COMMENTARY

Expanded Learning Partnerships to Help Reinvent School for Upper Grade Students



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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 older youth. We seek to answer the question: How can expanded learning be leveraged to support pandemic recovery, specifically for older youth who risk becoming disengaged from school and are at higher risk of developing anxiety and depression?

In theory, educators agree that a one-size-fits-all instruction model does not best meet the needs of our students. Delivering on that vision, however, often runs counter to how traditional school systems are designed and operated. When COVID-19 hit our schools in the South Los Angeles community, we recognized the opportunity to go beyond theory and dive into innovation. To cater to each student's individual needs we built on the existing partnership between our high school at The Accelerated Schools (TAS) and our expanded learning provider—arc: after school and experiential education programs—to reimagine what learning can, and should, look like. Instead of just adapting in-person school to a virtual platform, our partnership prioritized creating student-centered learning experiences designed to reflect and respond to the needs and realities of older students having to adjust to and thrive in a distance learning context.

Even prior to COVID-19, many older students were already navigating survival—balancing family, school, and work. Shelter-in-place orders exacerbated these challenges and, not surprisingly, students had trouble engaging with distance learning when faced with the challenge of securing basic needs like food, housing, and family health and safety. Our school leaders recognized this unprecedented moment as requiring flexibility and openness to new norms of teaching and learning. The collaborative resources provided by our extended learning partnership provided vital support for this kind of rapid innovation.

Here are some lessons that we've learned about how expanded learning partnerships can best serve older youth during the continued educational disruptions associated with the pandemic and as we develop plans for recovery:

Hybrid asynchronous and synchronous learning models work well for older youth.

Our students' lives were upended by shelter-in-place orders. Many students were not only cut off from social and academic ties but also required to shoulder a larger portion of family responsibilities: younger siblings needed distance learning support and family economic insecurity required some students to take on "essential worker" jobs.

While distance learning in this new context was challenging for many of our students, the virtual platform also presented opportunities for new ways of engaging with older youth and for working with our expanded learning partners. With levels of disengagement escalating among high school students, staff at community-based organizations (CBOs) served as a critical resource for delivering and reinforcing instructional content as well as for meeting students' diverse needs. Through our partnership, CBO staff were trained by classroom teachers to support high-level content learning (e.g., prerecorded lectures across high school sites) and also freed up local school staff to provide individualized academic support. This approach has enabled classroom teachers to better use synchronous instructional time to meet students' educational needs while also allowing for the scheduling flexibilities that our students require in order to accommodate other responsibilities like family and work.

School administrators are critical to strengthening collaboration between teachers and CBO staff and should emphasize that the larger the support team is for students, the better it is for everyone.

For expanded learning partnerships to work best, CBO staff must be welcomed and valued in the classroom. In the past, we had observed reluctance on the part of school staff to trust CBO partners as coeducators, instead seeing them as less serious workers who lacked professional training. School administrators need to anticipate, acknowledge, and validate the concerns of their teachers and of their CBO partners—especially when schools expect CBO partners to support high-level instruction. School leaders need to explicitly support staff in creating and testing student support strategies and approaches that leverage the assets of teachers and of CBO partners so that together they facilitate higher student engagement and success.

Schools should share grading and evaluation tools as well as information with their CBO partner(s) to provide consistent support for students.

Like many other middle and high schools, TAS has struggled with consistency and transparency around grading, evaluation, and accountability even among our own teaching staff. Prior to COVID-19, each teacher largely had their own process and metrics for student success. As a result, it was not clear to our expanded learning partners how they might support students' academic progress.

The shift to distance learning and increased leveraging of our expanded learning partners to support students allowed us to reimagine and clarify our goals behind grades—they are not just static summative "scores" but rather important data points to support student progress and learning.

In fall 2020, we rolled out a schoolwide project-based learning curriculum and single-grading system using a cognitive skills rubric. This classroom-based pedagogical shift has allowed for deeper levels of collaboration and for full transparency between school and expanded learning staff. Afterschool staff, for instance, are now clearer about the content and skills that students are working on, and are able to communicate more effectively with classroom teachers to support particular learning strategies. Using this shared platform, expanded learning partner staff are trained alongside school staff to help track student assignments and growth across a range of cognitive skills and content areas.

We should consistently and proactively engage students in evaluating new systems and partnerships.

We can learn a lot from students by listening to them and observing their choices. Every few months, our schools and our expanded learning partners jointly conducted collaborative learning rounds (or focus groups) with a handful of students from each grade to hear, firsthand, what was and was not working, and how our CBO partners might help us respond. Students let us know that they are turning to our expanded learning partners for academic and social support. Some questions that we asked included: What do you need when you're struggling in school? Where and when do you notice that you are making the most progress? Teachers, site leaders, and CBO staff jointly reflected on what we heard and on ways in which we might shift our individual and collective practice in order to target and adapt our support to students' changing needs.

Even prior to the pandemic, the collaborative relationship between TAS and arc was an important resource in our mutual work to support equitable student success. COVID-19 and the myriad unanticipated twists and turns of the last 12 months have further highlighted the invaluable nature of our partnership. We have learned alongside one another how to be better partners and, in turn, how better to support the students we serve.

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