

# Helping Older Youth Succeed Through Expanded Learning Opportunities

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*This is the first 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](http://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.

## The Role of Expanded Learning Opportunities in School Success for Older Youth

ELOs work with schools, families and communities to help keep middle and high school youth engaged in learning. Sustaining the interest of older youth in learning is particularly critical given that nearly one in four students fails to graduate from high school on time.<sup>1</sup> Research indicates that regular participation in quality ELOs can help keep older youth on a positive academic trajectory and support their successful graduation and transition into college and/or career. Outcomes related to high school success and college readiness include the following.

**1. Higher rates of school attendance and lower drop-out rates.** Attending school is a basic factor in student success, but it proves difficult for many youth who are struggling academically. ELOs can help keep youth in school, sometimes simply by requiring students to be in school in order to attend expanded learning activities. Also, as discussed below, ELOs help keep students interested in learning. A number of large-scale, multi-site programs have noted improved school attendance among program participants.<sup>2</sup> In addition, participants in some ELOs are less likely to drop out and more likely to be on track to graduate on time.<sup>3</sup>

*Citizen Schools (CS) provides after-school educational enrichment, career exposure, and high school and college preparation to middle school students nationally. In Boston, former CS participants had higher high school attendance than nonparticipants. In addition, former participants in CS' 8th Grade Academy were more likely to be on track toward graduation.<sup>4</sup>*

**2. Improved attitudes toward school.** Many older youth drop out of school because they feel disconnected from school, their teachers and what they are learning. ELOs can engage youth in learning by providing hands-on, interactive learning opportunities in line with youth's interests but outside the scope of topics studied in school. Youth who participate in these programs show an improved sense of belonging at school and positive feelings

about school.<sup>5</sup> In addition, attending programs regularly has been shown to help students put more effort into and develop confidence in their academic studies.<sup>6</sup>

*The national Promising After-School Programs Study examines the effects of high-quality after-school programs on the cognitive, academic, social and emotional development of youth in high-poverty communities. The study found that middle school students who regularly participated in high-quality after-school programs had greater gains than their peers in self-reported work habits in school.<sup>7</sup>*

**3. Stronger connections to adults and peers.** Relationships with adults and peers matter immensely in ELOs. When implemented well, programs can provide youth with positive role models and strong relationships with caring adults.<sup>8</sup> These role models can help keep older youth engaged in their education, making them more likely to stay in school and graduate. Participation in ELOs also can foster stronger peer groups,<sup>9</sup> which can encourage youth to stay connected to school.

*The Beacon Community Centers Middle School Initiative offers programming in academic enhancement, life skills, career awareness, civic engagement, recreation and art to middle school-age youth in New York City. Activities observed at a subset of Beacon sites were found to foster positive relationships among youth and between youth and staff.<sup>10</sup>*



**4. Improved health and ability to make healthy choices.** Because youth who are in good health both physically and mentally are better prepared to attend school ready to learn, they are better positioned for academic success than their less healthy peers.<sup>11</sup> ELOs that target health aim to promote physical activity and nutrition and prevent obesity. Programs also often focus on preventing unhealthy behaviors—including drug use, sexual activity or violence.<sup>12</sup> This is particularly important for older youth, who face increased pressure from peers.

*After School Matters* provides teens in underserved communities in Chicago with a network of out-of-school opportunities, including apprenticeship and drop-in programs. Compared to their peers, program participants engage in fewer problem behaviors, especially gang activity and selling drugs.<sup>13</sup>

**5. More opportunities to learn about and choose college and career options.** Through ELOs, youth often have opportunities related to potential college majors and careers that typically are not explored during the traditional school day.<sup>14</sup> They might discover a passion for robotics or that they excel in music, for example. Youth can also make plans and prepare for college through programs that organize college visits or pair youth with college students or mentors who help youth navigate the college application and entrance process.<sup>15</sup> All of these experiences can help youth to better focus on their possibilities for the future.<sup>16</sup>

The *California 21st Century High School After School Safety and Enrichment for Teens (ASSETs) Program* funds school–community partnerships to establish out-of-school-time programs that provide California high school students with academic support, enrichment and family activities. Participation in ASSETs led youth to consider and act on postsecondary education options they had not previously considered, according to adults involved with the program.<sup>17</sup>

## How Are High-Quality Expanded Learning Opportunities that Serve Older Youth Structured?

Not all programs have the necessary elements to achieve these results, however. In addition to elements of quality that matter for all ELOs (e.g., appropriate supervision and structure, well-prepared staff and intentional programming), research also highlights several effective strategies for working specifically with older youth. The strategies of successful programs include:<sup>18</sup>

- Providing a variety of leadership opportunities so that youth have a voice and a sense of belonging and ownership.
- Supporting the specific developmental needs and interests of older youth (e.g., programming that helps youth achieve concrete goals, choices in activities).
- Allowing for flexibility in recognition of the fact that older youth often have other responsibilities, including work and family obligations.
- Employing staff who can form strong relationships with youth participants and who demonstrate that they care about them.
- Offering a safe and nurturing environment that creates a sense of community.
- Providing opportunities for intentional and meaningful peer interaction.

### For more information on the research discussed here, see:

- *Engaging Older Youth: Program and City-level Strategies to Support Sustained Participation in Out-of-School Time*, online at [www.hfrp.org/EngagingOlderYouth](http://www.hfrp.org/EngagingOlderYouth)
- *Research Update 7: OST Programs Serving Older Youth*, online at [www.hfrp.org/RU7-OlderYouth](http://www.hfrp.org/RU7-OlderYouth)

## Policy Implications and Examples

- Increasing flexibility of high school credit-earning opportunities can engage older youth and reduce dropout rates through individualized, interactive credit-bearing ELOs. New Hampshire, for example, has piloted extended learning opportunities in which students earn credit toward high school completion outside the classroom and school

day. In a 2011 evaluation report, those involved in the initiative—including youth, school staff, and community partners—considered these extended learning opportunities to be valuable and felt they should continue.<sup>19</sup>

- In addition to helping policymakers meet academic and school attendance goals, ELOs can be used as a tool to meet other objectives for older youth that support student success. As discussed above, these include advancing youth's social-emotional skills, improving their health, and preventing them from participating in delinquent activities.
- The burden of paying for ELOs often falls on states, communities and parents. With ongoing state budget gaps, funding for ELOs has become increasingly scarce. One tactic policymakers can use to sustain or increase these programs is to make use of programs already established in state education codes. A 2009 National Conference of State Legislatures survey of education codes showed the areas in which funds can be used.<sup>20</sup>
- Creation of state ELO task forces and commissions can help assess the supply and demand of ELOs, map state and local funding streams, build community partnerships, and identify barriers and gaps to serving youth through ELOs. In 2005, the Massachusetts legislature created the Special Commission on After School and Out of School Time to better understand the effects of out-of-school-time programs. In 2007, the commission issued a report that included policy recommendations.<sup>21</sup>

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## Notes

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