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# No Longer Optional:

Why and How Expanded Learning Partnerships are Essential to Achieving Equity in School Reopening and Recovery

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**OPPORTUNITY**  
I N S T I T U T E



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This brief was a collaboration between the Opportunity Institute and Partnership for Children & Youth.

**About the Opportunity Institute:**

The Opportunity Institute advances economic mobility, equity, and racial justice. It focuses broadly on cradle-to-career education opportunities and adjacent areas of social policy. Its work bridges the domains of policy, research, advocacy, and values.

**About Partnership for Children & Youth:**

Partnership for Children & Youth (PCY) is an advocacy and capacity-building organization championing high-quality, equitable learning opportunities for underserved youth in California. Grounded in research and experience, PCY trains school and community-based educators, facilitates relationships between schools and community-based organizations, and advocates for effective public policies and resources.

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**For more information on these recommendations, contact:**

Jennifer Dietrich  
Policy Director, Partnership for Children & Youth  
[jdietrich@partnerforchildren.org](mailto:jdietrich@partnerforchildren.org)

Deanna Niebuhr, MPP  
California Policy and Program Director, Opportunity Institute  
[deanna@theopportunityinstitute.org](mailto:deanna@theopportunityinstitute.org)



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**R**eopening schools in this chaotic environment in ways that center equity will unquestionably require an all-hands-on-deck approach. The massive task schools have in front of them is far beyond the capacity and resources they have at their disposal, and the systems of support they typically rely on are just as strained. While it is considered best practice during more normal times, it is now imperative that schools immediately and proactively reach out to partners in the community to enrich learning experiences for students, especially for low-income and English learner students who have been most negatively affected by the pandemic.

COVID-19 has exacerbated and put a spotlight on what we already knew through decades of research and experience: there are huge and now rapidly growing economic and racial disparities among families who can afford to provide or pay for learning supports and effective learning environments and those who cannot. To mitigate these disparities, **California has historically invested significant resources in afterschool programs in many high-need communities across the state; we have municipal park and recreation systems everywhere; and we have youth-serving community-based organizations with deep connections to their communities. It would be a significant missed opportunity if our school systems do not work in partnership with these invaluable assets as they plan for the coming school year.**

There is an opportunity for positive action amidst the crisis—a chance to deepen the link between the school day and community partners to ensure positive learning environments and address achievement and opportunity gaps. Schools and

districts across California, and especially those serving students most impacted by the COVID crisis should: 1) integrate, coordinate, and plan with expanded learning partners to collaboratively meet the academic and social-emotional learning needs of students, and 2) invest in and expand access to expanded learning programs throughout the year—with a strategic eye on the summer of 2021.

This brief outlines how expanded learning programs can provide valuable support to schools and students, how districts can leverage current funding and system flexibilities, and highlights key expanded learning opportunities for school and district leaders as they work with stakeholders and partners in building out their reopening plans.

## Background: Expanded Learning Programs

California Department of Education (CDE) defines expanded learning as:

*Expanded Learning programs are an integral part of young people's education, engaging them in year-round learning opportunities that prepare them for college, career, and life. Expanded Learning refers to before and after school, summer, and intersession learning experiences that develop the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs and interests of students. Expanded Learning opportunities should be hands-on, engaging, student-centered, results-driven, involve community partners, and complement learning activities in the regular school day/year.*

California has two primary funding sources for expanded learning programs: the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program and the state After School Education and Safety (ASES) program. **These programs provide over \$780 million annually to local education agencies for before and after school, summer, and intersession programs across 4,500 sites.** Both of these programs are administered by the CDE, and the majority of these programs are run by community-based organizations (CBOs) in contract with their local school districts or county offices of education.

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California provides \$780 million annually for before and after school, summer, and intersession programs. Research has consistently shown these programs make a difference in student engagement, achievement, and social and emotional development.<sup>1</sup> It would be a significant missed opportunity if our school systems did not leverage this asset as they plan for the coming school year.

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In addition to the approximately 50% of elementary and middle schools that offer state and federally funded programs, nearly all communities also have community or municipal

organizations that provide enrichment and other supports for students in non-school hours, such as park and recreation programs, public libraries, subsidized school-aged childcare, and local youth-serving nonprofits.

## Challenges and Opportunities: Expanded Learning Programs Area Critical Asset for Schools in Reopening

Schools must balance safety and the undeniable need to provide some form of in-person learning, while responding to the volatility of local community infection. But most importantly, schools hold the responsibility to encourage and develop curious, engaged, and supported learners, in ways that respond to each student's unique academic and social-emotional needs.

Expanded learning and youth development providers have long been partners to school-based educators, offering enrichment and applied learning opportunities that complement and extend the deeper learning goals of schools. Today, the challenges presented by COVID-19 require a collaborative approach that leans into these partnerships and builds off of the school community's strengths and assets. During the spring school closures, expanded learning programs adapted alongside schools and communities to provide a range of academic and enrichment support both virtually and in-person to best meet their student and community needs. Schools and districts should leverage the assets that expanded learning programs bring as we move into the new school year:

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<sup>1</sup> Terry K. Peterson editor, *Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success*, Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project, (2013).

## California's publicly funded afterschool programs help serve the most vulnerable students

84%

of children in afterschool programs are **socio-economically disadvantaged.**

9/10

children in afterschool programs are **children of color.**

1/3

of children in ASES programs are **English learners.**

25%

of the state's **homeless students** are in afterschool programs.

**1. Challenge: There is a learning loss emergency that is widening educational inequities.** Due to school closures and cumulative learning losses from uneven access to engaging academic content, students could fall half a year to a year behind with schools remaining closed for the summer, with more drastic impacts on vulnerable student groups.<sup>2</sup>

**Opportunity: Expanded learning programs can provide additional learning time and support to our most vulnerable students.**

Traditionally, expanded learning partners have been important assets for student learning across a range of settings, since students spend more time out of school than in school. However, the differences in how students are engaged in out-of-school time is shown to be responsible for more than half of the achievement gap between lower- and higher-income students. By the time students reach 6th grade, middle-income students have likely spent over 6,000 more hours in organized learning activities than kids born into poverty.

As schools and districts consider how to most effectively provide increased and improved services to unduplicated pupils, they should prioritize partnerships as a way to expand

and extend learning time, specifically for students who have limited access to other sources of enrichment. Schools and districts should deploy afterschool staff to support as many high-need students as possible in the coming year — and should also build on those partnerships to address the massive summer learning needs that will exist in summer 2021.

### Example: Cajon Valley USD

Cajon Valley USD leveraged its expanded learning program to welcome children (PreK-8) of essential workers back to campus in April, from 6 AM to 6 PM. Students interacted while still physically distancing and following all health and safety guidelines to maintain a safe site for students and staff. Staff supported students with their distance learning activities during the day, along with STEAM and physical activities.

**2. Challenge: Physical distancing guidelines require much lower student-adult ratios to ensure safety for all.** As such, schools are planning for a variety of staggered scheduling options. Prior to COVID-19, class sizes in California averaged over 20 (with many places having ratios closer to 30:1).<sup>3</sup> For campuses to

<sup>2</sup> Kuhfeld, M. and Tarasawa, B., *The Covid-19 slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement*, NWEA, Collaborative for Student Growth, (2020).

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, *Schools and Staffing Survey*, (2007-08).

## California's publicly funded afterschool programs have diverse staff

70%

of staff are people of color.<sup>4</sup>

78%

of staff live in the communities they serve.

90%

of staff are bilingual (English and Spanish).<sup>5</sup>

63%

of staff are between 20-29 years of age.

reopen safely, schools will need more adults to support smaller class sizes. And if schools are forced to close again due to increased risk, maximizing human resources will be critical—e.g. supervising students, implementing staggered schedules, developing curriculum and supporting synchronous learning.

**Opportunity: The publicly funded expanded learning workforce employs over 30,000 adults who already have valuable experience working with and caring for students, in and out of schools, and alongside educators.**

Afterschool staff have deep training and experience with tutoring, mentoring, and facilitating student collaboration and play. Across the spectrum of public, private, and municipal systems, expanded learning staff can help schools address the need for more adults to supervise and support learning in accordance with new safety measures.

During the recent school closures, expanded learning programs led, developed, and supported a diverse range of virtual lessons and curriculum, homework help, and supervision for children of essential workers and other vulnerable students. The majority of the workforce is college-age and often come

from the communities that they serve, thereby providing a valuable link to families, local leaders, and other community institutions.

### Example: Sacramento Chinese Community Service Center

Partnering with school districts in the greater Sacramento area, the Sacramento Chinese Community Service Center created a virtual afterschool program for two hours every weekday, including physical activity, STEAM, nutrition, social-emotional learning, and literacy. Students reported having a sense of normalcy by seeing and talking to their peers and mentors.

**3. Challenge: Students are experiencing trauma on many levels and their social-emotional needs have significantly increased.** Research has shown that access to consistent and trusting relationships with caring adults is crucial to supporting youth development and resilience. Significant numbers of students have been completely disconnected from school. One survey found that nearly 50 percent of students are in need of mental health services and medical professionals are deeply concerned about the

<sup>4</sup> In California's three largest afterschool programs, serving 95,000 students, 91% of staff are people of color; 80% are Hispanic or Latinx.

<sup>5</sup> For the largest publicly funded afterschool provider, serving 40,000 children daily.

physical and mental health impacts of social isolation without in-person care.<sup>6</sup>

**Opportunity: Expanded learning programs increase access to social-emotional supports and caring adults.** Districts and schools can benefit from efforts in recent years at the state and local levels to align strong social-emotional learning (SEL) goals in schools and in out-of-school programs. By their design and structure, high-quality afterschool and summer programs include key features to support social and emotional development.<sup>7</sup> These features include projects and activities that are collaborative in nature; keep learning active—using students’ bodies and minds; have meaning and relevance to students based on their interests and values; and broaden students’ horizons by exposing them to new ideas, experiences, and people.<sup>8</sup> These activities are rooted in relationships between staff and young people and serve to build a culture and community of mutual respect, mentorship, and leadership development.<sup>9</sup>

During the initial spring school closures, California afterschool providers conducted individual wellness checks, led enrichment classes and play, facilitated peer group activities and games, guided physical education and fun health activities, and much more. School leaders and educators should leverage expanded learning staff as part of a proactive and positive, tiered approach to support engagement and attendance strategies

#### **Example: Woodcraft Rangers**

In Los Angeles County, Woodcraft Rangers after school program developed BIRCH, a caregiver support platform specifically designed for parents, grandparents, and siblings who are caring for children without the usual in-person support from educators, youth workers, extended families, and trusted helpers. Families received notifications directly to their mobile phones that featured ideas to keep children ages 4-12 engaged in enriching at-home activities. BIRCH also included guidance to help parents support children emotionally during this time of change and uncertainty.

**4. Challenge: Schools need more innovative use of physical space to meet safety guidelines.** Many school campuses were already overcrowded and did not adequately meet the learning needs of students. Now, even with staggered schedules, schools will need to expand how and where they provide learning. Outdoor environments and access to fresh air are recommended as safer spaces for larger groups and have been utilized successfully in other countries where schools have reopened.

**Opportunity: Expanded learning programs have expertise in creatively using space and can provide alternative indoor and outdoor spaces for students and adults.** Given widespread plans to reopen in an all-virtual framework, many students will need safe places to learn out-of-school when they are

<sup>6</sup> Youth Liberty Squad, ACLU of Southern California *Summary of Mental Health Survey Results*, (March 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Durlak, J.A, Weissberg, R.P., and Pachan, M. “A Meta-Analysis of After-School Programs That Seek to Promote Personal and Social Skills in Children and Adolescents.” *American Journal of Community Psychology*. No. 45 (2010): 294-309.

<sup>8</sup> Temescal & Associates, *The LIAS Learning Principles: In the Words of Field Leaders and Afterschool Youth*, Learning in After-school, (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Jenny Nagaoka, Camille A. Farrington, Stacy B. Ehrlich, and Ryan D. Heath, *Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework*, University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (2015).





### **Example: Healdsburg**

In Healdsburg, afterschool programs partnered with the school district and city to provide essential services like reaching out to families to find out what they need (e.g., food, resources, support for distance learning and enrichment), supervising and caring for children of essential workers, and delivering food.

not receiving instruction. Expanded learning programs have a long history of offering learning enrichment and play opportunities indoors and outdoors. Some programs have access to flexible-use community and publicly owned spaces—e.g. multipurpose rooms, playgrounds, sports fields—that could be used to extend classroom learning and supervision to more students safely. District and school leaders can partner with expanded learning partners to develop innovative strategies to provide physical education, recess, and play in alternative settings.

- 5. Challenge: Due to the economic and health crisis, students and families are in need of a range of direct resource supports.** Schools have already been functioning as community resource and information hubs (e.g. community health updates, connections to community-based support, meal distribution) and will need to deepen their family support role.

**Opportunity: Many expanded learning programs have deep and trusted connections in the communities they serve and a robust infrastructure to connect to or provide direct services.** Community-based expanded learning partners are often able to connect to a range of social services such as health, employment, and public benefits. Providing community resources can serve to strengthen the trust and connection of families to the school community, and help to maintain direct contact to families and students, especially important in times of unstable housing and displacement.

Since school closures in March, food distribution and coordination has been a primary function of afterschool staff in dozens of districts. According to a national survey, nearly 40% of programs were serving as a meal site or distributing other resources such as devices and connectivity.



## Leverage Program Flexibility and State and Federal Funding to Deepen Partnerships

Schools and care providers have been granted significant flexibility by both the state and federal agencies in the ways that they serve students, including instructional minutes, staffing ratios, reporting and accountability requirements, and student testing and assessments. This flexibility allows districts to blend staffing, funding, and activity spaces of often-siloed programs. Similar flexibility has been extended to California's expanded learning programs:

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### CDE has granted waiver authority for ASES program hours, ratios, uses, and reporting.

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- CDE has granted waiver authority for ASES program hours, ratios, uses, and reporting.<sup>10</sup>
- Funding uses have been expanded to include, but are not limited to: meal distribution; student supervision; supporting, designing, and implementing virtual learning; virtual meetings and planning; and wellness and SEL supports and checks.
- Expanded learning programs have been held harmless and all existing grants will be fully funded based on 2019 attendance and grant levels. 2019-20 funds can be rolled over into the 20-21 school year. (Programs should consult with CDE if planning to redirect funds.)

State education agencies and associations are consistently promoting the important role of expanded learning partners as a necessary asset in school reopening, as demonstrated by the proposed guidance from:

- California Department of Education *Stronger Together: A Guidebook for the Safe Reopening of California's Public Schools*
- Association for California School Administrators *School Reopening Planning Group: Final Report*
- California Collaborative for Educational Excellence *Continuity of Learning Playbooks*

Schools and districts have over \$5 billion in new dollars (federal and general state funds) directed at mitigating learning loss with broad discretion on how and where to spend this money. These state and federal investments provide opportunities to deepen the impact of school and expanded learning partnerships:

- ***\$1.4 billion in federal funds went to Title I schools to meet the learning and wellness needs of students.*** This increased funding can be used to increase the number of students served by expanded learning programs, increase the number of days and hours of learning and enrichment in the summer or school year, or provide more intensive learning supports to children who have suffered the most learning loss.
- ***\$2.9 billion in federal funds went to schools and districts through a needs-based formula to serve underserved student***

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<sup>10</sup> California Department of Education, *COVID-19 Guidance for Expanded Learning Programs*, (2020).

**groups including English learners, low-income families, foster and homeless youth.**

Similar to above, this funding is intended to mitigate learning loss, increase days and hours of instruction, and provide increased academic and social-emotional interventions, all of which can be met by increased access to expanded learning programs.

- **California Community Schools Partnership Program:** The budget includes \$45 million in new funding to expand existing community schools efforts. Expanded learning programs and providers are a core pillar of community school strategies. The funding can be used for program and partner coordination, capacity building, and providing a range of integrated pupil support services and expanded learning programming.



## Key Considerations for School and District Leaders

As districts and schools plan for the 20-21 academic year, they need to consider how to leverage expanded learning programs to best meet student needs—whether that is increasing access or deepening intensity and rethinking staffing roles of existing partners. While planning for the fall is a monumental task, it is also important to get a head start in planning strategically for summer 2021 to address cumulative learning losses that many high need students will have experienced. Summer will provide a key opportunity for helping students catch up and get back on track after a disruptive and uncertain year.

- **Assess student needs and existing infrastructure with a focus on equity.** Schools should focus on vulnerable student groups, including children of essential workers in need of care; foster and homeless youth; low-income students; and students in need

of additional educational support, social-emotional support, or other identified priority needs. Schools can build off and reflect on what has and has not worked in the implementation of distance learning, community partnerships, communication tools and platforms, and meal programs. This includes assessing past student attendance levels, demographics, academic and SEL outcomes, trends and staffing needs. Program planning should be guided by parent, community and student input and include intentional outreach, scheduling, and enrollment strategies.

- **Develop a shared and integrated 20-21 roadmap of student success that includes expanded learning.** District and school leaders need to communicate and invest in building strong partnerships in support of expanded learning across their staff and communities. Expanded learning staff and strategies should be included in the development of the newly required **Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans**. California already has strong **quality**

**standards** for expanded learning that are complementary to school-day learning objectives. District and school leaders should develop shared and complementary goals and engagement practices, including academic learning outcomes, social-emotional learning and behavior management, attendance, health and wellness, student and family engagement.

- **Take inventory and reach out to all community partners who can contribute to students' learning needs.** Community-based youth-serving organizations, city park and recreation programs, libraries, regional or state parks, and others have trained adults and resources to contribute to reducing adult-student ratios, helping with schoolwork, providing enrichment and outdoor activities, and supporting students' emotional well-being. Often, in rural communities, the small and dispersed student population makes it difficult to put together a cost-effective program, so building regional partnerships usually through county offices of education (COEs) is particularly important.
- **Include partners in planning and professional development.** To successfully develop blended student learning experiences and supports, it will be essential that leaders from districts, schools, and expanded learning programs begin joint planning as soon as possible. Districts need to conduct a proactive and strategic review of existing contracts, policies, and procedures to ensure that they encourage rather than obstruct partner relationships, and consider how they might be modified in a COVID-19 environment. To maximize resources, time, and solidify shared goals, districts should provide professional development and training across their school-day and afterschool staff on topics such as safety protocols, student behavior guidelines and plans, distance and virtual learning, and family engagement. A system for professional development, which many schools and providers already have in place, will also need to flexibly respond to the training needs of staff, especially given the likely fluidity of school programming.
- **Include summer 2021 in school-year planning as a critical component of mitigating cumulative learning losses and social-emotional challenges.** By summer 2021, students will have experienced more than a year of disrupted learning and a great deal of social disconnection, regardless of the combination of virtual and in-person learning in the coming year. **Providing summer learning opportunities** next summer for as many students as possible will be essential for getting and keeping students on track and engaged. Summer can also provide a training ground for staff, teachers, and site administrators for integration and collaboration in blended staffing models (CBO staff, counselors, paraprofessionals) and more planning time for teachers and administrators.
- **Create data-sharing protocols and access across partners to increase alignment and protect privacy.** Leaders can use data on student achievement, behavior, attendance, and demographics to understand access and quality at the state and district level. Such information is a powerful tool when all partnering entities are able to share and use the data (adhering to appropriate and clear privacy guidelines). With distance learning as a new reality, there are new agreements, processes, and approvals that need to be adopted to ensure expanded learning providers can fully support students, teachers, and families. Shared student data can provide opportunities for joint evaluation, planning, and technical assistance between districts and their community partners.





- ***Local systems should empower school site administrators to create and sustain effective programs to meet the unique needs of their communities.*** Ultimately, it is at school sites where effective, well-coordinated expanded learning programs take place. Districts that expect to see high-quality programs in action need to give principals and site coordinators responsibility and support. The majority of districts in the **Time Well Spent** report provided school sites with a basic memorandum of understanding that the site then customized to address issues such as access to technology, space, and custodial services. In the most coherent expanded learning programs, school-day and afterschool staff work side by side for at least a portion of the day, and school site administrators have the flexibility to share resources on both formal and informal levels. Officials can help create this environment by working to make sure that their personnel policies and union contracts support collaborative staffing.

## Rebuilding Together — The Only Way Forward

No one system—schools, health agencies, community-based youth-serving organizations—can singularly address the enormous and growing needs of students and their families. Particularly now, it is urgent that we capitalize and coordinate the collective resources of our diverse communities—across race, socio-economic differences, language, ability, and geography. In doing so, we must also act to counterbalance the fact that students whose families have the time, space, and resources to provide supportive at-home learning environments and the ability to supplement their child’s learning with exposure to other experiences, learning supports, or enrichment opportunities, will have distinct advantages that will allow them to weather this storm much more effectively than students who lack one or more of these things. In order to prioritize equity, educators and administrators must come together with communities and families to tap into the expanded learning field’s creativity and resourcefulness in assertive ways.