

Perspectives that bind: Reshaping partnerships in education

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Abstract

School closures during the height of the pandemic marked a time when students and families across socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds acutely experienced the limitations of our current educational system. That synergy should be a call to make lasting change, reshaping inequities into quality education for all. Partnerships between schools, families, and expanded learning providers are a powerful tool that we have in this endeavor. Fundamental barriers to strong partnerships are deficit thinking and power struggles that are embedded in our systems. In this paper, I examine how each of these phenomena hinder the development of thriving partnerships between schools, families, and expanded learning partners and delineate the shifts in thinking that could engender transformational partnership models. These shifts include sharing power through intentionally designed roles, adopting strength-based language and practices, and building informal and formal ways to connect. This paper closes by describing opportunities for systemic change afforded by new funding intended to help educational systems recover from the pandemic.

Perspectives that bind: Reshaping partnerships in education

We are at a critical inflection point in education. It is not clear whether we will turn back to what we have always done or whether we will carve a new path forward centered on what works for students and families. At the height of reopening, the buzz about reimagining schooling was cacophonous. Decades of data on educational outcomes show that schooling was working for white, English-language-dominant, middle- and upper-class families and largely leaving behind those who did not fit

that profile.¹ School closures during the pandemic marked a time when students and families across socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds acutely experienced the limitations of the public education system.

These limitations should be a call to action, but the momentum for reimagining school is waning. As school systems look to rebuild and recover from the pandemic, they should remember one of the most powerful tools available to them: partnerships between schools, families, and expanded learning providers.

Fully leveraging the power of partnership to support recovery from the pandemic will require fundamental shifts to our approach to collaboration. Namely, we must agree on a common vision for education and de-center schools in our current partnership models in favor of centering young people. For too long, we have focused on school-family partnerships or school-expanded learning partnerships and have given little attention to the prospect of a triad-shaped partnership between family, schools, and expanded learning providers.²

In this paper, I examine current partnership models and uncover common barriers to uniting schools, families, and expanded learning providers. I recommend strategies for addressing the crosscutting barriers and identify opportunities to shift systems to foster partnerships between schools, families, and expanded learning providers.

A common vision

Our notions of what schooling can and ought to look like are changing. Two years ago, we would have been hard-pressed to find a district that launched remote learning at scale, yet that's where we were in the not-too-distant past. Despite the upheaval since the pandemic began, the optimal conditions for learning have remained consistent. The Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole-Child Design articulate the components of environments that promote thriving in young people.³ These principles are derived from the science of learning and development, a multidisciplinary body of research about when and how young people learn and develop. From SoLD, we understand that youth and children learn best when they have consistent access to the following:

- Positive developmental relationships, including relationships with familial and nonfamilial adults and peers

1 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Monitoring Educational Equity* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2019), doi:10.17226/25389.

2 In this paper, the term “expanded learning opportunities” refers to enriching experiences that are designed to help youth build skills through hands-on experiential learning; see Expanded Learning Opportunities Council, *Expanded Learning Opportunities Guide* (Olympia, WA: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2018), <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/workgroups/elocmeeting/elocguide.pdf>. High-quality expanded learning opportunities reinforce and/or supplement, but do not replicate, the school curriculum. Pre-pandemic, these opportunities typically occurred before or after school, during the summer, or during school breaks. During the pandemic, many expanded learning opportunities altered their hours of operation to match the needs of families and youth, including being open during traditional school hours; see Afterschool Alliance, *Afterschool in the Time of COVID-19* (Washington, D.C.: Afterschool Alliance, July 2020), <https://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/afterschool-COVID-19-Wave-1-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

3 Learning Policy Institute and Turnaround for Children, *Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action* (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, June 2021), https://eb0b6ac7-8d5b-43ca-82bf-5fa89e49b5cb.usrfiles.com/ugd/eb0b6a_042c6c82a88144249223ca80bc9c2919.pdf.

- Environments characterized by safety and belonging, where children and youth feel emotionally and physically safe and expressions of their identity and culture are honored and valued
- Rich learning experiences that promote learning, through developmentally appropriate and challenging activities that encourage collaboration and connect to the lived experiences of young people
- Opportunities to develop skills, habits, and mindsets that encompass social and emotional competencies and cognitive abilities
- Integrated support systems that offer multiple and diverse supports that are widely available and easily accessible to all learners

These research-based principles provide a common vision for what education can and ought to look like, no matter the context in which young people learn.

The potential of partnerships

Reimagining our approach to education is a monumental and exciting endeavor. It is not a feat that will be accomplished by schools and districts alone, nor should it be. Too often we confine learning as a process that occurs only in school, while research says that children can learn anywhere and at any time.⁴ With this in mind, we can broaden who is included in the reimagining of education to include all those who touch the lives of young people. Akiva and Robinson (2021) remind us that it takes an ecosystem to help youth thrive: health, justice, social services, education, families, and more. The ecosystem is appealing precisely because it reflects how young people live. In this paper, I focus on the education sector and the need for partnership between schools, families, and expanded learning providers to promote learning. Traditionally, in education we center the role of the school and focus on the partnerships between schools and community-based programs and/or partnerships between schools and families. However, recognizing the potential for stronger connection among all these core actors will likely enhance the potential to enact the guiding principles for equitable whole-child design. To understand what is possible, it is important to examine the nature of the current partnership models.

School-expanded learning partnerships

Partnerships between schools and expanded learning providers are a well-known and well-endorsed strategy in education. Multiple private and public funders, including the federal government, encourage school-community partnerships to support expanded learning by including these relationships in applications for funding.⁵ The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) grant program, the largest

4 Priscilla M. Little, Merita Irby, Poonam Borah, and Karen Pittman, *Design Principles for Community-Based Settings: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action* (Washington, D.C.: Forum for Youth Investment, September 2021), https://5bde8401-9b54-4c2c-8a0c-569fc1789664.filesusr.com/ugd/eb0b6a_61db3771b95747f19cdc99c1d795cde8.pdf.

5 Jeffrey R. Henig, Carolyn J. Riehl, David M. Houston, Michael A. Rebell, and Jessica R. Wolff, “Collective Impact and the New Generation of Cross-Sector Collaborations for Education: A Nationwide Scan (New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University, March 2016), <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Collective-Impact-and-the-New-Generation-of-Cross-Sector-Collaboration-for-Education.pdf>.

public funding stream for expanded learning programs, is a strong example. States awarded 21st CCLC funding employ statewide competitions to award the funds. Local educational agencies (e.g., county office of education), community-based organizations, and private entities are eligible to receive 21st CCLC funds, yet states must give priority to applications jointly submitted by local education agencies and community-based organizations (U.S. Department of Education 2010). This priority is a nod to the importance of partnerships—however, once awarded, it is not entirely clear how 21st CCLC funding can be used to nurture stronger partnerships between schools and expanded learning providers.

Over 9,000 21st CCLC programs operate on school campuses.⁶ Research shows that strong integration between schools and expanded learning providers boosts the benefits to young people. A common vision for learning and development, shared goals, pooling resources, and infrastructure for collaboration are all facets of strong alignment.⁷ Yet existing research suggests that schools and expanded learning programs rarely exhibit strong, integrated partnerships.⁸ This is often despite the desire by both schools and expanded learning providers for more effective partnerships.

Supporting more effective collaborations between schools and expanded learning providers will require identifying and addressing the barriers to stronger integration. While more research is needed, existing evidence points to deficit thinking about expanded learning staff and a lack of time and resources for schools and expanded learning staff to collaborate.⁹ Deficit thinking results in school staff focusing on perceived “problems” or “threats” at the expense of recognizing the assets and strengths offered by expanded learning providers.¹⁰

Research suggests that school staff tend to think of expanded learning programs as places that focus on childcare and recreation and do not consider the academic focus of many programs,¹¹ even though expanded learning programs commonly offer academic support and academic content to participating youth. The most recent publicly available annual performance report for the 21st CCLC grant program indicates that academic-focused activities—including homework assistance, literacy support, tutoring, and science, technology, engineering, and math activities—are the activities most frequently held in programs across the nation.¹²

6 Sylvia Lyles, *21st Century Community Learning Centers Overview of the 21st CCLC Annual Performance Data: 2016–2017* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education, 2018), <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/performance.html>.

7 Tracy Leeann Bennett, “Examining Levels of Alignment between School and Afterschool and Associations with Student Academic Achievement,” *Journal of Expanded Learning Opportunities* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 4–22, <https://afterschoolsciencestudy.sri.com/downloads/CVAF-JELO-Spring-2015-Issue.pdf>.

8 Kenneth Anthony and Joseph Morra, “Creating Holistic Partnerships between School and Afterschool,” *Afterschool Matters* 23, no. 1 (2016), 33–42, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1120467.pdf>; and Gil G. Noam, Gina Biancarosa, and Nadine Dechausay, *Afterschool Education: Approaches to an Emerging Field* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2003).

9 Kenneth Anthony, “On the Level: Local Networks Creating Deeper and More Equitable School-Community Partnerships,” in *Changemakers!: Practitioners Advance Equity and Access in Out-of-School Time Programs*, edited by Sara Hill and Femi Vance, 29–44 (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2019); Anthony and Morra, “Creating Holistic Partnerships”; and Noam, Biancarosa, and Dechausay, *Afterschool Education*.

10 Stephen F. Hamilton, Mary Agnes Hamilton, and Karen Pittman, “Introduction: What Is Youth Development? Principles for Youth Development,” in *The Youth Development Handbook: Coming of Age in American Communities*, edited by Stephen F. Hamilton and Mary Agnes Hamilton, 1–22 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004).

11 Noam, Biancarosa, and Dechausay, *Afterschool Education*; and Anthony and Morra, “Creating Holistic Partnerships.”

12 U.S. Department of Education, *Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) Overview of the Annual Performance Data: 2019–2020* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, U.S.

The pandemic amplified the role expanded learning providers could play in supporting students' access to instruction and other supports for their well-being. Amidst school closures, multiple expanded learning partners led learning hubs so that youth could receive in-person academic support during the virtual learning day and have access to a safe environment, enrichment, social and emotional learning, and healthy meals and snacks.¹³ Field leaders emphasized strong district-expanded learning partnerships as critical to launching and maintaining learning hubs and noted that collaborating in this endeavor had improved collaboration and raised awareness about how expanded learning providers contribute to the well-being of youth.¹⁴ With schools open, the need for learning hubs has declined, but districts can learn from the pandemic-era examples of meaningful collaboration between community-based expanded learning providers and schools.

Achieving stronger partnerships between schools and expanded learning providers means we must also overcome challenges that have long affected many youth-serving nonprofits. Professional development and staffing are as much a priority as they are a concern for expanded learning providers because high-quality programs require high-quality staff. Yet time and funding for professional learning are scarce, leaving programs to leverage organizational knowledge to train staff, take advantage of free training opportunities, and/or limit the number of training opportunities to the highest-priority topics. Moreover, some, but not all, staff have attended postsecondary education, in comparison to teachers and administrators, who typically hold degrees. Anthony and Morra (2016) find that this contrast can result in school staff overlooking the expertise of staff in expanded learning programs and perceiving them as underprepared to work with young people. The National AfterSchool Association (NAA) conducted a survey of its membership in 2013 and 2016 to better understand the expanded learning workforce. The survey results push against the notion that expanded learning professionals lack formal training. According to the surveys, most salaried expanded learning staff have a degree, and nearly half are required to engage in training/continued education as part of their employment.¹⁵ One caveat is that the survey sample represents salaried employees rather than part-time hourly staff, who make up a large swath of the expanded learning workforce. Furthermore, the emphasis on formal education diminishes the value of on-the-job experience and training, which is the focus of much of the professional development efforts in the expanded learning field.

Another workforce-related barrier to partnerships with schools is the rate of turnover in the expanded learning field. It can be difficult to develop and maintain strong relationships when the people in the program shift frequently. Wilkins (2020) conducted a case study of a large youth-serving organization (which served over 30,000 youth) that provides insight into the scope of turnover these kinds of organizations are likely navigating. The study revealed that the organization's

Department of Education, December 2021), <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2022/02/21st-CCLC-Overview-of-the-Annual-Performance-Data-2019-2020-2021.12.22-FINAL.pdf>.

¹³ Femi Vance, Sara Wolforth, and Jessica Gunderson, "Learning Hubs: In-Person Learning for the Whole Child," policy brief (Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education, February 2021), <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/learning-hubs>.

¹⁴ Vance, Wolforth, and Gunderson, "Learning Hubs."

¹⁵ National AfterSchool Association, *The State of Expanded Learning Quality: Promoting Professionalism* (Washington, D.C.: National AfterSchool Association, 2014), https://naaweb.org/images/final_NAA_3_F.pdf; and National AfterSchool Association, *State of the Profession Report* (Washington, D.C.: National AfterSchool Association, 2017), <https://naaweb.org/images/StateoftheProfessionReport.pdf>.

turnover rate was 30–40 percent annually and that this turnover was concentrated among part-time staff. This presents a conundrum, as part-time staff tend to have the most face time with school staff and are also the staff who are most likely to change frequently, making it difficult to maintain relationships.

School-family partnerships

Intuitively, we understand that parents are allies in education and youth development. As the common idiom goes, “Parents are the first teachers.” A substantial body of literature supports our intuition. When families are engaged in their children’s education, at all grade levels, young people experience stronger academic and behavioral outcomes, including better grades, higher scores on achievement tests, decrease in drop-out rates, and stronger emotional regulation.¹⁶ Federal policymakers have made strategic investments in family engagement, thereby rooting policy in an extensive evidence base. Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act, formerly the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965, requires that local education agencies involve parents through outreach, programs, and activities.¹⁷ The U.S. Department of Education also funds Statewide Family Engagement Centers for the “implementation and enhancement of systemic and effective family engagement policies, programs, and activities that lead to improvements in student development and academic achievement.”¹⁸

Despite these efforts, scholars have found that family-engagement strategies cater to a specific subset of parents: those individuals who are white, middle class, U.S. born, and speak standard English.¹⁹ This is particularly problematic at a time when the demographics of our country are shifting. For example, on average, 10 percent or 5 million students are English language learners, and in Texas and California this proportion is closer to 20 percent.²⁰ Maintaining traditional forms of parent-engagement strategies will alienate millions of youth and families. Indeed, we see that families battling poverty, families headed by individuals without a college education, speakers of other languages, and racial/ethnic minorities are less engaged in traditional approaches to family engagement than their white counterparts.²¹ When

16 Christina M. Hall, “The Impact of Family Engagement on Student Achievement,” *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research* 22, no. 2 (2020): 1–16, doi:10.4148/2470-6353.1327; William Jaynes, “A Meta-Analysis of the Efficacy of Different Types of Parental Involvement Programs for Urban Students,” *Urban Education* 47, no. 4 (2012): 706–42, doi:10.1177/0042085912445643; and Tyler E. Smith, Wendy M. Reinke, Keith C. Herman, and Francis Huang, “Understanding Family–School Engagement Across and Within Elementary- and Middle-School Contexts,” *School Psychology* 34, no. 4 (2019): 363–75, doi:10.1037/spq0000290.

17 U.S. Department of Education, “Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies (Title I, Part A): Purpose,” last modified October 24, 2018, accessed July 1, 2022, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html>.

18 U.S. Department of Education, “Statewide Family Engagement Centers,” Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, last modified November 8, 2019, accessed July 1, 2022, <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/school-choice-improvement-programs/statewide-family-engagement-centers-program>.

19 Patricia Baquedano-López, Rebecca Anne Alexander, and Sera J. Hernandez, “Equity Issues in Parental and Community Involvement in Schools: What Teacher Educators Need to Know,” *Review of Research in Education* 37, no. 1 (2013): 149–82. doi:10.3102/0091732X12459718; and A. Lin Goodwin and Sabrina Hope King, *Culturally Responsive Parental Involvement: Concrete Understandings and Basic Strategies* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2002), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED472940.pdf>.

20 National Center for Education Statistics, “English Language Learners in Public Schools,” *The Condition of Education 2022* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2022), <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf>.

21 Hanson, Rachel, and Chris Pugliese. 202 Review of *Parent and Family Involvement in Education: 2019. National Center for Education Statistics at IES*. National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubinfo.asp?pubid=2020076>

traditional parent-engagement strategies—parent-teacher conferences, volunteering, and attending school events—fail, the fault tends to fall at the feet of these parents. They are seen by school personnel as uninterested or not valuing education and/or lacking the skills needed to be “adequately” involved in their child’s education.²² Furthermore, research has shown that color-blind approaches to parent engagement ignore the racialized experiences of people of color and impede the development of authentic relationships with families.²³

Expanded learning-family partnerships

Relationship building is the linchpin of the expanded learning field. Authentic relationships with youth, schools, and families are essential to providing high-quality programming.²⁴ In expanded learning programs, you can find staff simultaneously nurturing relationships between youth and staff, among youth, and between adults, including families and school personnel. The importance of family engagement in the expanded learning field is recognized at the federal level. The 21st CCLC grant program builds in family engagement, requiring all funded programs to offer families monthly opportunities to engage in their child’s education.²⁵ However, there is a dearth of research on partnerships between expanded learning providers and families that is related to the centering of schools in educational partnerships. That is, because the dynamic does not involve schools, it also has received less attention by scholars.

Little (2013) describes family engagement in expanded learning programs as family-centered activities that encourage program participation and support a child’s development of skills. Examples of family-engagement strategies employed by expanded learning providers include hiring a parent/family liaison and intentionally communicating with families during pickup, via phone calls, and by sending information home.²⁶ Programs with strong family-engagement strategies had higher attendance rates and also retained youth longer than other programs.²⁷ Family engagement in expanded learning, when done well, improved academic performance

22 Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez, “Equity Issues in Parental and Community Involvement in Schools.”

23 Parsons et al., “Parental Involvement: Rhetoric of Inclusion in an Environment of Exclusion,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 47, no. 1 (2016): 113–139. doi:10.1177/0891241616676874.

24 Malone, Helen Janc, Tara Donahue, J. Singer, J. Neman, and D. Moroney. “Building Quality in out-of-School Time.” Essay. In *The Growing out-of-School Time Field: Past, Present, and Future*, 195–210. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc, 2018.

25 U.S. Department of Education, “Title IV 21st Century Schools,” Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, last modified May 11, 2020, accessed July 1, 2022, <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-formula-grants/school-support-and-accountability/essa-legislation-table-contents/title-iv-21st-century-schools/#TITLE-IV-PART-B>.

26 Jennifer Birmingham, Ellen M. Pechman, Christina A. Russell, and Monica Mielke, *Shared Features of High-Performing After-School Programs: A Follow-Up to the TASC Evaluation* (New York, NY: The After-School Corporation, November 2005), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED498790.pdf>; Lee. M. Pearson, Christina A. Russell, and Elizabeth R. Reisner, *Evaluation of OST Programs for Youth: Patterns of Youth Retention in OST Programs, 2005-06 to 2006-07* (Washington, D.C.: Policy Studies Associates, June 2007), http://www.nyc.gov/html/records/pdf/govpub/3597year_2_interim_report_june_2007_final.pdf; and Christina A. Russell, Monica B. Mielke, and Elizabeth R. Reisner, *Evaluation of the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development Out-of-School Time Programs for Youth Initiative: Results of Efforts to Increase Program Quality and Scale in Year 2* (Washington, D.C.: Policy Studies Associates, January 2008), <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Evaluation-of-OST-second-year.pdf>.

27 Sarah N. Deschenes, et al., *Engaging Older Youth: Program and City-Level Strategies to Support Sustained Participation in Out-of-School Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project, April 2010), <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Engaging-Older-Youth-City-Level-Strategies-Support-Sustained-Participation-Out-of-School-Time.pdf>; Pearson, Russell, and Reisner, *Evaluation of OST Programs for Youth*; and Russell, Mielke, and Reisner, *Evaluation of the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development Out-of-School Time Programs for Youth Initiative*.

for youth and resulted in stronger relationships among youth and between staff and youth.²⁸

Notably, expanded learning programs are positioned as “brokers” between families and schools, as well as between families and other community resources.²⁹ One reason expanded learning staff can occupy the “broker” role is that these professionals have greater access to caregivers because programs often operate in the evenings and in some cases on the weekends. They also tend to see caregivers daily during pickup routines. As brokers, staff at expanded learning programs can share information with caregivers that may help them navigate formal school systems and programs, encourage them to come to school campuses, and offer or make connections to additional services for them.³⁰ There is more to learn about how expanded learning programs might bridge relationships between families and schools. Some research has found that caregivers of youth who regularly participated in expanded learning programs had more positive relationships with the school community, engaged with teachers more frequently, and attended more school activities.³¹ But, other studies have not found a relationship between children’s participation in expanded learning programs and traditional forms of family engagement.³²

Many expanded learning programs, while operating from school buildings, are managed and staffed by community-based organizations that can provide children and families access to additional resources through partnerships with other community organizations and/or through other programs that their organization offers. Racial diversity and shared lived experiences are other assets that the expanded learning workforce offers to families. While teachers and administrators are predominantly white,³³ workers in expanded communities are more likely to reflect the racial diversity of youth and families.³⁴ Expanded learning staff are also more likely to live in the same communities as the youth that they serve, which can lead to shared experiences and a rich understanding of the local context in which young

28 Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, and Mielke, *Shared Features of High-Performing After-School Programs*; and Intercultural Center for Research in Education and National Institute on Out-of-School Time, *Pathways to Success for Youth: What Counts in After-School* (Wellesley, MA: National Institute on Out-of-School Time, Wellesley College, 2005), <https://www.wcwonline.org/Publications-by-title/pathways-to-success-for-youth-what-counts-in-after-school-massachusetts-after-school-research-study-mars-report>.

29 Afterschool Alliance and MetLife Foundation, “Afterschool: A Key to Successful Parent Engagement,” issue brief no. 57 (New York, NY: MetLife Foundation, October 2012), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED539790.pdf>; American Institutes for Research, *Recognizing the Role of Afterschool and Summer Programs and Systems in Reopening and Rebuilding* (Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research, 2020), <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Recognizing-the-Role-of-Afterschool-Summer-Programs-Reopening-COVID-May-2020rev2.pdf>; and Priscilla Little, *Engaging Families in Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs: A Review of the Research* (Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project, 2013), https://www.expandinglearning.org/sites/default/files/em_articles/3_engagingfamilies.pdf.

30 Afterschool Alliance and MetLife Foundation, “Afterschool.”

31 Nathaniel R. Riggs and Carmen Medina, “The ‘Generacion Diez’ After-School Program and Latino Parent Involvement with Schools,” *Journal of Primary Prevention* 26, no. 6 (2005): 471–84, doi:10.1007/s10935-005-0009-5

32 U.S. Department of Education, *When Schools Stay Open Late: The National Evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, Final Report* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, April 2005), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED485162.pdf>.

33 Katherine Schaeffer, “America’s public school teachers are far less racially and ethnically diverse than their students,” Pew Research Center, December 10, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/12/10/americas-public-school-teachers-are-far-less-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-than-their-students>.

34 California Employment Development Department, *2012 After School Program Survey: Final Report of Results* (Sacramento, CA: California Employment Development Department, November 16, 2012), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5981e865f14aa16941337125/t/5a7ca3d58165f5d59b3201bd/1518117848397/AfterSchoolProgramSurvey_FinalResults.pdf.

people live.

The response in the expanded learning field to the pandemic amplifies the “broker” role played by program staff. Through multiple waves of a national survey, *Afterschool in the Time of COVID-19*, the Afterschool Alliance has documented the role of expanded learning in the pandemic. During the height of the pandemic, when most districts had shuttered school buildings and curtailed access to in-person learning, 70 percent of expanded learning programs continued to offer services to youth and families. These services were responsive to the moment, including providing 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.³⁵ The March and August 2021 waves of the *Afterschool in the Time of COVID-19* survey show that, despite rising operating costs, more providers have reopened compared to 2020 and continue to offer comprehensive supports such as homework help, exercise, reading, and social and emotional learning.³⁶ Additionally, providers are flexing their schedules to accommodate virtual, in-person, and hybrid schedules of schools and continue to connect families to other community resources.³⁷

Staff turnover and staff education, the same barriers that limit expanded learning programs’ relationships with schools, also seem to be factors for parental engagement. Malm et al. (2015) found that higher levels of staff turnover and more staff education were associated with higher parent engagement. That staff turnover is positively associated with parent engagement is surprising, and authors suggest that perhaps the higher level of parent engagement was in response to requests from programs or parents’ perceptions of challenges in the program. The quality of the expanded learning program also seems to be a factor in parent engagement. Birmingham et al. (2005) found that high-performing programs had strong connections with families. Malm et al. (2015) found that both high- and poor-quality programs had high levels of parent engagement. Although these studies indicate that quality has a role in parent engagement, it is not clear if quality dampens or promotes parent engagement.

What have we learned?

A few key lessons emerge from examining the nature of existing partnership models. First, on their own, school–expanded learning, school-family, and expanded learning–family partnerships are beneficial for young people. This is compelling because it suggests that intentionally bridging these relationships to create partnerships between schools, families, and expanded learning partnerships, rather than isolated pairs, can further benefit children and youth.

35 Afterschool Alliance, *Afterschool in the Time of COVID-19*.

36 Afterschool Alliance, *Afterschool Alliance COVID-19 Program Provider Survey—Wave 4 Results* (Washington, D.C.: Afterschool Alliance, March 2021), <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/Afterschool-COVID-19-Wave-4-Provider-Survey-Toplines.pdf>; and Afterschool Alliance, *Afterschool Alliance COVID-19 Program Provider Survey—Wave 5 Results* (Washington, D.C.: Afterschool Alliance, August 2021), <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/Afterschool-COVID-19-Wave-5-Provider-Survey-Toplines.pdf>.

37 Afterschool Alliance, *Wave 4 Results*; and Afterschool Alliance, *Wave 5 Results*.

Second, deficit thinking and power dynamics act as barriers to meaningful partnerships between schools and families and schools and expanded learning programs. Schools shape family-engagement policies and strategies that determine when and how families can be involved in their child's education. Furthermore, schools primarily control the narrative about why families choose to be engaged or not. Unfortunately, those narratives are rife with deficit thinking about families living in poverty and people of color.³⁸ The power imbalance between school and expanded learning programs is most apparent in that schools have access to more resources, fiscal and physical, and access to more information about young people than expanded learning programs. Schools, then, are positioned to control what expanded learning programs can access, including space and information about young people. Moreover, expanded learning programs are incentivized, typically through funding, to collaborate with schools, but these incentives tend not to exist for schools, thereby placing onus on expanded learning programs to initiate outreach to schools rather than the reverse.³⁹ Much of the deficit thinking about expanded learning programs centers on a perceived lack of expertise in supporting young people, whether through programming or the education and training of the expanded learning workforce. Failing to acknowledge these barriers will leave no room for transforming current partnership models.

Lastly, there has been and continues to be significant push via policy in favor of school-expanded learning partnerships and school-family partnerships; however, financial investment with public funds is primarily reserved for school-family partnerships. There has also been little policy acknowledging the need for expanded learning-family partnerships. This is significant because both funding and policies are likely necessary to sustain meaningful, long-lasting partnerships between expanded learning, school, and families.

Shifting perspectives

Partnerships can and should be a centerpiece of how we tackle the challenges and nuances of supporting students to recover from the pandemic. Realizing the potential of partnerships will require a mindset shift: we must decenter schools and, instead, surround children with a collaboration between schools, families, and expanded learning providers.⁴⁰

It is easy to understand how our current partnership models came to center schools. Compulsory education means that teachers, administrators, and money are funneled into schools, giving them enormous advantages in shaping the terms of partnerships. We can also depend on having consistent interaction with children and youth at schools. But these advantages too often mean that districts and schools underutilize the assets that expanded learning providers and families bring to the table. The interrogation of our current partnership models demonstrates that these advantages are also accompanied by deficit thinking and power imbalances that hinder the establishment of effective partnerships.

38 Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez, "Equity Issues in Parental and Community Involvement in Schools."

39 Noam, Biancarosa, and Dechausay, *Afterschool Education*.

40 In education, we also need to build partnerships with other sectors that touch the lives of youth (e.g., health, justice, social services, etc.) to create comprehensive, integrated support systems.

A full-service community school is one model that attempts to overcome these barriers by offering services to meet students' and families' needs. The model, which brings together schools, families, health and social services, and expanded learning partners, is driven by four pillars: collaborative leadership and practice, family and community engagement, expanded learning time and opportunities, and integrated supports or services that address barriers to learning and engagement (e.g., mental and physical health, transportation, etc.). Based on a literature review of 143 studies of the four pillars and evaluations of the community schools model, Maier, Daniel, and Oakes (2017) conclude that the place-based strategy can improve academic and social outcomes for youth, particularly those attending schools located in high-poverty neighborhoods. Notably, they found evidence that community schools help to close achievement and opportunity disparities experienced by students of color, those who live in poverty, English language learners, and students with disabilities. This research shows the promise of closer collaboration, but like other partnership models, community schools must also overcome barriers to authentic collaboration. Arguably, the model may require even more savvy at navigating power dynamics, isolated systems, and deficit thinking, as it brings multiple partners under one roof and in more consistent contact. Working to address existing barriers to partnerships can strengthen current services to youth and families as well as better position districts and states to take advantage of the community schools model now and in the future.

Addressing deficit thinking and power imbalances

Deficit thinking about families and expanded learning programs and staff is, in part, the result of power imbalances that favor schools. The positional power affords the educators and administrators in schools the opportunity to break down existing barriers by:

- Creating the conditions for sharing power with partners
- Adopting a strength-based approach to communication, strategic planning, and problem solving
- Cultivating and maintaining organizational and interpersonal relationships

Creating the conditions for sharing power with partners

It is unlikely that the power imbalance embedded in the current education system will change quickly. School and district leaders can upend the power imbalance by cocreating the conditions for sharing power with partners. The [Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#) is a model of parent engagement that pushes against deficit thinking and power imbalances. The framework positions families as partners with educators and is also one of the few frameworks that foregrounds equitable partnerships with these stakeholders. The framework delineates the conditions that are conducive to balanced partnerships and signals that the initial work that must be done to promote power sharing among partners is simultaneously about organizational conditions and the processes in which partners engage. One practice that is related to processes and can facilitate power sharing is

collaboratively carving out roles and responsibilities. The process for defining roles should be inclusive and result in clear roles that explain responsibilities and distribute decision-making. Defining roles will be an iterative process, such that each new endeavor will likely require a discussion about roles and periodically partners must review how and to what extent power is distributed among partners.

Shared language is an organizational condition that will also enhance power sharing. Typically, individuals in the same organization have a common language with which to speak about their work. School and district leaders must recognize the terminology that will be foreign to expanded learning providers and families and be open to learning the new terminology that these partners will bring. Together, partners will need to build a shared language. This can happen through collaborative practices inherent in developing integrated support systems for youth: codesigning goals, learning opportunities, and processes is one such practice; collaborative planning around how to enact goals, deliver learning opportunities, and implement processes is another. Joint professional development and/or adult learning opportunities is another avenue through which shared language can develop.⁴¹

Adopting a strength-based approach to communication, strategic planning and problem solving

Strength-based approaches have a long history in the youth-development field and emerged to combat deficit thinking and speech (Hamilton et al. 2004). Such approaches actively and intentionally recognize strengths, build on them, and leverage them to address barriers to success (Hamilton et al. 2004). A strength-based approach can be applied to nearly any process: role definition, continuous improvement, recruitment, etc. Two powerful processes to which schools and districts should apply a strength-based approach are communication and strategy development.

Strength-based communication focuses on the strengths and assets of individuals and groups (e.g., students, caregivers, and expanded learning professionals) rather than on perceived deficits. Strength-based communication can be used in formal and informal communications and is appropriate in verbal and written formats. Notably, the renewed acknowledgement of the importance of strength-based communication is spurring new resources about how to do it well. For example, [Prosper Strategies](#) (2020a) offers strength-based communication guidelines, such as using person-first language and emphasizing lived experiences. The organization also offers guidance on how to [integrate strength-based language](#) into an organization (Prosper Strategies 2020b). School and district leaders should use these new resources to spot deficit language in regular communications with expanded learning providers and families and to craft revised, strength-based language.

Asset mapping is a strategy that can be used in strategic planning and/or problem-solving to shift dialogue away from deficits and highlight the value that partners bring. Asset maps document the resources (human, physical, and fiscal) and strengths (e.g., skills, relationships, services, etc.) that partners can contribute to a project. Once an asset map is complete, partners can think through how to leverage assets to achieve their desired goals.

41 Anthony, "On the Level."

All partners should be represented during asset mapping. Partners must address questions that help them identify the strengths of each partner, such as the following:

- Which assets are germane to the current goals of the project?
- How might we leverage these assets to achieve the desired goals?
- Where do our strengths overlap?
- Where do our strengths and areas for improvement complement one another?

The answers can help partners ground conversations around strengths and drive partners to find new ways to collaborate and to augment existing practices.

Cultivating and maintaining organizational and interpersonal relationships

Relationships matter. Attending to this human element of our work can be as straightforward as providing formal (e.g., meetings and professional events) and informal opportunities (e.g., social gatherings) for people to get to know one another personally and professionally and to build a cache of shared experiences. This takes intentionality and time. A continued challenge to sustaining relationships is staff turnover. This can mean transitioning out of an organization or group, but it can also be promotion or lateral moves within an organization or group. The challenge can be twofold: (1) maintaining the relationship with the person who is transitioning so as not to lose connections to that individual's assets and (2) maintaining the organizational connection for continuity and so that youth and families can continue to benefit from the assets of that organization. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing these challenges, as they require a high level of knowledge about the person and the social and organizational context in which the relationships developed. Key considerations while developing strategies to maintain relationships are the type of transition (internal, external, etc.), the conditions under which the transition occurred, impending work, the extent to which transitions create gaps in desired assets, and opportunities for building on existing assets.

Opportunities for systemic change

Funding streams born out of the Covid-19 pandemic could create opportunities to change the systems in which partnerships between schools, expanded learning programs, and families occur. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 provides an unprecedented amount of potential funding for expanded learning programs via the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER). These funds are intended to help states' educational systems recover from the toll that the pandemic has taken on education (U.S. Department of Education 2022). Nationwide, there is roughly \$30 billion in ESSER funds that can be used to support expanded learning programs, although the specific amounts available vary by state.⁴²

This level of new funding is a testament to the value of expanded learning programs and is one avenue for which new infrastructure for partnerships that center on youth, rather than schools, can begin to grow. In fact, we are seeing examples

⁴² Afterschool Alliance, "American Rescue Plan," accessed July 1, 2022, <http://afterschoolalliance.org/covid/American-Rescue-Plan.cfm>.

across the nation of new ways in which expanded learning providers and schools are partnering. Twelve states are partnering with their [statewide expanded learning network](#) to enhance out-of-school learning opportunities for young people.⁴³ These intermediaries spread practices, support policies, and develop partnerships that support high-quality expanded learning in each state. The [Texas COVID Learning Acceleration Supports: High Quality Afterschool Supports](#) grant program encourages partnerships between local education agencies and nonprofit expanded learning partners to offer high-quality expanded learning programs in the state. In California, expanded learning programs were critical partners for launching and operating learning hubs.⁴⁴ In Hartford, Connecticut, schools and community-based organizations collaborated to launch Saturday Academy to expand students' access to enrichment activities and academic coursework.⁴⁵ Some of these partnership examples formed during the pandemic precede ESSER funds, yet they also present opportunities for ESSER funds to enhance these emerging models. We stand to learn a lot about which models are effective, under what conditions, and what policy levers might be needed to sustain these partnerships. A missing element of the new funding stream is how partnering with families fits into this developing landscape. Given that the resources are flowing to the state and local education agencies and to community-based partners, it falls to them to invite families into authentic partnerships and to practice approaches that can address deficit thinking and power imbalances.

Conclusion

The pandemic shook education to its core. It also created an opportunity for the field to address long-standing challenges. One such challenge is forming sustainable partnerships that focus on young people and allow for authentic and meaningful contributions from families and expanded learning providers in their work with schools. To move toward transforming partnerships from isolated pairs of school-family and school-expanded learning to triad-shaped collaboration, we must decenter schools. That will take intentional efforts to address the deficit thinking and power imbalances that exist in current partnership models, research suggests, because they act as barriers to establishing and maintaining fruitful partnerships. The community schools model stands out as one approach that attempts to leverage schools' resources to bring multiple services to youth and families and increase partnerships within and outside of the education sector. Notably, effective practices for community schools include partnerships with expanded learning providers and families and emphasize shared responsibility.⁴⁶ However, not every school will be able to fully replicate a community schools model, and the young people they serve deserve to benefit from more holistic partnerships. The recommendations in this paper are strategies that can be used in any context to break down perceptual barriers and minimize power imbalances.

43 Afterschool Alliance, "Supporting Students with Afterschool & Summer Programs Funded by Pandemic Relief," Afterschool Alliance, accessed July 1, 2022, <http://afterschoolalliance.org/covid/partnerships.cfm#partner>.

44 Vance, Femi, Sara Wolforth, and Jessica Gunderson. "Learning Hubs: In-Person Learning for the Whole Child." Policy brief. Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education, February 2021. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/learning-hubs>.

45 Afterschool Alliance, "Supporting Students with Afterschool & Summer Programs Funded by Pandemic Relief."
46 Partnership for the Future of Learning, *Community Schools Playbook* (Washington, D.C.: Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2018), <https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/assets/downloads/community-schools-playbook.pdf>.

Looking ahead, more research is needed on the barriers to partnerships between expanded learning providers, schools, and families. Learning from those who are building effective partnerships in support of youth and their families will be essential to delivering on the promise of cross-sector collaboration.

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