

Closing the Gap in Vermont: The Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Special Fund



A Report from the Working Group on Expanded Learning Opportunities Vermont's PreK-16 Council DRAFT – Sept 2015

In May 2015, the Vermont Legislature passed H. 480/Act 48 which included language establishing a state fund for Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO). The purpose of the ELO Special Fund is to expand access to programs that serve prekindergarten through secondary school-age children and youth outside the school day on a regular basis, including before and after school and during the summer. While no money has yet been allocated to the Fund, the Fund is able to receive both public and private grants, donations, and contributions. Along with establishing the ELO Special Fund, H.480 charged the Prekindergarten-16 Council's Working Group on Expanded Learning Opportunities with developing recommendations in partnership with Vermont's Secretary of Education on how to administer the Fund, award grants to communities from the Fund, and build the funding in the Fund. This report presents the ELO Working Group's recommendations.

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INTRODUCTION

Vermont places a high value on quality Expanded Learning Opportunities, including afterschool and summer learning programs, because they keep kids safe, inspire learners, and help working families. Expanded Learning Opportunities are also well-positioned to **support Vermont’s major education initiatives**, including the new Education Quality Standards, flexible pathways to graduation (Act 77), personalized learning plans, proficiency-based graduation requirements, and transferable skills (e.g., communications, collaboration, creativity, innovation, inquiry, problem solving, and the use of technology).

The Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Special Fund was established to increase access to these important programs. We know that what children and youth are doing in the hours outside the classroom and over the summer plays a significant role in their future success. However, Vermont is faced with an opportunity gap where the types of experiences and ELO programs that a student has access to after school and over the summer depends largely on the level of their family’s income and varies greatly from one community to the next. One in three or 22,000 Vermont children and youth, who are not currently participating in Expanded Learning Opportunities, would be taking part today if more programs were available and accessible.



The PreK-16 Council’s Working Group on Expanded Learning Opportunities began this work over a year ago. Our first report, *Every Hour Counts: Vermont Students Succeed with Expanded Learning Opportunities*, consolidated the best research and information available on ELO’s both nationally and in Vermont. The report includes detailed information for Vermont on student outcomes, components of program quality, impact on working families, program cost and location, and return on investment. In that report, we also put forth a clear priority for ensuring access to ELO programs for the children and youth in every Vermont community by 2020.¹ This effort is timely and directly in line with ongoing conversations in the state, such as around Act 46, about how to increase educational equity and access.

Vermont is fortunate to already have a strong system in place for supporting and building ELO programs. We have a comprehensive state system of support through our statewide afterschool network in partnership with our state agencies to provide partnership building, professional development, technical assistance, networking opportunities, and resources for those working in the field. We have pockets of innovation and excellence that we can draw upon where engaging Expanded Learning Opportunities exist for elementary, middle school, and high school students. What we need to do now is scale up across the state so that the Expanded Learning Opportunities that a Vermont child has access to are not limited by his/her family’s circumstances or where they live in the state. This effort will take strong state leadership and investment and all of us working together to ensure that Vermont’s children and youth have the resources and opportunities they need to succeed in school and in life.

KEY DATA

- **Peak Hours.** On school days, the hours between 3-6pm are the peak hours for youth to commit crimes, be in or cause an automobile accident, be victims of crime, smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs.²
- **Dangerous Behaviors.** Teens who do not participate in structured activities after school are nearly three times more likely to skip classes at school, experiment with drugs, and engage in sexual activity than teens who do participate.³
- **Parent Concerns.** According to polls, 87% of working mothers say the hours after school are when they are most concerned about their children’s safety. This “after school stress” often can lead to lower productivity, high turnover in jobs, and work absences.⁴
- **Cost to Companies.** Researchers have identified that the stress parents experience regarding their children’s after school arrangements costs companies nationally between \$50-\$300 billion/year in healthcare and lost productivity.⁵
- **Improved Student Outcomes.** Studies show that students involved in quality Expanded Learning Opportunities have: improved school attendance, including fewer absences and less tardiness; more engagement in learning and better grades; more time spent on homework and higher rates of homework completion; increased rates of family involvement in school; greater sense of the relevance of curriculum; enhanced problem solving and conflict management skills; and increased responsibility and improved effort in school.⁶
- **College Connections.** Students who are consistently involved in extracurricular activities (e.g., afterschool programs, sports, clubs, etc.) are about 70 percent more likely to go to college than kids who are only episodically involved—and roughly 400 percent more likely than kids who are not at all involved.⁷
- **Summer Learning.** Research has shown that up to two-thirds of the academic achievement gap between lower and higher income youth can be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities.⁸
- **Achievement Gap.** Studies demonstrate that more consistent time spent in afterschool activities during the elementary years is linked to narrowing the academic achievement gap. In a recent longitudinal study, income differences in math achievement were eliminated for students who had consistent afterschool activities across their Kindergarten to Grade 5 years.⁹
- **Public Support.** 88% of Vermont parents support public funding for Expanded Learning Opportunities.¹⁰
- **Return on Investment.** For every dollar spent on quality Expanded Learning Opportunities, Vermont gets back \$2.18 in long-term savings from reduced criminal activity and substance abuse treatment, as well as accruing additional benefits from increased high school completion and work productivity.¹¹

Unmet Demand

24% percent of Vermont’s children, grades K-12, are currently enrolled in Expanded Learning Opportunities. Of those children not currently in programs, 33% would participate if a program were available.¹⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) **Establish the ELO Committee with Broad Representation and Clear Responsibilities.** The ELO Special Fund creates a unique opportunity to eliminate funding silos by bringing together all those working to improve afterschool, summer, and expanded learning programs in Vermont. A state level ELO Committee, established to oversee the Fund, can work to create a collaborative and inclusive grant process. The ELO Committee can also serve as a “one-stop shop” where programs, even if they do not receive a grant, can interact with a people who understand the big picture around ELO’s in Vermont and who have access to useful resources and relevant information.
- (2) **Ensure that the Funding Process is Flexible, Aligned, and Streamlined.** The grant process for the ELO Special Fund should be flexible and responsive to the needs of the local community; aligned with other grant processes in the state; use Agency resources and staff capacity wisely; and streamlined so that applying and utilizing the funds ensures quality without placing undue burdens on local communities and schools. The grant process should be designed so as not to exclude in particular Vermont’s small, rural communities.
- (3) **Continue to Support Quality Programming.** Vermont benefits from a strong statewide structure for professional development, resources, and technical assistance for Expanded Learning Opportunities. This structure centers on the close partnership of Vermont Afterschool with the Vermont Agency of Education and the Child Development Division, Department for Children and Families, Vermont Agency of Human Services. Increasing the number of programs across to state must be accompanied by appropriate support and resources for these programs, including opportunities for programs to network, learn from one another, and share innovative practices and program ideas.
- (4) **Bring in Public-Private Partnership for Funding.** While it is clear that the Fund cannot be funded solely with private donations, the private business and philanthropic communities have an important role to play in supporting this work through local matches and other contributions to the Fund. A strong private-public partnership around this issue will be essential in order to build sustainable and sufficient financial support for the Fund.
- (5) **Claim a Strong State Leadership Role.** A statewide effort to ensure access in every Vermont community requires state vision, investment, and action with a long-term view. If eliminating the academic achievement gap, ensuring equity in educational opportunities, and fulfilling the vision of Vermont’s Education Quality Standards are indeed priorities for the state, then it is critical that the Legislature and Administration take leadership with investment and action on this issue by following the recommendations above and allocating state funding to work toward providing access to Expanded Learning Opportunities for the children and youth in every Vermont community.

STRUCTURE OF THE FUND

Purpose and Definition

The ELO Special Fund was established to ensure that children and youth in every Vermont community have access to quality Expanded Learning Opportunities. As defined in the legislation, an “Expanded Learning Opportunity (ELO) program” means a structured program designed to serve prekindergarten through secondary school-age children and youth outside the school day on a regular basis, including before and after school and during the summer, by providing opportunities for personal, emotional, and academic growth for children and youth.

Eligibility

This report recommends that a broad array of entities be able to apply for a grant from the ELO Special Fund. Eligible programs could be run by a school, district, or supervisory union or by a community organization, nonprofit, business, or licensed childcare center. Following the definition above, eligible programs must serve students on a regular basis outside the regular school day/year (e.g., before school, after school, summer, weekends, school vacation weeks, evenings, or teacher in-service days).



Flexibility

The ELO Working Group strongly recommends that there not be added restrictions put on the funding and that the application process not be too burdensome for small, rural communities and/or non-school entities to apply. While the grant process should be aligned with other funding currently going to programs, such as federal funding through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) Program and the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), it would be short-sighted to put the same restrictions and obligations on this Fund. Rather the Fund should allow the state to meet the needs of Vermont communities in ways that the current federal funding sources are not able to. Vermont would not be alone in this approach. A number of other states (e.g., California, Minnesota, Connecticut, Tennessee, and Indiana) have developed processes that address alignment while still maintaining flexibility in how their state funds are awarded and administered.

Match Requirement

In order to stretch funding and support sustainability over the long run, the ELO Working Group recommends that a one-to-one local match be required for all grant awards from the Fund. Grant recipients should be allowed to satisfy the match requirement through in-kind support and through the use of federal, state, local, or private funds. The match requirement will also provide a tangible way for the private sector to contribute to the sustainability of the Fund while still being able to target their contributions locally.

FUNDING PRIORITIES

The 2014 America After 3PM report found that one in three, or 22,000 Vermont children and youth, who are not currently participating in expanded learning programs would be today if more were available and accessible.⁹ While all communities in Vermont should be allowed to apply for funding, the ELO Working Group recommends targeting grants from the ELO Special Fund to specific underserved populations in Vermont, as determined by family income and/or geographic location, as follows:

- **Expanding access to programs for children and youth of all ages who qualify as low-income.** According to the 2014 America After 3PM study, Vermont has the lowest level of low-income children enrolled in afterschool in the nation, and Vermont parents listed program cost as one of the key barriers to participation.⁹
- **Expanding programming in parts of the state where few or no options are currently available.** The ELO Working Group's analysis last summer of program availability identified key areas of the state where a significant number of families are living in poverty and yet few or no options are available for programming after school or in the summer.¹² Grant funds should be targeted to support programs in these communities.



In addition, the ELO Working Group notes a secondary set of funding priorities for consideration:

- **Programs for middle school and high school students.** One significant source of funding for low-income working families is the Child Care Financial Assistance Program. However, not all families in need meet all the eligibility criteria of this program, and in most cases the benefits only extend to a child's thirteenth birthday. At the same time, when families are faced with tight budgets, early adolescence is when many parents begin to feel that their child is old enough to stay home alone thus allowing the family to save on child care costs. However, studies have shown that the hours of 3-6pm are the peak hours for middle school and high school youth to commit crimes, be victims of crime, be in or cause an automobile accident, or engage in risky behaviors.¹ These are also key years when adult role models, positive peer relationships, and opportunities to explore interests, identity, and possible career paths—all things that quality Expanded Learning Opportunities support—are critical.
- **Programs that run 10-15 hours/week during the school year and six weeks, full-day during the summer.** When seeking positive youth outcomes, dosage is important. Expanded learning programs cannot have a positive effect on children and youth unless participants are in programs on a regular and sustained basis. Likewise, in order to address summer learning loss and have an impact on the academic achievement gap, the National Summer Learning Association recommends that summer programs run a minimum of five full days per week for at least six weeks. Currently, Vermont programs fall short of the national average in both afterschool hours and summer programming. Only 22% of Vermont schools provide more than 10 hours of afterschool programming per week, and 55% of the school-based summer programs in Vermont operate for less than five weeks per year.¹³

ALLOWABLE USES OF FUNDS

The ELO Working Group recommends that the grants awarded to communities from the ELO Special Fund be limited to the following allowable uses:

- **New Programs.** Starting a new Expanded Learning Opportunity program (e.g., before school, after school, summer, weekends, school vacation weeks, evenings, or teacher in-service days);
- **Program Expansion.** Increasing participation in an existing Expanded Learning Opportunity program, especially for students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch;
- **Quality Improvements.** Making quality improvements to an existing Expanded Learning Opportunity program, including but not limited to professional development or training for staff, the purchase of special curricula or resources, increasing staff hours for planning and reflection, or hiring additional or highly qualified staff;
- **Sustaining or Matching Funds.** Sustaining an existing Expanded Learning Opportunity program, such as one funded by a 21st CCLC grant or other federal, state, local, or private funding;
- **Community Assessment.** Conducting a community assessment to determine local needs and priorities for Expanded Learning Opportunities.



REQUIRED PROGRAM ELEMENTS

In order to ensure quality and consistency, the ELO Working Group recognizes that effective Expanded Learning Opportunities in Vermont must be based on a common set of key principles. The ELO Working Group's first report pointed to the eight elements of quality Expanded Learning Opportunities as outlined by the Afterschool Alliance¹¹ and recommends that the grant process be structured to ensure that the following elements of program quality are addressed at every funded site:

- School-Community Partnerships
- Engaged Learning
- Family Engagement
- Intentional Programming
- Diverse, Prepared Staff
- Participation and Access
- Safety, Health and Wellness
- Ongoing Assessment and Improvement



STATE ELO COMMITTEE

In order to support state level leadership on policy, vision, and money for Expanded Learning Opportunities the ELO Working Group strongly recommends that a state level ELO Committee be established by the Legislature. This committee should include experts in ELO programming and funding as well as individuals who can contribute to big-picture, innovative thinking about this issue. Representatives from private business and philanthropy should also be included if the intent is to establish a strong public-private partnership in support of the Fund.



The ELO Working Group would like suggest that one representative from each of the following come together to decide on committee membership: Vermont Agency of Education; Child Development Division; Vermont Afterschool; Vermont House; and Vermont Senate. No more than 13 people at a time should be selected to serve on the ELO Committee. A smaller subcommittee of five to seven people should be created from the full committee for the purposes of overseeing the grant process for the ELO Special Fund.

Committee Roles and Responsibilities

In the model presented here, the full ELO Committee would have the following responsibilities:

- **Leadership.** Serve as the state leadership group for policies concerning ELOs.
- **Support.** Serve as a “one-stop shop” where programs, even if they do not receive a grant, can interact with a group of people who understand the big picture around ELO’s in Vermont and who have access to useful resources and relevant information.
- **Funding.** Evaluate the current funding structure across the state for ELO’s (including funding from local school budgets, towns, participant fees, other grants, and federal/state programs). Pursue and/or accept additional funding from other public and private sources, including a special focus on innovative and collaborative efforts for the more rural parts of the state.

The smaller subcommittee would have the additional responsibility of the grant process, including:

- **Application and Review.** Developing recommendations for all aspects of the grant program, including the application process and criteria for evaluating applications.
- **Funding Decisions.** Participating in the grant review process and making recommendations for funding.
- **Ongoing Oversight.** Providing regular oversight for the grant administration process, including any decisions where funding is to be awarded or taken away.



AGENCY ROLE

The ELO Special Fund was created under the auspices of the Vermont Agency of Education and the ELO Committee would need to work in close partnership with the Agency on all aspects of the grant process. Having the Agency of Education serve as the lead agency on the ELO Special Fund is appropriate given the important connections between ELO's, student success, and Vermont's Education Quality Standards. Under the model recommended here, the Agency of Education would have the following responsibilities:

- Award grants based upon the recommendations of the ELO Committee
- Administer the grants consistent with the terms of acceptance
- Provide technical assistance and resources to support grantees with quality programming.
- Provide administrative support to the ELO Committee or approve administrative support services for the ELO Committee provided at no cost by one or more members of the ELO Committee
- Meet at least two times per year with the ELO Committee to discuss funding awarded, outcomes achieved, and barriers or challenges encountered
- Provide an annual report to the Legislature on the grant program, dollars spent, and outcomes achieved

A minimum of five percent of the annual amount in the ELO Special Fund should be made available for the Agency to use for training, technical assistance, evaluation, and state administration of the grant awards. These funds may be contracted out by the Agency for the purposes stated above. If the Secretary of Education does not feel that the Agency has the capacity to administer the ELO Special Fund, the ELO Working Group recommends transferring this authority to the Commissioner for Children and Families who has responsibility for overseeing all licensed afterschool and summer learning programs in the state.

OUTCOME MEASURES

In developing outcome measures for the grant program, the ELO Working Group recommends:

- **Existing Measures.** Before developing new measures consider the Results-Based Accountability measures developed by the United Way of Chittenden County for their grantees, a number of which offer afterschool and summer programming. Also, consider measures included in Vermont's 21st CCLC Statewide Evaluation plan.
- **State Data and Assessment.** Include fields in the longitudinal dataset being developed at the Vermont Agency of Education for tracking student participation in Expanded Learning Opportunities. In order to get the most meaningful data include measures of dosage and regular attendance (e.g., days or hours of participation per year). It is also essential to include ELO's in the Agency's education quality review process.
- **Social-Emotional and Transferable Skills.** Perhaps more so than almost any other format, quality Expanded Learning Opportunities create experiences for children and youth to develop social-emotional skills, as well as transferable skills including communications, collaboration, creativity, innovation, inquiry, problem solving, and the use of technology. Programs receiving grants from the ELO Special Fund should be supported in including outcome measures that capture these types of skills in their evaluation plans.

FUNDING FOR THE ELO SPECIAL FUND

The ELO Special Fund is set up to accept both public and private contributions, grants, and donations. The ELO Working Group used discussions, research, meetings, and witness testimony this summer to explore how best to structure a system where public and private dollars can work together to provide sustainable and long-term funding for the ELO Special Fund.

State Leadership and Investment

A statewide effort to ensure access in every Vermont community requires state vision, investment, and action with a long-term view. Vermont faces tough choices around funding and costs. However, if eliminating the academic achievement gap, ensuring equity in educational opportunities, and fulfilling the vision of Vermont’s Education Quality Standards are indeed priorities for the state, then it is critical that the Legislature and Administration take leadership with investment and action on this issue.

The private sector, local organizations, participant fees (from those who can afford them), and other funding sources can be leveraged to support this effort. However, the ELO Working Group raises a specific caution here. If the state creates a system that relies solely on private contributions, local funding, and participant fees, Vermont risks the danger of further exacerbating a situation where wealthier families and those areas of the state with more money are able to provide more opportunities and programs for children and youth than are families and areas of the state with lesser means. It is the state’s role and responsibility to address this “opportunity gap” – a gap that research shows is directly linked to the achievement gap—and allocate resources to ensure that all Vermont’s children and youth have the opportunities and resources they need to succeed in school and life.

Private Contributions

The ELO Working Group acknowledges that there is an appropriate and important role for the private business and philanthropic community to play in supporting Expanded Learning Opportunities. If the ELO Special Fund is to benefit from an effective public-private partnership an intentional plan for soliciting private contributions should be developed to address the following:

- Clarify the legal and tax issues around private individuals, businesses, and foundations giving to a state fund;
- Ensure that the funding is sustainable and not just a one-time grant or donation; private foundation funding is often short-term (1-3 years) and focused on innovation or seed ideas;
- Recognize that private donors often prefer to give locally and to have control over how their money is used;
- Avoid setting up competition for private funding that is already going to support local expanded learning programs; and
- Consider models that incorporate education initiatives with work force development efforts.



PROPOSED PLAN

Last year the ELO Working Group worked with Vermont Afterschool on a detailed analysis by geographic location of how much money would be required to provide access to Expanded Learning Opportunities in every Vermont community. The results of that study, including information on program size, cost, and location were included in the 2014 report from the ELO Working Group. Drawing on that analysis, the ELO Working Group recommends establishing funding level of at least \$5 million per year for the ELO Special Fund. With this level of funding, Vermont would be able to accomplish the following:

- **Target Resources.** The Fund would allow Vermont to target resources to communities most in need and to provide programming and services that would have tangible and direct impacts on children and youth, in particular those living in adversity.
- **Impact Communities.** Depending on how the grants are awarded, the funds provided, when combined with the required match, would create or expand programming in approximately 86 communities and provide programming and services to approximately 13,500 Vermont children and youth, kindergarten through grade 12.ⁱ
- **Be Cost Effective.** Of the 13,500 students served in the communities funded approximately 33% would participate in Expanded Learning Opportunities on a regular basis.ⁱⁱ For just over \$1100 per student per year, the Fund would help create between 600-800 hours of additional programming per year for these children and youth.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Build Public-Private Partnership.** Build a strong private-public partnership around funding that uses state leadership and investment to leverage federal, local, and private dollars. Based on testimony and research this summer, the ELO Working Group recommends that as a first step the public-private partnership around the ELO Special Fund be structured as follows:
 - **State Funding.** Claim state leadership and start with a state investment in the ELO Special Fund that would target programs and services to Vermont’s children and youth today.
 - **Private Match.** Use the match requirement within the grant process to match the state investment by bringing in private dollars and other resources at the local level.
 - **Embolden the ELO Committee.** Seek out the right mix of public and private representatives and big-picture, entrepreneurial thinkers on the ELO Committee and give them time to develop a joint vision model that will result in blended, sustainable funding to support access to Expanded Learning Opportunities in all of Vermont’s communities.

ⁱ For the purposes of this example, it was assumed that the ELO grant process would target high-poverty communities first and the 86 communities noted here refers to the 86 schools in Vermont with at least 60% of their students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. The estimate of 13,500 students was calculated from the number of enrolled students in the 86 identified schools. (Data source: Vermont Agency of Education, 2013-2014).

ⁱⁱ According to the 2014 American After 3PM report, 33% of the children in Vermont not currently participating in Expanded Learning Opportunities would be if more programs were available and accessible.

ⁱⁱⁱ Providing programming for 10-15 hrs/week during the school year and for six week, full-day during the summer would create between 600-800 hours of additional programming.

ENDNOTES

1 Vermont's PreK-16 Council. *Every Hour Counts: Vermont Students Succeed with Expanded Learning Opportunities*. December 2014.

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3 YMCA of the USA. (2001). After School for America's Teens. An overview of the study and report can also be found at U.S. Department of Justice. (2001). OJJDP Fact Sheet: The YMCA's Teen Action Agenda. Retrieved on 11/15/2014 from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/fs200114.pdf>

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8 Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., and Olson, L. (2007). Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. *American Sociological Review*, 72, 167-180. More information and research on summer learning can be found at the National Summer Learning Association: <http://www.summerlearning.org/>.

9 Vandell, D., Reisner, E., and Pierce, K. (2007). Outcomes linked to high-quality afterschool programs: Longitudinal findings from the study of promising after school programs. Washington, DC: Policy Studies Associates, Inc. See also Vandell, D.L. (2013). Afterschool program quality and student outcomes: Reflections on positive key findings on learning and development from recent research. In *Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success*. Washington, DC: Collaborative Communications Group.



10 America after 3PM: Afterschool programs in demand. Retrieved on 11/15/2014 from <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/>.

11 Vermont Afterschool. (2014). Return on Investment Study. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1zqTHp0>

12 Afterschool Alliance. 2012. *Principles of Effective Expanded Learning Programs: A Vision Built on the Afterschool Approach*. <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/policyexpandedlearning.cfm>.

13 A survey of public school principals was conducted by Vermont Afterschool (formerly Vermont Center for Afterschool Excellence) in 2012. 164 school principals responded to the survey resulting in a 95% confidence level with a +5.27% margin of error.

PHOTO CREDITS

Thank you to the following programs for the photos used in the report. Photos were taken by Cassie Willner, Vermont Afterschool.

Cover Page: Crossroads Program, Swanton (upper left); One Planet Program, Tunbridge (upper right); Hunt Middle School, Burlington Afterschool (lower left); EPIC Program, Rutland, Proctor, West Rutland (lower right)

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