PACE

COMMENTARY

# Compassionate Partnerships for Youth in Foster Care

## The Role of Expanded Learning



**AUTHORS**

Michelle François | National Center for Youth Law

Margaret Olmos | National Center for Youth Law

**PUBLISHED:** February 5, 2021

*The aim of this commentary—released as part of a series on expanded learning partnerships and learning hubs in the context of the pandemic—is to provide actionable guidance for districts, schools, and expanded learning providers interested in best serving youth in the foster care system. We seek to answer the question: How can expanded learning be leveraged to support pandemic recovery, specifically as we look to serve the state's nearly 60,000 youth in foster care?*

The shift to distance learning in California has been a rocky ride for all students and families, but it has not affected all young people and communities equally. In many ways, for youth who are in the state's foster care systems, the experience of COVID-19 has only exacerbated the trauma, isolation, and disconnection youth in foster care already struggle with on a daily basis Aside from COVID-19 learning disruptions, their schooling has already been interrupted by home and school moves, which can mean receiving little to no credit for coursework completed. For many such students, compounding traumas of displacement and other underlying hardships have significant impact on their physical, social, emotional, and academic well-being.

At the same time, there has been a resounding call to action by many youth-serving public systems to work in close partnership with districts and schools in order to respond to students' immediate needs. In this call to action, there is a valuable opportunity to transform a fragmented system that has long underserved youth who have been furthest from access and opportunity. In the months and years ahead, the work of community-based expanded learning providers and school districts will be instrumental in designing compassionate systems of care in which youth in foster care are able to readily access care within trusting communities that can recognize and respond to their individual strengths and needs.

For outcomes to improve for youth in foster care, multiple public systems and community partners (including in education, childcare, physical and mental healthcare, social services, community organizations) must work closely with youth leaders to anticipate need, prioritize access, and ensure effective communication and collaboration structures are in place. Young people will need to be supported through transitions; receive support that is tailored to their unique assets and needs; and be connected with trusted, compassionate adults.

In order to leverage expanded learning to support pandemic recovery for youth in foster care, we must:

### Ask students what they need and tailor programs and services to match those needs.

Even prior to COVID-19, youth in foster care have had to develop resilience, healing, and creative problem-solving skills. They understand resourcefulness; naturally think outside the box; and, because of the challenges they have had to face, exhibit a capacity for empathy, learning, and compassion that, if thoughtfully included, can be a powerful unifier in all settings, especially now. We must do all we can to make meaningful contact by asking questions of, listening to, engaging with, and lifting up youth perspectives. Rather than spending time and resources hypothesizing what youth may need, we must ask them, give them a seat at the table, and centre their voices. Particularly given the time constraints of developing expanded learning partnerships that best meet the needs of children in foster care, we must prioritize their voices.

### Elevate the expertise of community partners on how to meet the needs of youth.

Given their deep roots in as well as knowledge of their community and the specific needs of youth experiencing public systems of care, many community-based organizations have deep knowledge of the youth in their community. At the same time, the capacity of community organizations is not evenly distributed across the state, with rural communities often having much less capacity than urban and suburban communities.

### Hire staff who understand the community and who understand schools.

In expanded learning organizations, cultivating staff members who have personal experience understanding the intricacies of what goes on in schools is crucial. This is particularly relevant for understanding how schools are currently supported—or will be supported—to respond to students who experience the foster care system. By better grasping the nuanced needs (and competing priorities) of students, schools, and districts, expanded learning partners can better tailor how they offer critical resources and supports for schools to access.

### Connect with organizations and services that provide adequate mental and physical health services and education.

Mental and physical health resources are often scarce or inaccessible for youth in foster care. As we invest in community schools, we must also invest in school-based and school-linked health clinics to ensure that there are places where students and families can get support and scientifically backed information. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the longstanding distrust and fear around vaccines and healthcare, partnerships with community-based health clinics can provide needed support.

### Build out learning resources for family members, caregivers, and students in the languages spoken in the community.

Parent hubs and online learning resources are often only offered in English, which makes them less accessible formany families caring for youth in foster care. Given the multiple benefits of multigenerational support for students, particularly youth experiencing child welfare systems, it is imperative that resources geared to supporting students are actually accessible by those at home who can in turn offer support for students.

**Be creative, flexible, and open to learning.**

Given the immediate needs of youth in foster care and the anticipation of shrinking resources and services to help those most affected, expanded learning partners will need to get creative and be flexible with how they best meet these needs as a long-term strategy, not just a stop-gap measure. In addition, partnerships must commit to evaluating progress and continuous improvement, first and foremost by listening to the experiences of students and families: Do young people feel seen and supported? Do young people have someone they trust? How many people do they trust and to what degree? Do they feel like they are learning?

**Suggested citation**

Francois, M., & Olmos, M. (2021, February). *Compassionate partnerships for youth in foster care* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/compassionate-partnerships-youth-foster-care

PACE
Policy Analysis for California Education

Stanford Graduate School of Education
507 Lasuen Mall | Suite 205
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org