COMMENTARY

Reenvisioning Learning for Students with Learning Differences

Opportunities for Expanded Learning Partnerships



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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 students in special education. We seek to answer the question: How can expanded learning be leveraged to support pandemic recovery, specifically for students with learning differences?

All students have had their learning routines drastically upended by COVID-19, but for many students with learning differences, distance learning has further exacerbated their challenges as well as those their educators face to meet their various academic, emotional, social, and physical needs. Distance learning seldom allows for the types of connections and supports that students in special education rely on to access rigorous and engaging content and instruction. As such, most districts have been conducting (physically distanced and masked) full-time, in-person, or hybrid special education services since the school shutdowns began in spring 2020. Even such in-person efforts, however, rarely reflect what we might "normally" do—we have had to reimagine our models of teaching and to reenvision how we can best support our students and their unique needs.

The creative strategies of expanded learning partnerships with schools and districts offer exciting potential for how we might think about a comprehensive and holistic approach to supporting students with special needs, beyond just crisis teaching and learning. As we anticipate the needs of our students and teachers in the coming months and years, we've thought about how expanded learning partners can amplify the work of special education providers—e.g. educators and developmental psychologists—as well as how we might strengthen a seamless approach to learning and development. The following questions offer up some possibilities for discussion between expanded learning partners and special education practitioners and leaders.

How can schools and districts make training resources available to expanded learning partners that serve students outside of the regular school day?

Districts and counties offer extensive training and professional development materials to support multiple approaches to special education—such as applied behavioral analysis and academic interventions—that are provided to (and often required to be completed by) school staff and paraeducators.

Historically, expanded learning partners that are serving the same students have not taken advantage of—or in some cases have had limited access to—county office or Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) trainings.

Given that our students spend 80% of their waking hours outside of the traditional classroom, we should think about how knowledge and skills can be made more accessible. Our families should be able to trust that out-of-school providers are trained and supported to work with their children. We need to challenge our routines and make training materials available to community partners in order to amplify the quality of support and opportunities for learning that students receive throughout the day. One advantage of the transition to using and upgrading online systems caused by the need for remote work during COVID-19 is that now many of these training materials are being made available online.

Not only do we already have training that could be shared with youth-serving partners but also we have fully-trained staff who often are not employed full time, even when they would like to be. We might consider leveraging their skill sets and the relationships that they have with students and teachers.

How can we prioritize universal design principles in developing learning environments that can engage all students?

When finding or designing spaces or creating lessons for expanded learning, we should ask ourselves how accessible they are and how they address inequities. This can take place during the physical search for learning spaces as well as through the ways in which staff and educators decorate spaces and design curriculum—and what that signals to students. This includes considering spaces that are wheelchair accessible; auditorily accessible in that they meet the needs of students with hearing impairments; visually accessible in that there are visual aids and prompts; and emotionally accessible in that there is space such as a cool-down room.

Universal design approaches also include training staff to consider inclusive methods such as offering not only auditory prompts but also visual components. Doing so creates environments supportive of the needs of students with specialized needs and additionally can support various students learning styles and teaching modalities. If we create physical and social-emotional spaces that center the needs of students with specialized learning accommodations, we will ultimately develop a universally supportive and equitable environment that helps all of our students.

How might we rethink the traditional structures of a school day or partner holistically to meet the needs of students with special needs?

COVID-19 has allowed us to reimagine the structure of the traditional school day. For example, we've observed how some students have been more engaged in online support platforms (e.g., virtual speech therapy), perhaps because students at home are able to "go to school" synchronously in the morning, work on their own asynchronously, and not feel singled out or embarrassed by their need for services. By thinking creatively about how best to meet the comprehensive needs of students not schedules, we might rethink how and when services are provided, for example: having occupational therapists work in partnership with an expanded learning partner outside of the school day; leveraging trusting relationships with community partners; integrating services into nonacademic settings.

How can we anticipate and address barriers to strengthening innovative and effective interagency collaboration?

It makes sense that students benefit from more support and from better trained staff. However, there are significant barriers that often limit the efficacy of cross-agency sharing and partnership, including prohibitive laws and funding parameters. We can look to existing examples that may be relevant to addressing common challenges as we explore deeper partnerships with expanded learning providers.

- **Working towards intentional alignment across funding and enrollment priorities to serve both general education and special education students.** El Dorado County Office of Education (COE) is working in collaboration with Head Start and other programs to allow for more inclusive environments for preK students with special needs. For example, in contrast to traditional preK programs that are often segregated by student ability, this COE has created several preschool classrooms that are fully inclusive for all students and has built the only fully accessible preschool playgrounds in El Dorado County—with the assistance of two grants. This partnership has allowed for important inclusion practices that benefit children both needing and not needing special education. However, while the benefits of inclusive learning environments for students are clear, the access challenges and funding requirements of Head Start programs make such partnerships with special education providers difficult to maintain and sustain. Special education educators might consider partnering with expanded learning providers to support student participation in nonacademic activities, such as those that are funded through the state After School Education and Safety (ASES) grant program, especially given the current flexibilities that allow programs to operate during and outside of the school day.
- **Improving vertical and horizontal communication, accountability, and continuous improvement.** The traditional policy and programmatic structures of special education mean that there are limited opportunities for meaningful and integrated collaborative practices at the practice, policy, and legislative levels. For example, with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), there is an important focus on compliance regarding the implementation of the Individualized Education Program (IEP). Related services for students with disabilities to address disability-related therapy needs generally occur within the regular school day. Services outside the school day can be considered extended school under the law and have to be specifically addressed in the IEP; other services outside the regular school day generally occur in a clinic-type setting through an individual's insurance coverage. Changing this structure without policy and programmatic safeguards may result in schools being apprehensive to think outside the box in terms of supporting expanded learning partners in a creative endeavor due to concern over a compliance misstep or potential litigation.

Providing comprehensive and coherent support to students with disabilities will require the commitment and focus of multiple agencies at all levels. To support the braiding of programs, policy-makers and legislators will need to create platforms to identify and remove barriers that prevent cross-agency collaboration. Additionally, structures and agreements will need to be established to ensure that community partners are working in tandem to implement new ideas locally and to learn from small-scale implementation efforts.

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