

Learning Hubs

In-Person Learning for the Whole Child

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Communities in California and around the country are implementing learning hubs to provide in-person education supports to students who are distance learning. In this brief, we explore a prevalent learning hub model and raise considerations for local policymakers, schools, and expanded learning partners. We include guidance for the design and operations of learning hubs, and identify the policy levers that support the model.

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Introduction

Since initial school closures in spring 2020, schools, community-based organizations, and childcare entities have been providing in-person care to essential workers (see p. 9 for a timeline). Starting at the beginning of the 2020–21 academic year, several communities across the state and country started implementing learning hubs to support distance learners with in-person education supports. Hubs have ranged from private pods organized by parents to large, city- or municipal-operated efforts.¹ Learning hubs typically offer small groups of students in-person academic support and other whole child supports like enrichment, social-emotional learning, exercise, and healthy meals and snacks—all of which are vital for students to thrive but may be missing from distance learning.

Learning hubs are one strategy to address the impact of traumas and inequities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and racial violence by including supports that consider the full range of students’ social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs.² Hubs can promote equity by serving students for whom distance learning is most challenging, for example, families without internet access or devices,³ a safe environment conducive to learning,⁴ or an adult to provide guidance when needed. And while many learning hubs began as a short-term solution to meet the needs of vulnerable students during ongoing school closures, they may be needed throughout the 2020–21 school year and can offer school leaders, communities, and their partners an example of how to safely and intentionally transition into classrooms.

Learning hubs that reflect a whole child approach require collaborative work; expanded learning professionals can serve as essential partners. Expanded learning staff have strong connections and experience with students and families as well as deep expertise around cultivating comprehensive life skills and relationships that young people need in order to thrive.⁵ In recognition of the important role that expanded learning providers have played throughout the pandemic, Governor Newsom’s proposed 2021–22 budget includes \$4.55 billion specifically to support expanded learning time, including “community learning hubs that provide students with access to technology, high-speed internet access, and other academic supports.”⁶

In the **first brief** in this series,⁷ we described principles for partnerships between schools and expanded learning professionals that are applicable to a learning hub model. In this second brief, we explore learning hubs and raise considerations for local policymakers, schools, and expanded learning partners. We include guidance for the design and operations of learning hubs, and identify the policy levers that support the model. The concept of learning hubs is so new that little research exists and there is a need in both practice and policy to learn and to share examples that reflect rapidly evolving schooling models. To inform this brief, we conducted 20 interviews with school and expanded learning⁸ leaders serving dozens of diverse communities across California.⁹ We also reviewed recent news coverage and reports from education organizations.

Key Components of Learning Hubs

In learning hubs, small groups of students receive in-person supervision while participating in distance learning. We focused on learning hubs that involved the school or district and expanded learning providers as partners, and that shared the following key components:

- **Were voluntary and targeted.** Students and families could opt into an in-person learning hub, though all programs had subgroup priorities and slots may have been limited by space and resources.
- **Strictly adhered to local and state public health guidance.** This included observing appropriate group sizes, social distancing, wearing personal protective equipment (PPE), and maintaining a rigorous cleaning regimen. All hubs had a set of health and safety agreements that students and families had to sign in order to participate.
- **Maintained consistent cohorts of students and adults who stayed together in one space every day to minimize the spread of COVID-19.** Student groupings had to remain consistent on a day-to-day basis and were often composed of students from mixed grade levels, classrooms, and even schools.
- **Provided essential materials and nutrition.** These included a designated study space/desk, internet connectivity, computers and headphones, and PPE. Students also had access to breakfast, lunch, snacks, and in some cases grab-and-go dinners, which were supported by federally funded meal programs.
- **Operated for the duration of distance learning instruction (or longer).** The hours and duration of school day instruction vary greatly by district, grade, school, and other factors. Hubs operated from between 5 to 10.5 hours per day and all sought to meet the needs of working parents.
- **Provided academic supports and beyond.** All students had access to an adult to help them manage assignments, troubleshoot technology, and answer questions. Most learning hubs offered more intensive academic supports such as tutoring, training in study skills, and homework help. The majority also offered activities to address social-emotional development and physical health. These activities were woven into the day either when students were not engaged in distance learning and/or after the school day.

Designing and Launching a Learning Hub

Field leaders have shared emerging best practices from their experiences operating learning hubs to inform future learning hubs and encourage modifications to existing hubs.

Prioritize Buy-In and Alignment Across Partners

Having strong existing partnerships between schools and expanded learning providers makes it both possible and easier to set up programs quickly. With school and district staff overwhelmed by a range of issues, expanded learning providers and their system of support providers were readily available to help the school district navigate the maze of regulatory hurdles to help make in-person hubs possible. Several providers noted that learning hub site visits helped to build buy-in, trust, and collective knowledge among a cross-section of district, site, and partner staff. Visits also supported shared goals on the how and why of learning hubs and larger reopening efforts. In many cases, working together on learning hubs strengthened the collaborative leadership required for complex coordination at multiple levels, increased school and district engagement in program development, and enhanced appreciation for how expanded learning staff are “on the front lines of supporting our most vulnerable students.”

Focus on Students Who Are Most Negatively Affected by COVID-19 Disparities

Prioritize the most underserved groups. The majority of learning hub providers have prioritized children of essential workers, homeless or housing insecure students, foster youth,¹⁰ and students without access to distance learning and/or who had not previously regularly participated in distance learning. Middle and high school students are currently underserved by most learning hubs¹¹ despite critical developmental and social needs during adolescence.¹²

Coordinate with teachers and site leaders to enroll students. Efficient, coordinated outreach and enrollment processes can expedite student supports.

From the Field

Sacramento City Unified School District initially set priority criteria for learning hub enrollment of, for example, foster and homeless children, children of district staff and certain essential worker groups, English learners, and students with special needs. District homeless and foster youth leads, principals, and teachers made enrollment recommendations. Every hub met capacity within 2 to 3 days.

Engage communities to understand and address the most acute needs. Many districts and expanded learning providers surveyed students and families to have a better understanding of the barriers facing families and the demand for specific in-person supports. Meaningfully engaging families and responding in practical ways helped to build and strengthen trusting connections with families.

Invest in Staff to Ensure Safety and Effectiveness

Learning hub partners must make intentional choices to ensure the safety of their workforce while also preparing staff to create enriching learning environments. This means taking all measures to protect staff from virus transmission and addressing the basic needs of staff including living wages, social and emotional support, and childcare.

Follow COVID-19 precautions and care.

Learning hub staff must be protected in the event that they are exposed to COVID-19, that is, they should have access to healthcare, health insurance, and paid sick leave. All interviewees stated that they had ample PPE, which the school and/or district provided.

Offer social and emotional support.

The trauma of COVID-19 and ongoing racial violence has had a significant impact on teachers and expanded learning partners. Learning hub providers must support the social and emotional needs of staff by providing mental health education, workshops on self-care, individualized self-care plans, and opportunities to discuss openly successes and challenges.¹⁵

Ensure access to childcare for staff. Learning hub staff who are also parents need childcare. Learning hub providers must speak with staff in order to understand their families’ priorities and needs as well as how the partnership might support them.

According to a 2012 labor market survey by the state’s Employment Development Department,¹³ most of the expanded learning workforce consists of young women of color, with roughly 70 percent working part time, earning between \$10 to \$13 per hour. Furthermore, only 24 percent report having health insurance.

While nearly all learning hub staff are working more hours than they did prepandemic, and are thereby closer to full-time work, more hours also mean higher risk of exposure to COVID-19. In turn, expanded learning leaders are taking strong stances to protect and support their staff. For example, Woodcraft Rangers are not sending part-time, uninsured staff to deliver in-person learning.¹⁴

Design an integrated staffing approach to cover a typical workday. In typical afterschool programs, expanded learning staff often work part-time outside of traditional school hours. In contrast, learning hubs generally operate twice as long as do afterschool programs. Scheduling must consider this practical reality and the bandwidth of staff. New working norms for school and expanded learning partners may lay the groundwork for more intentional and innovative programming and staffing strategies post-COVID-19.

From the Field

When Sonoma Valley Boys and Girls Club first opened, the hub operated for 10 hours and had a 14:1 staff ratio. The hub quickly learned that the day was too long and that there needed to be 2 staff in the classroom, so they shortened the day to 7 hours and provided more staff overlap and breaks.

Provide coordinated professional learning. Consistency across learning environments benefits youth.¹⁶ School and expanded learning partnerships can support alignment by proactively identifying professional development needs and offering coordinated or joint training. Topics might include ensuring health and safety, using classroom and communications platforms, understanding community resources and related referral processes, and incorporating social and emotional learning¹⁷ across virtual and in-person learning settings.

From the Field

Many districts are providing learning hub staff, often community-based organization staff, with district emails as well as access to internal communications resources and student data tracking systems. This integration practice provides more personalized and consistent support to students and their families, and enhances coordination between school and community partner staff.

Emphasize Integration and Coordination in Planning Implementation

Codesigning a learning hub ensures that partners leverage each other’s strengths and resources.

Identify and prepare facilities. Implementation partners should jointly identify and prepare facilities—including school buildings, when possible—to accommodate differentiation of students, physical distancing protocols, and room for enrichment and recreation. Facility management teams and staff should design classrooms and student building routes. Hubs may require that a principal or other site administrator be on campus to serve as a resource and liaison for students and expanded learning staff.

Braid funding sources and pool resources. Learning hub partnerships cost significantly more than traditional expanded learning programs due to smaller student to staff ratios. Operational expenses may be covered by pooling resources. For example, at school-based hubs, expanded learning programs provide staff support, while the district provides appropriate PPE and janitorial services. There are also a variety of funding sources including the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding to address learning loss and vulnerable student groups. Most hubs reported using a combination of state expanded learning funds, federal education stimulus, private grants, and municipal dollars. When devising funding plans, school and expanded learning partners should weigh how funding levels and sources will affect the design of the learning hub, for example, the duration of daily programming (half vs. full day), number and type of students who can be served, and staffing levels.

From the Field

Sonoma Valley Unified School District has committed \$700,000 of their federal funding to Sonoma Valley Boys and Girls Club to expand full-day learning hubs to approximately 220 students for the rest of the 2020–21 school year. A significant portion of the federal funding had to be spent by the end of 2020, but according to the California Department of Education (CDE) as of September 30, 2020, less than 50 percent of the CARES Act funds have been expended by Local Education Agencies (LEAs).

Start small and increase over time. Serving students in-person under COVID-19 safety rules is complex, at times overwhelming, and requires staff and students to relearn many social interactions to which they are accustomed. Hubs should start with a smaller-than-capacity number of students and sites.

From the Field

Bay Area Community Resource (BACR), an afterschool program provider overseeing learning hubs in Oakland, wished they had staggered opening dates rather than launching two hubs on the same day, so that they would have had more capacity to problem solve and triage during the first week.

Build processes for continuous and shared learning. Collaborative problem solving is a necessity given shifting public health and education guidance. Additionally, offering safe, in-person learning supports requires space for feedback from students and parents, iteration, and flexibility.

From the Field

In Sacramento a district coordinator facilitates a weekly Friday call across six learning hub sites, including all staff across four different organizations as well as school site leadership.¹⁸ These calls provide a forum to work through specific needs, concerns, and updates as well as to identify best practices. This real-time learning has influenced the quality, operations, and growth of the learning hubs and informs how and which in-person learning options might evolve.

Looking Ahead

Policymakers and system leaders can consider how they might allocate resources and flexibilities needed to launch and implement successful learning hubs, including:

1. **Identify the flexibilities** (see timeline on p. 9) that should be maintained or added in order to allow learning hubs to operate while distance learning is still the norm and to enhance school community partnerships and integration in the longer term.
2. **Provide guidance** to schools and their partners on how best to offer safe, in-person care for vulnerable students.
3. **Provide funding** to support and protect staff who are on the front line providing in-person supports to students. This might include hazard pay; higher wages; and increased funding for operations, technology, and professional development. The governor’s proposed 2021–22 budget provides promising indications that significant state funds will be allocated to support expanded learning partnerships to address learning needs, including community learning hubs.
4. **Strengthen partnerships** between schools and expanded learning providers through guidance, funding, and technical assistance.¹⁹
5. **Track lessons learned** from implementation to inform future iterations of in-person offerings.

Communities that have already launched learning hubs can reflect on how well this model is working and make adjustments. And as additional communities consider ways to meet the needs of the whole child during these tumultuous and uncertain times, they can learn from these early implementers. Further, these lessons learned—as well as the partnerships that may be formed or deepened through the implementation of learning hubs—can provide a strong foundation for the field as it moves from reopening to rebuilding.

Timeline

March–December 2020: Evolution of In-Person Supervision and Supports

March–June 2020: School Closures & Essential Care/Supervision

- **March 2020:** CDE and Health and Human Services (HHS) offer joint guidance on K–12 closures, supervision, and childcare;²⁰ allows for school or campus sites to be used for pop-up childcare for essential workers.
- **May 2020:** CDC publish guidance on childcare, schools, and summer camps.²¹
- **May 2020:** More than 70 percent of family care providers remain open; more than 30 percent of childcare centers remain open.²²

June–August 2020: Summer Learning & Camps

- **June 2020:** Childcare facilities can open to all families, not just essential workers.
- **June 29, 2020:** Senate Bill 98 (Education Omnibus Budget Bill²³) includes:
 - \$5.3 billion allocated (primarily federal CARES Act funding) to address coronavirus needs and learning loss with a focus on students and communities most affected, most to be spent by December 31, 2020.
 - Regulatory flexibility for Afterschool Education and Safety (ASES) grantees.²⁴ Previous requirements that limited how ASES funds could be spent were suspended for the 2020–21 school year. The regulatory flexibility—hours, staffing ratios, site locations—is essential to make in-person and virtual learning possible.
- **July–August 2020:** At least 30 percent of expanded learning organizations offer in-person summer programs.²⁵

August–December 2020: School Reopening

- **August 28, 2020:** Four-tier framework for county reopening including in-person instruction.²⁶
- **September 2020:** Guidance to allow small group learning.²⁷ Allows in-person learning and supervision even if school campuses are closed: “A stable group of no more than 14 children or youth and no more than two supervising adults . . . stay together for all activities.”
- **September–October 2020:** Nearly 50 percent of California respondents are offering some level of in-person care in the fall.²⁸
- **December 10, 2020:** State legislators introduce Assembly Bill 10 to require schools to reopen once they are off the most restrictive tier.²⁹

Endnotes

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- ² Science of Learning and Development Alliance. (2020, May). *How the science of learning and development can transform education: Initial findings*. 5bde8401-9b54-4c2c-8a0c569fc1789664.filesusr.com/ugd/eb0b6a_24f761d8a4ec4d7db13084eb2290c588.pdf
- ³ Alliance for Excellent Education. (2020). *Students of color caught in the homework gap*. futureready.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HomeworkGap_FINAL7.22.2020.pdf
- ⁴ Menasce Horowitz, J., & Igielnik, R. (2020, October 29). *Most parents of K–12 students learning online worry about them falling behind* [Report]. Pew Research Center. pewsocialtrends.org/2020/10/29/most-parents-of-k-12-students-learning-online-worry-about-them-falling-behind
- ⁵ Little, P., & Pittman, K. J. (2018). *Building partnerships in support of where, when, and how learning happens*. The Aspen Institute. assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2018/10/Aspen_YD_FINAL_2_web-11.18.pdf?_ga=2.219778265.1947166615.1601949641-526856950.1588709583
- ⁶ Expanded Learning Time and Academic Intervention Grants, State of California Department of Finance, Title 2, Div. 3, Part 22, Chapter 7, Bill 37712, (2021–22). esd.dof.ca.gov/dofpublic/public/trailerBill/pdf/225
- ⁷ Vance, F., Wolforth, S., & Kimner, H. (2021, February). *Expanded learning partnerships: A foundation for rebuilding to support the whole child* [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/expanded-learning-partnerships>
- ⁸ 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 youth; California Department of Education After School Division. (2015, April). *A vision for expanded learning in California: Strategic plan 2014–2016: April 2015 update*. caexpandedlearning.com/uploads/2/7/3/3/27335217/_asd_strategic_plan_april_2015_update_final_4-22-15.pdf
- ⁹ Ten interviews representing expanded learning programs in dozens of diverse districts were conducted in October and November 2020. At the time interviews were conducted, all interviewees were operating in-person learning hubs in districts where schooling was only offered online.
- ¹⁰ In California, state afterschool funding requires that students experiencing homelessness and foster youth are prioritized, which aligns with many districts’ priorities for the learning hubs.
- ¹¹ Only one of the learning hubs that we learned about in our interviews focused on older youth.
- ¹² Osher, D., Pittman, K., Young, J., Smith, H., Moroney, D., & Irby, M. (2020, July). *Thriving, robust equity, and transformative learning & development: A more powerful conceptualization of the contributors to youth success*. American Institutes for Research and Forum for Youth Investment. forumfyi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Thriving.Equity.Learning.Report.pdf
- ¹³ California Employment Development Department. (2012). *2012 after school program survey: Final report of results*. static1.squarespace.com/static/5981e865f14aa16941337125/t/5a7ca3d58165f5d59b3201bd/1518117
- ¹⁴ California AfterSchool Network. (2020, August 10). *Update on CDE EXLD FAQs & interview with Woodcraft Rangers*. afterschoolnetwork.org/post/update-cde-exld-faqs-interview-woodcraft-rangers
- ¹⁵ Afterschool Alliance. (2020b, October 13). *Caring for children and youth in crisis: Part II. How to create healing-centered environments in afterschool* [Webinar]. afterschoolalliance.org/webinars.cfm?ID=BEB07B47-5056-A82E-7AE6BEB1EFD33724
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- ¹⁷ CASEL. (n.d.). *The CASEL guide to schoolwide social and emotional learning*. schoolguide.casel.org
- ¹⁸ The number of learning hub sites and partner agencies has increased since the interview was conducted in November 2020.
- ¹⁹ The Opportunity Institute. (2020, August 6). *No longer optional: Why and how expanded learning partnerships are essential to achieving equity in school reopening and recovery* [Brief]. theopportunityinstitute.org/publications-list/2020/8/6/why-expanded-learning-partnerships-are-essential-to-achieving-equity-in-school-reopening
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- ²³ Education finance: Education omnibus budget trailer bill, SB-98. (2020). leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200SB98
- ²⁴ California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Expanded learning*. cde.ca.gov/ls/ex
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- ²⁶ Official California State Government Website. (n.d.). *Blueprint for a safer economy*. covid19.ca.gov/safer-economy
- ²⁷ California Department of Public Health. (2020, September 4). *Guidance related to cohorts* [Press release]. cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/COVID-19/small-groups-child-youth.aspx. Quotation under “Definitions.”
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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., & Kimner, H. (2021, February). **Expanded learning partnerships: A foundation for rebuilding to support 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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