

Families and Expanded Learning Opportunities: Working Together to Support Children's Learning

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This is the second in a series of briefs created by Harvard Family Research Project and the National Conference of State Legislatures to address topics in expanded learning opportunities (ELOs). This series will highlight research evidence on ELO best practices and effects on youth and discuss the policy implications related to this research. For more information, visit www.hfrp.org/NCSL-Briefs.

What Are Expanded Learning Opportunities?

Expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) offer structured learning environments outside the traditional school day, through before- and after-school; summer; and extended-day, -week or -year programs. They provide a range of enrichment and learning activities in various subjects, including arts; civic engagement; and science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). They also offer academic support, mentoring and more. High-quality ELOs often engage participants through innovative learning methods and complement what students learn during the school day. ELOs are part of a range of supports that can help youth succeed, along with positive influences from family, friends, school and other enrichment activities.

Families and ELOs—Partnering to Support Children's Learning Success

Educators, youth development workers and others involved in children's learning are increasingly moving toward a broader vision of learning. This vision goes beyond traditional education in schools to encompass a variety of 21st century skills and learning environments. As children's educations increasingly occur across a range of settings—including through expanded learning opportunities—parents are uniquely positioned to help ensure that these settings best support their children's specific learning needs.

As the primary bridge between multiple learning settings, parents play an important role in helping to broker and foster their children's learning experiences. For this reason, there is an increasing need for ELOs to engage families in more pivotal and meaningful ways. This involves finding ways for families and programs to support each other and work together to better support their children's learning and development.

ELOs can provide parents with approachable entry points to schools and their child's education (i.e., ELO staff may seem more accessible and easier to talk with than school staff, but may also have key information about their children's school-day activities).¹ Even though school teachers and administrators realize the benefits of family engagement, obstacles often exist to engaging families in their children's learning (e.g., lack of funding, time or other

resources).² Participation in quality ELO programs, however, has been shown to improve parents' engagement with their children's learning, which can lead to stronger communication between families and schools. ELOs also can contribute to children's learning and development beyond the school day. Family engagement in out-of-school time settings has been shown to offer many benefits, including improved youth outcomes (such as behavior, well-being and school success) and better relationships between parents and their children, among others.³

ELO programs have long recognized the value of family engagement and have worked to build this component into their programming. Traditionally, this has meant that ELO staff and families take the time to communicate with one another about issues specifically related to the program (e.g., discussion of program activities, youth behavior in the program, transportation and other logistics). Additional family responsibilities often have been geared toward encouraging their children's participation in ELOs; working for ELOs as volunteers or paid staff; and participating in ELO events, governance, decision-making and planning. Additional program responsibilities, meanwhile, have frequently involved helping connect families with schools, offering services for families (e.g., job skills training) and providing information about opportunities for families to become involved in the program.⁴



It is becoming increasingly necessary, however, to build on these family engagement practices and take them to the next level. For children's learning to be successful, ELOs and parents need to work together in close partnership and move beyond information sharing and occasional parental participation in activities and events. Taking this next step will ensure that ELOs are contributing to children's learning in meaningful ways that complement what is taught in schools and other learning settings. Thus, parents and ELOs have a shared responsibility for promoting children's learning.

For ELOs to provide beneficial learning opportunities, parents must work with ELOs as equal partners to:

1. Understand children's learning needs
2. Ensure that program goals and activities align with children's larger learning goals
3. Facilitate communication with other settings where children learn to better coordinate learning supports (e.g., tutors, books and other learning materials)
4. Share key data and results regarding children's learning progress

Because these responsibilities are complex and require significant work, efforts by ELOs to engage families need to be intentional and well-planned. These elements are discussed below in more detail, supported by evidence from recent research.

1. Understand children's learning needs.

Families and ELOs must work together to understand children's learning needs, including their strengths and weaknesses, and what various settings offer to meet these needs. Specifically, parents can consider their child's existing learning activities to identify gaps that ELOs can help address. In turn, ELOs can help to uncover additional learning needs of youth participants and communicate these needs to parents. In fact, family engagement in ELOs is associated with improvements in parents' communication with and understanding of their children.⁵

Family PLUS (Parents Leading, Uniting, Serving), a national initiative launched in 2006, seeks to help Boys & Girls Clubs ensure that families in need have the necessary resources to support their children's success and to involve families in program planning and implementation. Parents reported that spending time at the club not only allowed them to learn about their children's friends, interests and talents, but also provided the basis for them to have more substantive conversations with their children.⁶

2. Ensure that program goals and activities align with children's larger learning goals.

In addition to understanding how ELOs can complement children's other learning experiences and address their learning needs, families and ELOs must work together to ensure that the program actually is addressing specific learning needs of participants. To be considered high-quality and able to benefit youth, ELOs should have a clear set of desired outcomes for their participants (e.g., improved academic performance or better physical health) that are directly linked to program activities (e.g., providing healthy snacks and physical activity for a program focused on improving health).⁷ To most effectively support children's learning, however, ELOs also should understand how their activities and goals fit within the larger learning goals of their participants (i.e., what is the ELO's contribution to participants' sets of learning supports?). ELOs should work with families to identify their specific contribution to the larger system that supports children's learning and development.

Generacion Diez provides migrant Latino children in grades 1 through 6 in rural Pennsylvania with after-school snacks, homework help and an array of group activities focused on skills such as academic achievement and social/emotional competence. The program also has a home-education component for families. Parents of children with high program attendance tend to have better relationships with their children's school, more frequent contact with their children's teachers and more engagement in school activities.⁸

3. Facilitate communication with other settings where children learn to better coordinate learning supports.

Research indicates that family involvement in learning supports "helps to create consistency and reinforce learning and developmental messages across learning contexts (in school, in after-school and summer programs, and at home)."⁹ Although this bridging role is not new, it has become a more significant component in this broader vision of learning, because it involves coordination of multiple learning supports. As learning settings become more diverse, families and ELOs can play key roles in connecting the various learning environments, especially schools. ELOs often play an important role in helping facilitate families' communication with teachers, principals and other key school staff. ELOs and families together can help one another communicate with other settings in which children learn. For example, ELOs can work with parents to help them to better understand school policies and

find opportunities to become more involved in their children's schools.¹⁰ Research suggests that families' engagement in ELOs is associated with increased communication with teachers and involvement in school activities, including parent-teacher conferences.¹¹

New York City Department of Youth and Community Development's (DYCD) Out-of-School Time (OST) Programs for Youth Initiative funds ELO programs across New York City to address a broad range of developmental objectives for K-12 youth and serve the needs of their families and communities. Parents are seen as partners with DYCD OST programs, so that programs and families can work together to "meet youth needs more effectively."¹² To work with parents, the majority of the DCYD OST programs communicate with parents at least once a month by phone (91 percent of programs), through in-person meetings (83 percent of programs) and by sending materials home to parents (70 percent of programs).

4. Share key data and results regarding children's learning progress.

To be effective, ELOs and other learning environments should have systems in place to track data on children's performance and learning progress. It is crucial that the data be coordinated and communicated across settings—including between ELOs and families—to provide a comprehensive picture of a child's learning and development. To be most effective, this data sharing should be reciprocal between families and ELOs: ELOs must share the data they gather on their youth participants with families, but families also should share data about their children to which the program may otherwise not have access.¹³ For example, a mother can provide information to the ELO about her child's progress at home and in school as well as any specific learning challenges the child is facing. Families and ELOs can then maintain ongoing communication about the meaning of the data and how it can be used to better support children's learning needs.

Higher Achievement provides after-school and summer activities focused on academics, social skills and leadership to middle school-age youth from at-risk communities in Washington, D.C.; Alexandria and Richmond, Va.; and Baltimore, Md. Almost half of participants' parents (47 percent) reported talking with program staff about their child's progress at least once a week during summer 2010.¹⁴

Policy Implications and Examples

- Legislators can create and/or participate in state-wide advisory councils or task forces to explore best practices for increasing family engagement in schools, ELOs and the home and make appropriate policy recommendations. This work can help coordinate learning supports, guide ELO practices and support family engagement through policy. In 2009, for example, Colorado enacted legislation (S. 90) that created the State Advisory Council for Parent Involvement in Education (SACPIE). Council members include various stakeholders from schools and the community, including parents; teachers; school board members; and representatives from parent information and resource centers, nonprofit organizations and statewide parent organizations.
- As state policymakers review existing ELO quality program standards or develop new ones, they can work with ELOs to produce appropriate standards that include ELO best practices for family engagement. This can include ensuring that ELO program goals and activities align with children's learning goals.
- When states consider measures to promote and support family engagement—such as supporting professional development for teachers in building parent-teacher relationships or providing grant funding for developing family engagement programs—state policymakers will want to consider including ELOs.
- As state and community leaders, legislators are uniquely positioned to engage the community on how parents, schools and ELO providers can coordinate, communicate and support youth learning. Legislators also can highlight and promote ELOs that are effectively implementing the family engagement elements and strategies discussed above. In addition to promoting these best practices informally in their communities, legislators can encourage formation of public-private partnerships (e.g., media campaigns) to promote family engagement strategies.

Notes

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