Afterschool Spotlight

Laconia School District Extended Learning Opportunities

Laconia School District Extended Learning Opportunities

Laconia, New Hampshire

75 — Average number of students served during the school year

72% — Families with low incomes

Main funding sources:

▶ 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative

Integrating youth voice and student-created curriculum to boost engagement

Student-centered, active, and engaging learning experiences that build on young people's interests, while developing their skills and knowledge, are at the heart of high-quality afterschool programs. Young people of all ages can benefit from these experiences, however, adolescence is a critical time for exposure to these types of learning opportunities, when young people are discovering their interests and passions as they begin on their path toward adulthood.

Afterschool programs can provide older youth opportunities to find their inspiration and gain skills that will benefit them in and outside of the classroom while allowing them to earn school credits. Credit-for-learning programs in the afterschool space—which can range from students earning physical education credits through a local YMCA to taking part in a boat-building course for elective science credit—are a valuable resource that individualizes knowledge acquisition and complements school day lessons for middle and high school youth.

Overview

Laconia School District's Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) program provides students in grades 9-12 the opportunity to take ownership of their education by earning elective credits outside of the classroom that align with their interests. Student choice and interest is at the core of the program. Students take the lead in designing and executing their ELOs, which include an individualized learning plan, with support and guidance from teachers, community mentors, and the district's dedicated ELO coordinator.

A typical day for students

Each day, students work toward completing their individual learning plan; however, this looks different for each student. Each student's learning plan identifies three to four competencies—which are goals for skill or knowledge acquisition developed by the student, teacher-advisor, community partner, and the ELO coordinator—along with specific activities and benchmarks to meet those competencies. For example, a CTE (Career Technology Education) competency identified in a past digital media arts ELO was understanding the fundamentals of computer graphics. Students typically work independently on the outlined activities in their plan and check in with their teacher multiple times throughout the week to ensure they are meeting their benchmarks. Time is set aside every day where students add to their reflective journals, which detail their activities and learning.

Outcomes

Laconia School District reports that students in the program are highly motivated, working toward completing a rigorous project of their own design. During the 2020 school year, 98 percent of students who began an ELO successfully completed the program. Students have earned both elective and honors-level credits through the successful completion of their ELOs.

Program characteristics

The Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) program, which is coordinated through the Office of Extended Learning, centers on the idea that learning can take place anytime, take place anywhere, and take many forms. This philosophy enables students to pursue credits outside the classroom that align with their interests, and take ownership of their education and graduation pathway. ELOs at Laconia School District are not pre-planned, rather, each year they are developed based on students' interests. The ELO process begins with the ELO coordinator—who is supported by federal 21st Century Community Learning Center grant funds and managed by the district's Office of Extended Learning—informing students of this opportunity. However, the development of the ELO process is initiated by students, who design an ELO based on their topic of interest. Some students design a semester-long ELO for one credit, while others design a year-long ELO for two credits.

To establish an ELO, students fill out an interest form and the ELO coordinator helps them find a teacher who will assist in developing an individual learning plan based on school-day curriculum. A validation committee is also a part of the ELO development process to ensure that students' plans are rigorous enough to earn credit. The individual learning plan centers around the topic the student would like to learn about and includes defined content competencies, benchmarks to be reviewed throughout the ELO, an outline of activities, and a final presentation to be graded after completion.

Students take the lead in completing their learning plan, with teachers and community mentors playing a supporting role. Teachers ensure students meet their benchmarks, and community mentors periodically look over students' work to make suggestions and give ideas. At the end of the term, students present their final product to a panel of stakeholders, including teachers, community or business professionals, and educational leaders. A rubric aligned to the ELO is used to assess students' performance, and the final grade is added to the student's transcript.

Through ELOs, some students explore career options, while others choose to advance their learning in school courses. For example, one student interested in a career in teaching special education shadowed a veteran teacher to learn about classroom management and practice building lesson plans. Another student interested in advancing their studies in physics took Physics II for honors credit. These opportunities both allow students to follow their interests, and make courses accessible to more students.

The need for credit-for-learning opportunities

Credit for learning expands educational opportunities for youth, where young people can explore their interests and delve deeper into subject matter outside of the classroom. These programs provide diverse learning experiences, promote student engagement, and prepare students for life after graduation.

Boosting motivation and engagement

When students are interested in what they are learning and have the opportunity to experience and develop a sense of agency, it can increase their engagement and motivation to learn. Credit for learning employs this student-centered learning approach, where learning is tailored to students' interests and needs, and students have ownership of their learning. This approach can be especially beneficial for older students, as school engagement has been found to decrease as students get older, or for youth who are disengaged from school.

Improving college and career readiness

Credit for learning provides youth the chance to engage in real-world learning experiences and learn about potential career paths while earning school credit. In these hands-on and applied learning contexts, students can develop skills that employers value, such as problem solving and collaboration, be mentored by and build connections with industry professionals, and complete internships or apprenticeships.

Addressing opportunity gaps

Research shows that students attending high-poverty schools too often lack access to the same learning opportunities as students attending low-poverty schools. Credit for learning can address equity issues present in the education system, broadening access to learning opportunities that schools may be unable to provide.

Read *Credit for Learning: Making Learning Outside of School Count* to learn more.

Credit recovery vs. Credit for learning

While the underlying intention of **credit recovery** and **credit for learning** differ from one another, there are overlapping strategies between the two credit earning opportunities.

Credit recovery*

Credit for learning
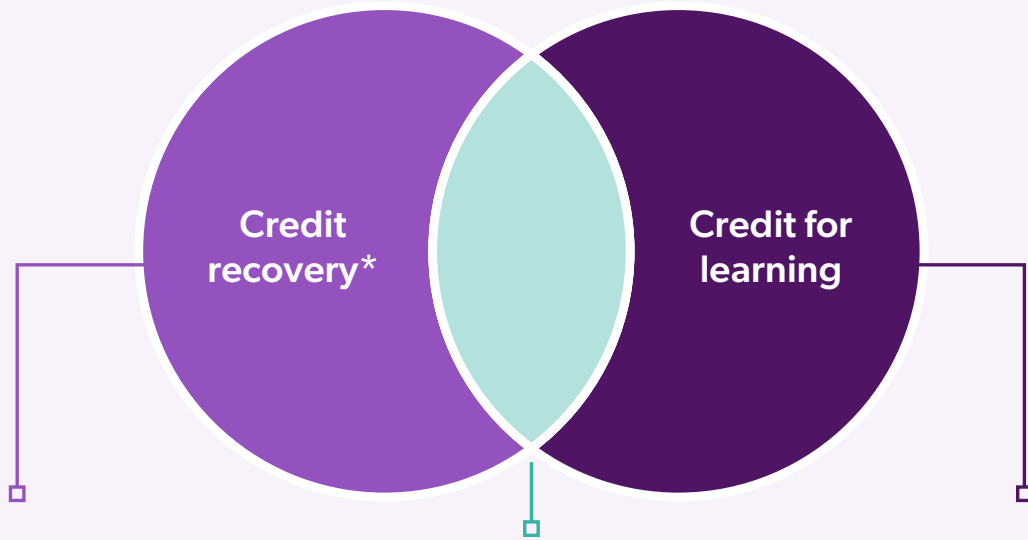
- Intended for students who are ***falling behind academically*** or ***at-risk of not graduating on time***.

- Students can ***redo coursework in a class they have failed*** or ***retake the class*** in an alternative manner, such as in summer school, during afterschool or weekend classes, or online.

- Provides opportunities to earn credits outside of the school day that count toward graduation requirements.

- Can take place in afterschool and summer programs.

- Intended for students interested in ***earning additional credits*** toward graduation, or students looking to ***further personalize their education or pursue an interest***.

- Students can ***earn credits for various activities and experiences outside of the classroom***, such as community service projects, internships or apprenticeships, independent studies, and student-led projects.

*U.S. Department of Education. (2018). Issue Brief: Credit Recovery. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/high-school/credit-recovery.pdf

Program history

The Extended Learning Opportunities program at Laconia has been offered for more than 15 years. It began in 2006 when the Nellie Mae Foundation partnered with the Office of Extended Learning to kick-start their student-centered, project-based learning initiative. Over the years, the ELO program continues to be refined to improve program quality and ensure that all students interested can pursue an ELO.

Recommendations

for integrating youth voice and student-created curriculum to boost engagement:

▶ Student voice can be incorporated in both small and more significant ways throughout programs, from students choosing partners for group projects to determining the topics of interest to them that they would like to pursue during the program. The more ownership students have in their work, the greater their motivation. For ELOs to be most successful, students should take the lead from start to finish.

▶ Establishing systems to ensure rigor helps strengthen ELO programming. For example, bringing together school-day staff and community partners to review and certify student created ELOs lead to high-quality credit-for-learning opportunities that maintain students' ownership of and agency in the program.

Afterschool Alliance
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