

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

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, and afterschool and expanded learning partners stand ready to help.

While structural issues like developing new protocols for instruction, new school day and year schedules, and new safety procedures are top of mind for school leaders right now, expanded supports for students who will return having experienced extreme social disconnection, trauma, and significant learning gaps will be critical. The expanded learning field, which encompasses programs that offer before-school, afterschool, summer learning, and extended day or expanded learning time (ELT), are prepared to rise to the moment to partner with schools, help re-engage kids in learning, and provide the necessary supports to help students and families, especially those who have been historically underserved, emerge from this crisis strong, resilient, and hopeful.

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 how we think about a new learning day and the role of community partners with these principles will ensure quality and consistency across all learning opportunities and provide strong supports for the positive academic and emotional well-being of youth. This document can be used to guide expanded learning policy and implementation at the local, state, and federal levels, which is particularly important as our country moves to recovery from COVID-19.

1. School-Community Partnerships

Strong partnerships between community organizations and schools are at the core of successful expanded learning programs. As schools reopen in ways that look different than a “traditional” school day, 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. Meaningful, active collaboration maximizes the use of community resources and fosters creative learning solutions that engage young people and their families. Well-aligned expanded learning programs provide a broad array of enrichment activities that reinforce and complement the regular academic programs of the school, but look and feel different than the regular school day.

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. Programs both provide supports that are protective factors for young people, such as caring and supportive mentors and an environment that fosters belonging and connectedness, and help young people build protective factors, including agency, positive self-concept, and self-efficacy. They lift up youth voice and provide greater autonomy while engaging them in hands-on learning experiences that may involve science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); physical activity; music; or arts. They may also provide activities that help young people prepare for the jobs of tomorrow, including college and career exploration opportunities, internships, or apprenticeships. 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. This wide body of services complements, rather than replicates, lessons taught during the school day.

3. Family Engagement

Engaging with families to determine how expanded learning programs can help supplement any new school day scenario will be essential to help young people, working families, and our economy recover. Afterschool and expanded learning programs have a long history of fostering a welcoming environment for all families through strategies such as seeking parental input in program hours, structure, and offerings; providing activities that encourage family engagement; offering workshops or connecting families to community resources; and serving as a source of information to help families become more active stewards in their child's education. Expanded learning programs typically end later than the regular school day, which makes interactions among parents and staff more frequent, and characteristics of programs including diverse staff who can offer a cultural and linguistic connection between school and home, the informal nature of programming, and celebrating identities and cultures can foster trust between all parents and program staff. 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.

Expanded Learning Defined

The spectrum of expanded learning programs includes before-school, afterschool, summer, and extended day or expanded learning time (ELT) programs. The typical afterschool and summer learning program involves schools and community partners and offers a wide variety of hands-on, engaging learning until 5 or 6 p.m., most days of the week during the school year, with summer programming typically provided six hours a day for six weeks. Families choose whether or not to participate, although some students are encouraged to participate based on needs. Extended day or ELT programs—are those that add time to the school day, and a number of approaches to extended day have been tested with mixed results. Grounding all expanded learning programs in the best practices of proven afterschool and summer programs will provide the greatest likelihood of success. At a minimum, expanded learning programs should engage students in their own education by providing hands on, experiential learning opportunities that build on—but do not replicate—learning that happens during the school day.



Photo credit: Breakthrough Miami afterschool program

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. Programs can support positive youth development by offering activities that are challenging and relevant to students, are sequenced and explicitly defined to help students develop mastery in an area, and are accompanied by the necessary tools and resources for students to fully engage. 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. Afterschool has proven that it is uniquely positioned to help kids learn and grow, including helping them manage stressful, traumatic experiences. 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

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. Similar to other professions, the afterschool field faces staffing challenges due to COVID-19 as many programs have had to sunset positions. The field will continue to prioritize professional development, as it did during spring 2020 closures linked with the pandemic. In most instances, staffing of expanded learning involves a combination of in-school staff and community partners, who serve as mentors to participants, helping meet both the academic and developmental needs of youth. 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. As programming is implemented, appropriate staff to participant ratios, staff qualifications/expertise, and professional development needs must all be taken into consideration.

Expanding STEM Learning

The hands-on learning approach of quality expanded learning programs offers a natural platform for building interest in, and understanding of, science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). Partners ranging from universities to science museums to STEM professionals make these programs a success. A recent analysis of 160 afterschool STEM programs across 11 states found that among the nearly 1,600 participating students, overwhelming majorities made positive gains in science career knowledge (80%), interest in STEM (78%), and their “science identity”—a personal belief that they can succeed at science. Below are a few outstanding examples.

Techbridge Girls supports girls from low-income communities with opportunities to develop interests in STEM subjects and careers.

- **65%** of middle school participants described increased enjoyment of computer coding.
- **83%** of high school participants indicate that they will pursue a STEM degree in college

Project Exploration provides out-of-school-time programs for youth in underserved communities to explore science through a strong mentor component.

- **95%** have graduated or are on track to graduate from high school
- **60%** of 4-year college students study related fields



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. Expanded learning programs are not a one size fits all solution. When youth choose and direct their enrichment experiences, they become more ardent learners and stronger leaders. Youth involvement through input, choice, and feedback on expanded learning experiences is critical, and ensuring that programs meet the needs of both students and their parents can help ensure regular and meaningful participation. As we work towards reopening and redesigning the 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 in expanded learning programs not be mandatory. Allowing children and youth access to programming that meets their family's needs and is age appropriate, meaningful, and relevant will be key to helping young people achieve their full potential.

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, actively participate, and try new things. Creating a safe space for students, both physically and emotionally, helps students grow their confidence, work productively with their peers, and feel that they belong and matter at the program. 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 adequate space and proper safety measures, including masks, sanitation, and smaller staff-to-student ratios so that families feel comfortable with their children in programs' care.

Promoting Protective Factors and Reducing Risk Factors

Young people are in need of a continuous system of support from birth through adolescence into young adulthood that creates the conditions to help each person thrive and build the skills and attributes that will have a positive influence on their lives. Expanded learning programs are a part of this continuous system of support, providing services during a critical time of development for young people that will help children grow their strengths, cope with the complications of life, and lead healthful lives to become healthy adults.

Expanded learning programs provide developmental supports such as:

- Caring and supportive mentors
- Safe spaces where students feel a sense of belonging
- Opportunities to work collaboratively
- Activities that promote critical thinking

In turn, these programs help young people:

- Gain self-confidence
- Develop strong social skills
- Build healthy relationships with their peers and adults
- Improve work habits and grades
- Improve school day attendance and behavior
- Reduce risky behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use

WINGS for Kids (WINGS) is an afterschool program that serves students from low-income communities and employs a social and emotional learning approach, embedding social and emotional learning into its program environment, program design, staff development, curriculum, and program activities. A study conducted by University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, College of Charleston, and Child Trends found that WINGS students:

- Improved their executive function and self-regulation
- Improved their relationship with teachers and reduced negative classroom behavior, based on reports from teachers

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. Studies have shown that improving a student's social and emotional skills leads to positive gains in their academic performance and their attitudes toward peers and school. In addition, improving a student's physical well-being can build higher self-esteem, leading kids to participate with greater frequency and confidence. 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. Afterschool and expanded learning programs connect students with caring professionals who provide developmental supports that are proven to help young people develop social skills, gain self-control and confidence, build healthy relationships, and reduce risky behaviors.

While COVID-19 has affected us all, it is essential to keep in mind 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, with many more families struggling from job losses and fallout from the pandemic. Expanded learning opportunities that complement the school day will be key to helping all young people and their families through this crisis.



9. Ongoing Assessment & Improvement

Just like schools, 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. Sustainable funding and sound fiscal management are needed to ensure long-lasting success.

*"One of the certainties as we navigate through this pandemic is that all children will benefit from being well known, well cared for, and well prepared. Afterschool programs have a long history of designing programs based on what young people need in order to help them be healthier and more ready to learn. Together schools and community organizations can co-design the future of learning **in ways that interrupt historic inequities** and help **all** young people emerge from this crisis strong, resilient and hopeful."*

Tony Smith, former Illinois State Superintendent and Oakland Unified School District Superintendent



Afterschool Alliance

The Afterschool Alliance is working to ensure that all children have access to affordable, quality afterschool programs.