Out-of-School Time Learning
Opportunities to Better Support Students

Many successful schools in the United States provide comprehensive academic, social, and developmental supports to meet the needs of their student. But at 3 p.m. each day the reach, impact, and effectiveness of even the best of schools usually leaves with the students. Collectively, the education system in this country does not have a firm grasp on supporting students after school and during summer break.

Many researchers, policymakers, and practitioners believe schools cannot continue to operate this way and still expect to meet the complex needs of students while simultaneously competing on a global scale. They point out that nations routinely scoring in the upper ranks on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have academic and social support systems in place outside of the classroom. This policy update focuses on the role of after-school programs and summer learning opportunities in developing an education system that supports students outside the classroom and throughout the year.

Issues to Consider

Quality and Credits

Meeting with students two or three days per week for an hour and a half each time gives many after-school programs a significant opportunity to provide students with academic and developmental support. Research shows that instruction-based, high-quality after-school programs have the ability to improve relationships between students and their peers, keep students engaged, reduce obesity, and improve academic achievement, along with many other benefits. However, almost one-third of public after-school programs merely provide day care without instruction and some do not provide even this level of service. In addition, in many states, extended learning opportunities such as after-school programs cannot award academic credit because of seat-time requirements, regardless of the amount of improvement students might show throughout the year.

In an effort to address the quality of after-school programs, the Illinois, South Carolina, and Washington statewide afterschool networks have been working with state policymakers to develop effective after-school programming throughout these states. The networks accomplish this by informing decisionmakers, engaging providers across the state on challenges they face, and gathering evidence of effective programs within the state. The following are a few promising practices of large-scale after-school programs that emerged through this work that boards can consider:

★ **Effective Evaluation of Programs is Key** – Many after-school programs receive minimal evaluation. Objective and effective evaluations are vital to making informed decisions about these programs.

★ **Meaningful Training for Providers** – After-school programming can be much more effective if providers receive training on the latest strategies and best practices. This can lead to improved student outcomes and more satisfied students and families.
more than supervised childcare. To progress toward this goal, providers need a background and expertise in youth development.

Recently, New Hampshire redesigned the state’s high school experience in an effort to improve student outcomes. One aspect of the redesign is transition to a competency-based credit system. If a school district chooses this option, the district must develop content, assessments, and sufficiency standards for credit. This competency-based credit system allows extended learning opportunities such as after-school programs to give students course credits for successfully mastering content or skills used in the program. Many music and arts after-school programs award fine arts credits for high school graduation.

**Summer Access and Supplemental Curricular Content**

Summer learning loss is one of the most persistent problems facing the American education system. At the beginning of the school year, teachers routinely spend significant instructional time trying to get students back to where they were prior to the break so instruction can move forward. Unfortunately, summer learning loss is also a cumulative effect over the course of multiple summers, and it disproportionately impacts low-income students. Many cite this as the primary factor in the achievement gap.

Additionally, summer learning opportunities typically center on remedial courses for students who are behind in school. There are fewer enrichment summer programs available to students. Research shows that summer learning programs, regardless of whether they are mandatory or voluntary, that encourage reading in the home throughout the summer can stem summer learning loss and actually lead to achievement gains. This impact can last for up to two years after the summer learning program.

One persistent issue for summer learning is that parents have few localized resources to identify summer learning opportunities for their student. Summer learning opportunities can be provided by local park services, nonprofits, and schools, and many times there is little aggregation of these opportunities. To address this issue, Rhode Island’s After School Plus Alliance developed a database linked to a map of the state to help parents identify summer learning programs across the state. A link to the website is available in the resources section. From a state perspective, collaboration with various agencies to develop a similar database could facilitate increased participation and access to summer learning opportunities for students.

In addition, many summer learning opportunities have limited amounts of non-redundant curricular content from which to draw for material because most courses during the school year are expected to cover all of a particular curriculum. This leaves many students in non-remedial summer programs hearing similar if not the same content from the school year. When developing curricular content, state boards could provide supplemental content areas that reinforce material covered in the main curriculum. These content areas could provide additional depth or breadth on a particular topic that is not typically possible during the school year. The content could reduce the amount of time teachers need to spend at the beginning of the school year getting students caught up by keeping students engaged on the topic throughout the summer.

Helping students take advantage of the learning opportunities outside of the classroom is one of the biggest challenges that the education system faces in the coming years. If U.S. education systems are to create better outcomes for the nation’s youth, traditional school-day classrooms can no longer be the sole source for structured and safe learning environments. State boards have the opportunity to guide development of quality after-school and summer learning opportunities to address this challenge.

In the coming months, NASBE will be releasing a discussion guide on out-of-school time learning, with support from the Wallace Foundation, to help boards systematically work through the complex issues in developing quality learning opportunities outside of the school.

**Additional Resources**


Rhode Island Afterschool Plus Alliance’s Summer Learning Program Map: afterschoolri.org/introducing-riaspas-new-summer-learning-programs-map/.

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