that the following characteristics ensure an effective expanded learning system.

1. Strong Leadership
All expanded learning systems studied have governing boards that include 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 engage in decision-making 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 of work such as development, finance, and communications.

2. Role as a Coordinating Entity
Major tasks of expanded learning intermediaries include organizing 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 expanded learning opportunities for all young people; strengthening their capability to achieve this goal; establishing regular communications; and aligning partners’ activities.

Results of this study show that coordination activities vary according to the local context for each system. For example, Sprockets (located in Saint Paul) created a stable network with multiple partners, while in the smaller communities, the Community Education Department is the main provider of afterschool programming and the intermediary leader reorganizes partnerships to meet evolving youth needs.

Despite these differences, intermediaries also engage in a range of common coordination activities. For example, leaders maintain regular contact with partners through meetings and communications such as newsletters. Intermediaries also provide various types of support to help networks carry out their work — professional development, assistance in collecting and using data, featuring programs in online locators, and collaborative fundraising.
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 inform programmatic changes.

Because intermediaries tend to play a central role in incubating new ideas and replicating these ideas across their networks, most of the intermediaries have made substantial progress in advancing the use of data. 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®). All these Minnesota 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 piloted and implemented an annual continuous improvement process, the “Activator Improvement Cycle” of assess, plan, and improve, then engaged 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 excellent programs.

Barriers mentioned included lack of knowledge of programs and activities among young people and families, lack of transportation, program costs, and a general lack of funding for expanded learning programs. Director Gilgen of the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth also noted that information about and enrollment processes for many expanded learning 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 address the lack of knowledge, three intermediaries developed online program locators. Northfield HCI, situated in a smaller town and serving a rural area, found that a program locator did not seem to justify its cost. Programs also expended considerable effort to explain the value of expanded learning to parents.

All intermediaries strived to address the barrier of transportation. The Brooklyn Bridge Alliance created Rec on the Go which takes sports equipment, art supplies, and games to young people during the summer. Minneapolis YCB partners with Minneapolis Parks and Recreation in a similar approach with “Pop-Up Parks” and had a “youth bus” that transports young people to programming. They also have experimented with Metro transit bus cards to help young people access programming across the city. Northfield HCI has organized buses to take low-income youth from their neighborhoods to expanded learning programs. Sprockets supports circulator buses in Saint Paul and has organized a guide to transportation for families.

Northfield’s Director 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 in the study described the strain imposed by a general lack of funding on the entire expanded learning field. As he noted, “That has gotten worse instead of better.” And, in an article in the Minneapolis newspaper, the Star Tribune, YCB Director DeGroot pointed out that four of the largest contributors to expanded learning time programs in Minneapolis had dropped their funding. As a result, “The programs that kids depend on and parents depend on are being severely limited,” she says.

6. Youth Engagement

All intermediaries engage young people in leadership roles in their organizations. In Northfield, young people sit on a broad range of boards across the region, providing input about youth issues and also assisting with critical activities, such as fundraising. The Minneapolis Coordinating Board has a Youth Congress that is trained in facilitation skills, so youth provide their own perspectives and those of other youth to elected officials and others. The Alliance solicits youth perspectives in a variety of ways including through their Brooklyn Youth Council. Sprockets does not have youth members on its board, but engages their network members in supporting youth voice. In three intermediaries, young people assist with evaluation activities, such as data collection, interpretation, and/or use.

Most intermediaries provide extensive support to program partners in how to engage young people. For example, Northfield, with support from Youthprise, has launched a Youth on Boards initiative in which they work with governmental and community organizations to add young people to their Boards. Approximately 90 young people now serve on the boards of Northfield organizations. Northfield, the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance, and Sprockets have all provided training and technical assistance to their local organizations in how to engage youth. The Alliance, for example, has developed a related curriculum.
7. Funding and Sustainability
Expanded learning programs have faced precarious funding conditions since their inception. Most recently, the Trump administration has proposed to cut funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers from its 2019-2020 budget. While states, foundations, and businesses provide some support, the bulk of funding for expanded learning programs (76%) is supplied by tuition and fees from parents. As with expanded learning programs, intermediary organizations also face an ongoing struggle to capitalize their work.

Intermediaries obtain funding for their organizations from a variety of sources. The Brooklyn Bridge Alliance and Minneapolis YCB 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, while they also regularly seek grants. The Minneapolis YCB experienced a drop in philanthropic dollars that focused their efforts on key elements of an afterschool city-wide system versus building out an entire city-wide system.

Intermediary leaders have responded to funding challenges to their organizations with various innovative strategies. Northfield HCI has begun a fee-for-service initiative, in which programs pay for some intermediary services, such as assistance with program evaluation. Sprockets makes an extensive effort to communicate the value of expanded learning programs to potential funders and the public. A key strategy for the Brooklyn Bridge 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 impact.

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. The Minneapolis YCB is working with its board to identify a new, reliable funding stream with the City of Minneapolis that would support funding for youth-serving organizations. The Brooklyn Bridge Alliance organizes collaborative projects with partners to meet identified youth needs. Sprockets helps program partners make the case for their effectiveness, informs program partners of potential grants, and writes letters of support. Northfield HCI supports collaborative grant-seeking efforts among its program partners.

8. Regional, Statewide, and National Collaboration
The Peer Learning Community, funded and facilitated by Youthprise, has been an essential collaborative for all intermediary leaders in this project since its inception in 2012. Participants gather every other month to report on their current work, share problems, and discuss ways to advance the expanded learning field. It has provided a space where leaders can learn from one another and gain new ideas, while discussing their challenges in a supportive environment.

Intermediary leaders also reported that their organizations collaborate with other regional, state-level, and national expanded learning organizations. Organizations that have offered useful alliances include the Every Hour Counts, the Forum on Youth Investment, the Afterschool Alliance, Minnesota’s Ignite Afterschool, the nationwide Afterschool Network, and the Regional Quality Collaborative — an initiative to expand the number of Youth Program Quality Assessors from ethnically diverse backgrounds.
Afterword

More than 219,000 of Minnesota’s youth are alone and unsupervised afterschool; many of these young people would join an afterschool program if one were available[1].

Concerned about these numbers, Ignite Afterschool partnered with a researcher at the University of Minnesota to analyze the Minnesota Student Survey data and found that the state’s afterschool access gap is both race- and income-based, with white and higher-income youth participating more regularly than youth of color and low-income youth[2]. When research demonstrates that young people who participate in high quality afterschool programs are more likely to succeed in school, our afterschool access gap becomes another contributing factor to growing educational disparities across the state.

This report demonstrates what’s possible when communities join together to close these gaps, creating opportunities and supporting high-quality experiences for learning and leadership. We find Youthprise’s report hopeful. It demonstrates that, in Minnesota, expanded learning systems:

- Elevate the contributions of young people to solve problems and strengthen their communities (with youth on boards, youth councils, and youth participatory action research);

- Lead necessary conversations and advance strategies that promote equity and address systems and structural inequities (with people of color as quality assessors);

- Use data to pinpoint where disparities show up in each community context and then drive partnerships that lead to solutions (such as sports programming);

- Organize elected and community leaders to leverage their authority and resources to explore new ways to address gaps (through children’s savings accounts and exploring potential city funding streams for afterschool);

- Support expanded learning programs to engage in continuous program improvement and quality improvement (through the “activator cycle” that is data-based).

At Ignite Afterschool, our vision is that every young person in every community will benefit from the power of afterschool and expanded learning. We hope this report can be used to inspire action in communities across the state and nationally. It clearly defines the key components in an expanded learning system, challenging both new and established systems to ramp up youth voice and equity strategies. Clear examples of community-level innovations should inspire others to borrow what works, adding their own innovations to our collective story. When more local communities are coordinated, it builds power. This allows us to make a stronger, collective case for the value of expanded learning and an ability to more effectively address and change system-level barriers that get in the way.
While this report offers much to celebrate, the work is not done. To build and expand upon the successes detailed here, we must:

- **Continue to foster learning across expanded learning systems;**
- **Incubate good ideas that improve quality and access and then expand and share those good ideas with other communities in Minnesota;**
- **Identify systems and policy barriers that exacerbate access gaps and work collectively to address them;**
- **Fund expanded learning systems and programs to ensure access to community-level data, professional development, and quality.**

We applaud Youthprise’s contributions and look forward to more years of collaboration that deepen and expand this work so that every young person can experience the power of afterschool.

**Kari Denissen-Cunnien**
Executive Director, Ignite Afterschool


[2] Analysis conducted by Dr. Michael Rodriguez, UMN College of Education and Human Development. More than 168,000 youth in Grades 5, 8, 9, and 11 across Minnesota participated in the Minnesota Student Survey in 2017
References


Special Thanks to our Partners

Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth

The purpose of the Alliance is to cooperatively support positive youth development in out-of-school-time opportunities for all youth in Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Park.
https://www.brooklynsallianceforyouth.org/

Health Community Initiative

At the Northfield Healthy Community Initiative (HCI), we’re dedicated to building partnerships and encouraging community collaborations that support, value and empower youth. We do this by bringing together programs and individuals and providing necessary support so that they can best put their expertise and resources toward efforts that positively impact youth.
https://northfieldhci.org/

Minnesota Youth Coordinating Board

The Minneapolis Youth Congress is a representative body of youth that has authentic power and influence in decisions and policies relevant to youth. MYC works in collaboration with elected officials focusing on a common understanding of the welfare of the youth in the City of Minneapolis.
https://www.ycb.org/

Sprockets

Sprockets improves the quality, availability, equity and effectiveness of out-of-school time learning for all youth in Saint Paul through the committed, collaborative and innovative efforts of community organizations, government, schools and other partners.
https://www.sprocketssaintpaul.org/
By the numbers

235,544
Young People Served

57
PQA® Trainings

1,661
Programs in the Network

652
Youth Trained in Facilitating

379
Organizations Supported by an Intermediary

39
Trainers of Color Certified

332
OST-Related Trainings

$9,550,000
Dollars Leveraged

Learn more at Youthprise.org/Equity_and_Innovation