



From Idea to Action: An Institute for Building Expanded-Learning Systems

High-quality after-school and summer programs can influence a range of academic, social, and emotional outcomes for young people. However, as Priscilla Little of The Wallace Foundation noted at Every Hour Counts' recent institute for building expanded-learning systems, "Not all programs are effective, and not all programs are high quality. The key is coordination."

Around the country, interest is growing in developing coordinated systems of after-school programming to expand students' access to high-quality learning opportunities beyond the school day, and to help equip them with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive. Cities have different assets and challenges when it comes to building these coordinated systems, and some have long histories of coordination, while others are new to this approach.

On May 13-14, 2014, more than 100 people from 25 cities across the system-building spectrum gathered in Baltimore, MD, to discuss the essential elements of expanded-learning systems. Leaders in system-building and citywide coordination presented sessions on quality, data, operations, partnership building, and advocacy. Teams of diverse stakeholders from around the country shared their challenges, offered lessons learned, and began planning next steps to take home and implement in their communities.

"From Idea to Action: An Institute for Building Expanded-Learning Systems" was hosted by Every Hour Counts, with generous support from The C.S. Mott Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, and the Family League of Baltimore. What follows is a summary of system-building strategies, lessons learned, and challenges that were discussed over the two-day institute.

Quality

"If a program is high-quality, young people will come, they're going to be engaged, and over time you'll get academic outcomes." – Alex Molina, Providence After School Alliance

Program quality matters for getting and keeping students in the door at after-school, as well as for maximizing the positive impact on children and families.

We learned that Prime Time Palm Beach County and the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) have developed robust quality improvement systems by following a few essential steps:

- Establish a shared vision and definition of quality among stakeholders at the outset;
- Agree on a set of indicators or standards and identify the right tools to measure them;
- Monitor programs, develop a plan, and offer the necessary supports to help programs improve.

For intermediaries just starting out in developing their quality improvement system, using a reliable, valid tool, securing financial support to keep the work going, and starting small can help build a foundation on which to grow. The process takes time. Initially, local providers may seek financial or other incentives to participate in the quality improvement system. In Palm Beach County, this incentive came in the form of a child-care subsidy from the Children’s Services Council. As a culture of improvement is built, however, and the system is shown to yield results, more programs will voluntarily participate, and the intermediary can dive into deeper levels of quality. This may also create an opening for partnership with the school district. In Palm Beach County and Providence, public school teachers now attend Prime Time and PASA’s professional development trainings.

Data

How can we unleash the power of data to ensure the success of our students? One answer, offered by Laura Hansen, Director of Information Management at Metro Nashville Public Schools, is for districts to share student-level data with community partners to target services.

In Nashville, the local intermediary and school district have defined roles and responsibilities and share data, guided by a shared vision of student achievement, memorandum of understanding, and technical solution to house and exchange data with privacy protections in place. Three key sets of data are intentionally shared: program quality (Youth Program Quality Assessment), program participation (attendance), and student outcomes (Early Warning Indicators). Program Dashboards—data reports across a program—are often used to facilitate communication between schools and community-based providers. Data are used to identify gaps in services, improve programs, make decisions about resource allocation, refine coordination of efforts, and, most importantly, personalize services and interventions for students.

In Chicago, After School Matters (ASM) offers apprenticeship opportunities to 14,000 unique teens annually. Initially, ASM fell into the trap of collecting too much data, but it later streamlined data collection to focus on the information that mattered most. In ASM’s case, that meant collecting data for business and administration purposes, as well as outcomes data aligned to the organization’s logic model. ASM then used that data to guide decision-making—for example, using provider/instructor evaluations to inform instructor coaching, and reviewing Chicago Public Schools’ “Freshman On-Track” data to target specific teen populations.

Policy

Policy change takes place at all levels of government. We discussed how, at the federal level, it is important to be aware of trends in Congress and the Administration, and to avoid debates about terminology, but instead speak with one voice about the quality and outcomes of expanded learning programs.

At the local level, partnerships with the school district and alignment to city leaders' priorities can go a long way towards building and sustaining support for expanded learning programs. In Baltimore, initial city funding for out-of-school time programs came about as a result of community organizing, but maintenance of that funding has depended on demonstrating results to city leaders. In Providence, the creation and continued funding of a Director of Expanded Learning position within the School District helps facilitate close collaboration between the local intermediary and school district on expanded learning policy.

Messaging

Messaging the value of expanded-learning systems and intermediaries to a variety of audiences isn't easy. We learned from Andrea Sussman, Senior Vice President at KSA-Plus Communications, that key strategies include: lead with outcomes instead of process, communicate in language that external audiences understand, and tell your stakeholders what's in it for them. Participants shared that, in Texas, describing how expanded learning programs build a strong workforce has been an effective message for the business community. In Baltimore, explaining how out-of-school time programs help reduce chronic absenteeism is a key message for city-level policy makers.

Ellie Mitchell, director of the Maryland Out-of-School Time Network, said that, as a statewide intermediary, she preferred process messages, but now she leads with outcomes, whether describing her work to the person next to her in an elevator, in a meeting with funders, or in public forums. No matter the situation, Andrea encouraged us to remember the mantra, "Heat, hope, help": apply pressure to your stakeholders, offer them the promise of improved outcomes, and seek out the support you need. Use Every Hour Counts' messaging materials and the unique attributes of your own system to make the case.

Measurement

Interest is growing across the country in tracking youth outcomes consistently within and across cities. Every Hour Counts has been working with expert researchers to develop a framework that identifies priority outcomes for expanded learning systems to track at the youth, program, and system levels. In addition to more traditional outcomes, the framework identifies a group of social and emotional "power skills," including critical thinking, self-regulation, and collaboration, as priority youth outcomes. The framework also provides tools and information on how to collect and use data to drive improvement. Every Hour Counts offered a sneak peak at the framework in Baltimore; the final publication will be released in summer 2014.

Building a System in Baltimore

In Baltimore, out-of-school time (OST) programs and community schools are aligned under a joint Community and School Engagement Strategy led by the Family League, a citywide intermediary

organization. Representatives from the Mayor's office, Baltimore City Schools, Parks and People Foundation, and the National Summer Learning Association spoke about key factors in the development of a citywide strategy for expanded learning. Main takeaways included:

- Buy-in from all partners is essential for success. In Baltimore, Parks and People Foundation, an award-winning summer provider, had been hoping to institutionalize its summer program since 1997, but the opportunity didn't arise until 2012, when simultaneously the Mayor's office began focusing on summer, the district saw a need for systems change, and the Family League had the capacity to coordinate a cross-sector effort. Further, there needs to be commitment at multiple levels, to help weather transitions in leadership.
- When developing a shared vision for the OST-community schools strategy, stakeholders turned to the evidence base pointing to a wide achievement gap between students who attend school regularly and those who don't, and decided to focus initially on reducing chronic absenteeism.
- A major facilities renovation in Baltimore City Schools is offering an opportunity to align OST and community schools more closely.
- Alignment between OST and community schools in Baltimore has already changed how schools and providers do business. Funds are closer to students, with each school responsible for its own strategy. OST providers work much more closely with individual schools and have a direct role to play in helping the school meet its objectives within that strategy.

The Role of Intermediaries

No one size fits all intermediaries. Their budgets range in size and breakdown, their organizational models vary, and their primary functions depend on local context and needs. Yet all intermediaries serve as the engine of expanded-learning systems. They unite stakeholders around a shared mission, coordinate and maximize resources, and drive improvement throughout their communities. Leaders from Boston After School & Beyond, Prime Time Palm Beach County, TASC (New York), and Youthprise (Minneapolis-St. Paul) identified the following as key functions that they execute in their role as intermediaries:

- Build relationships with key stakeholders, including policy makers from across the political spectrum, to facilitate collective action and sustain change through leadership transitions.
- Mobilize resources from funders and city leaders.
- Demonstrate innovations in practice—and, moreover, build capacity and political will to effect change at scale. Lucy Friedman, President of TASC, noted the importance of developing a scalable cost model and evaluating a demonstration from Day One to be prepared to make the case for wider adoption by policy makers.

Special Topics

Building a Summer Learning System – *Boston After School & Beyond*

The Boston Summer Measurement Project is an effort to close the gap in access to summer learning opportunities and strengthen connections between providers through aligned measures. The project is an expansion of the Boston Summer Learning Project, in which Boston Public Schools teachers and community-based non-profit staff co-develop, co-manage, and co-deliver a 5-6-week program. The expansion allows a wider variety of summer learning programs in the city to measure their program quality in a standard way. They measure outcomes around academics, skills, program quality, and health/wellness, identifying areas of strength and for improvement across programs.

Digital Badging and Student-Centered Learning – *Providence After School Alliance*

In Providence, students involved in the Hub can participate in expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) for high-school credit. They'll also receive a digital badge, an online representation of a specific skill or achievement gained through the ELO—for example, app development or debate. In order to successfully complete the ELO, receive credit, and be awarded a badge, students must attend regularly, blog weekly about their experience, and present a final demonstration of a product they created or new skill they acquired. The ELOs themselves are a collaboration among the intermediary, district/school, and community providers; during the ELO, students interact with other youth, community educators, and “teachers of record” from their school.

ExpandedED and Middle School ExTRA – *TASC*

For the past six years, TASC has piloted a longer school day that offers students academics and enrichment through strong school-community partnerships. The model relies on intensive joint planning between the school and lead community partner; principal buy-in and whole-school adoption allow for flexibility and freedom to experiment with scheduling. TASC's latest initiative, Middle School ExTRA, brings in tutors to provide small-group reading support for sixth-graders in expanded-day schools. One unexpected benefit of the initiative has been the opportunity for students to interact regularly with an older, caring adult in schools where the average instructional age is often under 30.

Expanded Learning Opportunities for High-School Students – *After School Matters*

Not many systems focus on high-school students—they're notoriously hard to engage, and funding isn't easy to come by. But for those that are interested, here are some tips from the pros:

- In order to attract and retain teen participants, *make them feel valued*. Bring in expert instructors who look like the teens you serve, give teens responsibility, and showcase them any chance you get.

- Get to teens during the pivotal eighth-grade year, but don't treat them like middle-school students. High-school students want more say and don't want to be treated like kids.
- Build partnerships with businesses by showcasing teens' work. Once they're hooked, ask them to employ teens as interns, where they can learn valuable professional skills.