

EXPANDED LEARNING PROGRAMS ARE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE SCHOOL DAY:

Key Principles for Reopening Schools and Helping Students Recover from COVID-19

As we move toward recovery from COVID-19, expanded learning programs are more essential than ever.

As parents begin to return to work and school districts nationwide consider different models for reopening and redesigning the school day—fully virtual school days, staggered schedules, and school days that incorporate a hybrid of virtual and in-classroom learning—expanded learning programs will be more essential than ever before. We should not expect schools to pull off the massive and uncharted task of redesigning the learning day on their own – afterschool and expanded learning partners stand ready to help. Decades of research documenting the outcomes of afterschool and summer programs reveal a core set of key

principles that are essential to helping young people reach their full potential. Aligning the spectrum of expanded learning opportunities with these principles will ensure quality and consistency across all programs. This document can be used to guide expanded learning policy at the local, state, and federal levels, which is particularly important as our country moves to recovery from COVID-19.

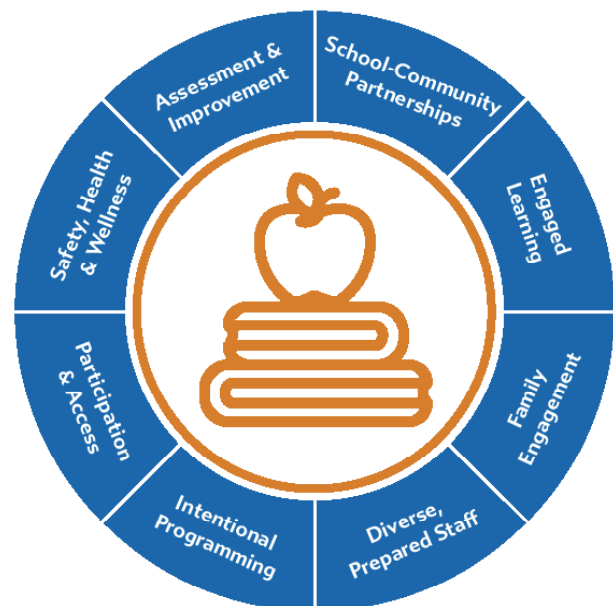
Working together, schools, afterschool programs, and community partners will be better positioned to help all of our young people, and especially those who have been historically underserved, emerge from this crisis strong, resilient, hopeful.

1. School-Community Partnerships: Strong partnerships between community organizations and schools are at the core of successful expanded learning programs. As schools reopen, expanded learning programs are an opportune partner to keep students engaged in learning, on track academically, and safe and supported in all of the reopening scenarios. These partnerships should be characterized by alignment of goals and services, effective lines of communication, and data and resource sharing.

2. Active and Engaged Learning: Strong expanded learning programs engage young people in meaningful and relevant experiential learning opportunities that are culturally competent and responsive to the students they serve. Activities tap into a young person’s interests, as well as help young people explore and find new areas of interest, sparking their passion and fueling their imagination. These engaged learning experiences, whether virtual or in-person, are even more critical as families live in and recover from the COVID-19 crisis. During these uncertain times, afterschool programs will continue innovating to provide services that keep kids excited about learning and build meaningful connections.

3. Family Engagement: Research points to active parent involvement in their child’s education as a key factor in student success, and community-based organizations collaborating with schools on expanded learning can help facilitate that involvement. The partnership between schools and expanded learning programs is particularly important during times like the COVID-19 crisis. Afterschool programs are well-positioned to regularly check in with parents and help schools stay connected to families, help parents navigate emerging challenges as many are facing job loss or modified work schedules, and help their children recover from learning loss, social isolation, and trauma related to the pandemic.

4. Intentional Programming: Explicit goals and intentionally designed activities that align with those goals are critical to the success of expanded learning programs. Successful programs must also engage participants in meaningful ways and meet their developmental and academic needs. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, which caused schools to close and students to miss months of learning, many afterschool programs adapted to stay open or offer virtual learning activities that teach to the whole child. Programs should expect to continue to intentionally design activities that help address emotional needs related to recovery as well as academic needs related to modified school calendars.



5. Diverse, Prepared Staff: In most instances, afterschool and expanded learning programs feature a combination of in-school teachers and community partners' staff. Successful expanded learning programs ensure that the staffing ratios, qualifications, ongoing professional development, and overall diversity of staff are closely linked to program goals and activities. The blending of teachers and non-teachers allows for a wide range of expertise and a breadth of adult perspectives that can help youth feel comfortable learning and exploring and ultimately contribute to their success.

6. Participation & Access: As we look ahead to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to ensure that all young people have access to more active and engaging learning opportunities is evident. Studies show that frequency and duration of participation in expanded learning programs matter; the more kids participate, the more likely they are to improve academically and behaviorally. When children choose and direct their enrichment experiences, they become more ardent learners and stronger leaders. As we work toward reopening and implementing a new learning day, it is important to recognize that attendance numbers in schools and expanded learning programs will likely fluctuate as families and communities recover from the coronavirus pandemic. For that reason, it is important that participation not be mandatory.

7. Safety: Adequate space, supervision, and security are necessary for young people to have the comfort and freedom to focus solely on the task at hand. Students' safety is the top priority among the afterschool field as programs adapt and reopen centers in a COVID-19 world. Programs will collaborate with schools and ensure proper safety measures, including masks, sanitation, and smaller staff-to-student ratios so that families feel comfortable with their children in programs' care.

8. Health & Well-being: The best programs take a holistic approach to well-being, helping students build their social and emotional skills and competencies, such as critical thinking, problem solving, and the ability to work in teams, as well as providing opportunities for exercise and access to nutritious meals and snacks that otherwise might be unavailable. As schools reopen, finding ways to help young people recover from the social isolation and trauma related to COVID will be essential to helping them resume learning and healthy development.

9. Ongoing Assessment & Improvement: Expanded learning programs that employ sound data collection and management practices focused on continuous improvement have the most success in establishing and maintaining quality services for young people. Frequent assessment (both informal and formal) and regular evaluation (both internal and external) are ingredients needed to refine and sustain expanded learning programs. Afterschool remains committed to sharing best practices as programs navigate delivery of services that are responsive to the coronavirus pandemic.

While COVID-19 has affected us all, it is essential to keep in mind that that low-income communities and communities of color have been especially hard hit. Afterschool and summer learning programs were a lifeline for underserved communities before the pandemic and now they are more important than ever as families with limited resources struggle to adapt to newly designed school days and years. The gaps in opportunity that already disadvantage students from low-income families are likely to grow. Expanded learning opportunities that complement the school day will be key to helping all young people and their families through this crisis.

