# Expanded Learning Partnerships

## A Foundation for Rebuilding to Support the Whole Child

Femi Vance
Sara Wolforth
Hayin Kimner

**S**trong partnerships between schools and expanded learning programs lay the foundation for building stronger, more equitable support systems for children and their families. Building on prior investments in the expanded learning system, California's school reopening guidance encouraged intentional coordination across schools and expanded learning providers to best meet the needs of students during this unprecedented time. This brief provides key principles for school and expanded learning partnerships—informed by insights from leaders and practitioners from across California—that policymakers and practitioners should consider as they move from reopening to rebuilding.

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# Introduction

The start of the 2020–21 academic year illustrated the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of school-aged students and their families, and has heightened the need to catalyze the systems that support them. In the face of unprecedented crises—compounded by continued racial violence and destructive wildfires—schools and other youth-serving organizations in California must consider what it takes to provide the whole child learning environments that truly help youth thrive.

The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (SEAD), drawing upon research and best practices, has underscored the importance of partnerships between community programs—including expanded learning providers—and schools, recognizing that learning happens both in and out of school settings.[1] In addition, Governor Newsom's January budget proposal for 2021–22 builds in $4.55 billion for expanded learning time, including afterschool and summer learning programs, as well as academic intervention grants to help address learning loss due to the pandemic.[2] Now more than ever, California schools and expanded learning providers have the challenge and opportunity to work together to mobilize their resources and expertise.

According to a national survey of 914 program providers conducted by the Afterschool Alliance,[3] 70 percent of providers have continued serving students and families amid the COVID-19 crisis in some capacity. This includes offering virtual programming, delivering resources such as meals, providing childcare for essential workers, and connecting families to other organizations to address mental, emotional, and financial well-being.[4]

By forging stronger partnerships, schools and expanded learning partners can better address the immediate needs presented by the current crises and proactively address the opportunity not only to reopen but also to *reimagine* and *rebuild* together. In this brief, we outline key principles for cultivating collaborative, sustainable partnerships between schools and expanded learning providers that support the whole child.

# California's Expanded Learning System

Arguably, California has the most robust publicly funded expanded learning system in the nation, serving over 900,000 students across 4,500 programs.[5] California defines expanded learning as before and after school, summer, and intersession learning experiences that develop the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs and interests of students.[6] The Expanded Learning Division (EXLD), a department in the California Department of Education (CDE), manages the expanded learning system. Programs are primarily funded by state Afterschool Education and Safety (ASES) grants and supplemented by the federal 21st-Century Community

Learning Centers grant program. Through the statewide system of support for expanded learning,[7] EXLD works in partnership with county offices of education and expanded learning intermediaries to provide training and technical assistance to local systems and programs. According to a 2017 report to the state legislature, children and youth who participated in expanded learning programs attended an average of 3.5 to 17 more days of school per year than did their peers who did not attend expanded learning programs; the attendance differences were especially pronounced for English learners in Grades 9 through 12.[8]

Faced with COVID-19, leaders encouraged coordination across schools and expanded learning systems in response to school closures. Following the start of the pandemic, California waived sections of the Education Code[9] to provide publicly funded expanded learning providers the flexibility to partner with schools to support students during the school day, in contrast to only operating after school-day instruction ended. The state's reopening schools task force also included EXLD, among other CDE departments, highlighting the investment and support for expanded learning from the governor, the president of the State Board of Education, and the superintendent of public instruction.[10] California's subsequent reopening guidance, *Stronger Together*, described how expanded learning programs can support different models of learning.[11] In addition, statewide education organizations such as the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) included in their reopening guidance an emphasis on school and expanded learning partnerships.[12]

## Key Principles to Guide Collaboration Between Schools and Expanded Learning

California's expanded learning system is well positioned to support school and expanded learning partnerships that can contribute significantly to rebuilding efforts. We interviewed 11 California field leaders and practitioners about the issues facing schools and expanded learning providers, cross-system partnership opportunities, and policy strategies for supporting the whole child. We also reviewed documents and reports about California's expanded learning system to develop key principles for designing (or redesigning) partnerships between schools and expanded learning providers. The companion tool to this brief, ***Planning Integrated Whole Child Supports***,[13] offers key discussion questions to guide initial and ongoing rebuilding conversations between schools and expanded learning partners.

The following key principles for collaboration among schools, districts, and expanded learning partners reflect what the science of learning and development tells us about how young people best learn and thrive. To meaningfully embrace these principles, **field leaders acknowledged that both schools and expanded learning partners would need to shift from the largely transactional way that they have traditionally partnered**.

## Principle 1: Collaboratively Plan and Implement Integrated Services

Rebuilding requires that school and expanded learning partnerships be explicitly designed to provide integrated learning opportunities that mitigate the challenges of distance learning, especially for marginalized students and families.[14] To rebuild for the whole child, school and expanded learning partnerships should develop integrated plans for the near term (school year 2020–21) as well as for the future.[15] This means beginning with intentional conversations to understand the needs and priorities of students and families, and to identify the assets of each partner, areas for learning, and collaborative solutions.

**Ensure strong representation and meaningful participation of expanded learning partners on rebuilding teams.** Rebuilding teams that have been mobilized to respond to the pandemic have typically been led solely by district leaders. Instead, school and district leaders should consider how to engage staff and leadership from the expanded learning field. Teams might include *site coordinators*, who lead programs at specific sites, or *directors*, who oversee multiple sites and/or manage grant funds. In California, there are also 11 *regional leads* for the statewide system of support that could serve on rebuilding teams. Regional leads are familiar with local contexts and the assets that local expanded learning partners can contribute. Engaging multiple expanded learning partners from different levels of the system can result in a more holistic perspective on what supports are needed by students, teachers, and families, as well as avenues for providing those supports.

**Codesign an improvement process that allows the rebuilding team to set goals, check in on progress, and make adjustments.** The good news is that schools and expanded learning professionals are likely already using their own data-informed improvement processes. While teachers and school staff might be more familiar with "plan, do, study, act" (PDSA) cycles,[16] expanded learning partners may use the "assess, plan, improve" cycle, which is embedded in

### California's Expanded Learning Division Is Working to Support Local Programs During the Pandemic

In response to school closures and shifting community needs, CDE's EXLD released new, more flexible policies, such as waiving the requirement for expanded learning programs to operate at a specific time and relaxing attendance requirements to protect current funding levels. EXLD Director Michael Funk partnered with the California AfterSchool Network (CAN) to create a series of virtual Fireside Chats[17] to answer pressing questions and to share examples of promising practices within the field. This new communication strategy helped keep expanded learning providers informed as well as connected to policymakers and to one another.

the state's expanded learning continuous quality improvement process.[18] A codesigned process should incorporate best practices from implementation science, such as setting manageable goals, collecting relevant data, reflecting on data to inform new strategies, and involving multiple stakeholders.[19]

**Design proactive and responsive communication strategies.** There is a heightened need to communicate effectively with students and families—especially multilingual families. Rebuilding teams will need to communicate to students, teachers, and families about, for instance, new processes for submitting homework or taking attendance. And leaders will also have to communicate responses to emerging needs or to changes in health guidance. Communication must be ongoing, timely, and clear.

District and expanded learning partnerships should begin by assessing how current practices can be leveraged to ensure regular communication with students and families. New strategies that are better suited to emergency situations and an increased need to communicate quickly might need to be developed. The trusting relationships that expanded learning partners often have with students and families can support effective communication in times of uncertainty and trauma, especially given potential fears families may have related to racism or the consequences of undocumented status.

Just as important as effective communication with students and families is seamless communication between schools and expanded learning partners. One strategy that districts and expanded learning partners can consider is ensuring shared access to communication, distance learning, and data platforms. Frequent, open communication in areas of common concern is essential for trusting, productive partnerships. The ***Planning Integrated Whole Child Supports*** companion tool can support partners as they strengthen their collaborative relationships.

> **"** Once you get people's attention, and you get the relationship in place, and you start having dialog about the things you both care about, you get there."
> —JENNIFER PECK, PRESIDENT AND CEO, PARTNERSHIP FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

## Principle 2: Provide Integrated Supports That Reflect the Science of Learning and Development

One field leader noted that while much has changed during the pandemic, the conditions that students need in order to grow and thrive remain consistent. Research on the science of learning and development pinpoints five interrelated design and implementation strategies that support youth to thrive.[20] Expanded learning providers can be vital partners in carrying out each of these strategies.

1. **Cultivate positive developmental relationships between youth and adults and among youth.** A core component of expanded learning programs is fostering relationships; practitioners often are from—and reflect the culture and demographics of—the communities they serve.
2. **Design supportive environments to promote safety and belonging.** Expanded learning programs are grounded in a youth-development orientation that focuses on designing activities that are developmentally appropriate for students.
3. **Create rich learning experiences that leverage the lived experiences of young people; help them master concepts and skills; and strike the balance between challenge and support.** Expanded learning programs offer enrichment, often through project-based and experiential learning opportunities.
4. **Support social and emotional development including providing opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, mindsets, and habits.** Increasingly, expanded learning programs are focused on supporting social-emotional learning—a focus area for California's state-level cross-system coordination.[21]
5. **Provide integrated, cross-system support to coordinate opportunities for young people to learn and develop.** Given their connection to the communities they serve, expanded learning providers are well positioned to coordinate supports with multiple partners and providers.

## Partnerships in Action: Integrated Planning

Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) laid the groundwork for integrated planning prior to the pandemic. The district uses a full-service community schools model[22] and works with 75 publicly funded expanded learning programs that serve over 36,000 students, most of whom are Black or Latinx and roughly 74 percent of whom live in poverty.[23]

Faced with reopening, expanded learning professionals were part of developing the reopening, or *Strong Start*, individualized plans for schools. The district's Afterschool Division created a tool to guide planning conversations with school site teams, principals, and full-service community school coordinators to understand collectively the priorities and needs of each school and to redesign services. These conversations informed the development of an integrated learning delivery model via which expanded learning providers collaborated with teachers during the virtual school day.

Expanded learning staff offered technology support to teachers, provided one-on-one literacy support to students, and led enrichment activities in virtual breakout rooms. Expanded learning staff received official OUSD email addresses to allow them full access to the same district resources available to teachers. Schools that opted for strong integration with expanded learning partners had higher student attendance.

**(Re)design systemic supports to address the whole child.** A whole child approach to learning and development recognizes that for students to fully engage in learning, practitioners must make it possible for students to bring their whole selves to learning experiences. This means practitioners welcome all aspects of young people's identities and attend to all aspects of development, not only academics. District and expanded learning partners should review how the current district, school, and expanded learning systems meet the basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, etc.), physical health, social and emotional well-being, academic needs, and mental health of students and families, as well as those of teachers and other school partners.

> ❚❚ When we go back to school after the pandemic, we want it to be a better place. Because students walk into the building in the morning as whole children—mind, body, and heart at the same time—we need to start thinking of how we can support the whole child and what that means for getting them support beyond the schoolhouse."
>
> —PATRICK SHIELDS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LEARNING POLICY INSTITUTE

Expanded learning partners work with schools to put these strategies into practice. The local context will, in large part, determine how these strategies will be implemented. In the near term, learning hubs are an emerging model in which schools and expanded learning partners can work together to provide in-person, whole child supports in order to address some of the barriers presented by distance learning. Learning hubs (see box on page 9) are spaces where students are given in-person support and supervision during the school day—including academic support; meals and snacks; and opportunities for social-emotional learning and physical exercise.[24]

## Principle 3: Prioritize Equity

The pandemic has unequivocally pointed out the existing inequities deeply embedded in our society as well as how our education system fails to serve our most vulnerable students. The gaps in access to internet and digital devices are profound, as are the ways in which distance learning is inaccessible for many families. Policymakers and practitioners across youth-serving systems must consider the ways in which equity has been challenged in their communities—both before and during COVID-19—and how they might design more equitable policies, environments, practices, and experiences.

> ❚❚ [This] is an opportunity to address the needs of the whole learner and to address inequities that are pointed to through the pandemic. With that in mind [we] can shift to thinking of reopening not as a point in time but a process . . . of reimagining and building education for the equity of all."
>
> —DIEGO ARANCIBIA, DIRECTOR, ASAPCONNECT, SANTA CLARA COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

**Develop a clear vision for equity.** Prioritizing equity as a central tenet to rebuilding will first require local policymakers and practitioners to articulate a clear vision for equitable learning. A shared vision is one that not only is determined by civic, school, and organizational leaders but also should integrate multiple perspectives—particularly those of diverse students, families, teachers, and expanded learning practitioners—so that all those who have a hand in implementing or participating in learning have a voice. This also means establishing equity goals that reflect the specific local context. Prior research shows that considering educational equity issues—such as how to address and/or interrupt inequitable disciplinary practices, the racial composition of educators, and deficit approaches to family engagement—in the design of learning environments can benefit young people.[25]

**Redesign the existing system to advance equity goals.** The California AfterSchool Network (CAN) reminds us that "expanded learning programs are part of the equity equation."[26] In California, 96 percent of expanded learning programs are located in low-income neighborhoods and provide free learning opportunities to children whose families are unable to afford potentially costly enrichment activities like summer camps, music lessons, and visits to aquariums and/or zoos. Furthermore, expanded learning programs in California largely serve marginalized youth including Latinx and Black youth, English learners, youth in foster care, and youth experiencing homelessness. In these programs, students have opportunities to make connections with racially diverse staff who represent their experiences in ways that are rare in classrooms taught by a predominantly White teaching staff.[27] A snapshot of California's expanded learning workforce shows that it is 48 percent Latinx and that another 21 percent of its staff are people of color.[28]

There are systemic barriers to advancing equity including unequal access to resources and opportunities; policies that disproportionally harm groups of students; and language and practices that communicate that White dominant culture is the standard. Rebuilding teams should undertake a critical examination of policies and practices with an explicit focus on systemic barriers. Many barriers may be identified through an intentional root cause analysis of specific outcome measures, roadblocks to change, and responses (or lack thereof) to trends or incidents that illuminate inequities, for example, the disproportionate numbers of Black students suspended from schools.[29] As teams work to understand systemic barriers and develop solutions, it will be critical to elevate the voices of multiple stakeholders, including students, families, representatives from community-based organizations, and neighborhood representatives. Teams might consider engaging in an equity audit to identify potential inequities and underlying systemic barriers.[30]

> **❝ It is time to shift from a model of people navigating multiple systems towards a vision of how our systems work in unison to serve people."**
> —JEFF DAVIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CALIFORNIA AFTERSCHOOL NETWORK

The learning hubs model has been used in some communities as a means of addressing inequities exacerbated by the disparate impacts of COVID-19 by providing focal populations (e.g., students with disabilities, students who are housing insecure, or students without access to technology or internet connectivity) with in-person supports during the school day.

**Make staffing choices that reflect (re)designed systemic supports and leverage the assets of professional staff across systems.** The rebuilding team can draw upon both the teaching workforce and the expanded learning workforce to meet the needs of students. Staffing choices should align with the selected learning models and additional support services that will be offered. Schools and expanded learning partners should determine who will carry out specific responsibilities based on their strengths.

Strong partnerships are also intentional about ensuring that teachers and expanded learning professionals have the knowledge and resources they need to carry out the selected learning strategies and support services. Teachers and expanded learning staff should develop a joint professional learning plan that indicates which topics will be explored and how they align with learning goals and support services. For example, one field leader we interviewed suggested that practitioners across schools and expanded learning programs could benefit from shared learning opportunities on supporting social-emotional learning and development in a distance-learning context.

In order to support viable and sustainable programs, it is especially important that expanded learning practitioners receive living wages and have access to childcare and health

### Partnerships in Action: Whole Child Health and Wellness Collaborative

In 2019, CAN (afterschoolnetwork.org) launched the Whole Child Health and Wellness Collaborative (WCHW Collaborative),[31] funded partly by the California Youth Opioid Response (YOR California).[32] The WCHW Collaborative brings together professionals from multiple sectors to "advance expanded learning programs as partners in creating hubs at schools and other community sites to promote whole child, whole family, and whole community health and wellbeing."[33]

In response to the lack of a statewide equity and racial justice strategy, the WCHW Collaborative made an intentional commitment to collective action. Beginning with an "equity pause,"[34] they emerged with an action framework that includes four concrete equity strategies: (a) focus on youth and family; (b) share and nurture the adult workforce; (c) leverage new and existing resources; and (d) collaborate across systems.

care. In California, teachers have unions to help negotiate on their behalf whereas expanded learning professionals do not. Examples of how to address the needs of expanded learning professionals are emerging. In San Francisco, some expanded learning organizations who are staffing in-person community hubs[35] are paying hub staff higher wages in acknowledgement of the uncertainty around the risks of exposure caused by working in person, as well as of the increased working hours needed to staff a full-day program.

## Conclusion

It remains unclear how long our nation will be grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic. As the public health response unfolds, our youth-serving systems must continue to stay committed to providing safe, supportive learning opportunities while caregivers work to keep families economically stable. Rebuilding presents a unique opportunity for forging stronger partnerships between schools and expanded learning providers that set the stage for transformative learning and development as well as for robust equity.[36]

## Endnotes

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# Author Biographies

**Femi Vance** is a researcher at American Institutes for Research (AIR).

**Sara Wolforth** is a policy principal at AIR with expertise in state education policy.

**Hayin Kimner** is senior research and policy fellow with Policy Analysis for California Education.

# Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

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## Related Publications

Adelman, H. S., & Taylor, L. (2020, November). *Restructuring California schools to address barriers to learning and teaching in the COVID-19 context and beyond* [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Gee, K., Murdoch, C., Vang, T., Cuahuey, Q., & Prim, J. (2020, August). *Multi-Tiered System of Supports to address childhood trauma* [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Vance, F., Wolforth, S., & Gunderson, J. (2021, February). *Learning hubs: In-Person learning for the whole child* [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Vance, F., Wolforth, S., & Kimner, H. (2021, February). *Planning integrated whole child supports: Key questions for collaborative discussions* [Companion tool]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

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