

Name of Report:
Sub title



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

In June 2014, Vermont's Prekindergarten-16 Council created the Working Group on Expanded Learning Opportunities to review and evaluate issues of equity in and access to Vermont's Expanded Learning Opportunities, including afterschool and summer learning programs. The Working Group's charge was extended in 2015 by the Prekindergarten-16 Council to look at Expanded Learning Opportunities in the context of personalized learning plans and proficiency-based graduation requirements. This report presents the Working Group's recommendations on how to build and strengthen systems in the state in order to more fully utilize Expanded Learning Opportunities in support of Vermont's vision for educating students in a way that is personalized, student-centered, and proficiency-based.

BACKGROUND

In 2013, Act 77 in Vermont established the Flexible Pathways Initiative “to encourage and support the creativity of school districts as they develop and expand high-quality educational experiences that are an integral part of secondary education in the evolving 21st Century classroom.” Included in this legislation is the requirement that all students in grades 7 through 12 have a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) that defines “the scope and rigor of academic and experiential opportunities necessary for a secondary student to complete secondary school successfully, attain postsecondary readiness, and be prepared to engage actively in civic life.” The intention of this mandate is to place each student at the center of the construction of his or her own learning experience and to take advantage of learning opportunities without the restriction of time or place.



Many appropriate learning opportunities are made available by organizations in Vermont beyond our schools. These “Expanded Learning Opportunities” or ELO’s can be accessed and used to meet the learning expectations and to achieve the standards we have for our students. ELO’s allow students to expand their education beyond the classroom walls, to explore and develop new interests and skills, and to take greater ownership in their learning. When seen as a continuum for student-centered learning from the elementary years through middle school and into high school, participation in quality ELO’s can also be an integral component of building career awareness and supporting college/career decision making. If determined to be appropriate through the planning process, students should be encouraged to include ELOs in their personalized learning plans as an integral part of their unique flexible pathway to graduation.

The Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Working Group under Vermont’s PreK-16 Council began work in June 2015 to explore how to better support this integration of ELO’s and personalized, student-centered, and proficiency-based learning in Vermont. Questions that guided our work together include:

- What does it look like when an ELO is an integral part of a student’s PLP?
- What do ELO providers need to know in order to better support students in designing and developing their learning through their personalized learning plans?
- What changes are needed to our broader system in order to support learning opportunities outside the classroom in becoming a recognized and essential part of a student’s education?
- What examples already exist either in Vermont or in other states where this integration of ELO’s and personalized learning is already being done well?
- How can we ensure equity across the state and across family income levels when it comes to accessing an exciting and broad array of ELO’s?

While our exploration of this issue is by no means complete, **NAME OF REPORT** presents our initial thoughts and recommendations for next steps. It is important to note that this report is the third in two years to come out of the ELO Working Group. Our first report, *Every Hour Counts: Vermont Students Succeed with Expanded Learning Opportunities*, brought forward a wide body of research and data about ELO's both in Vermont and nationally. The second report, *Closing the Gap in Vermont: The Expanded Learning Opportunities Special Fund*, made recommendations for a state fund that was established in 2015 to increase access to quality ELO's for Vermont students, particularly for students from families with limited resources and/or living in underserved areas of the state. **NAME OF REPORT** takes the discussion further by exploring how ELO's can support Vermont's vision for educating students in a way that is flexible, personalized, student-centered, and proficiency-based.

UNDERSTANDING ELO'S

Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELOs) can include traditional afterschool and summer learning programs, as well as extracurricular clubs and activities, service learning projects, work study or internship programs, and other interest-based classes or programs (e.g., dance lessons, music lessons, etc.). As Vermont moves towards a more flexible and personalized approach to education, ELO's can support Vermont's vision for education in the following ways:

- Making learning relevant and engaging;
- Creating personalized learning experiences for students with diverse needs;
- Providing opportunities for students to explore career interests;
- Allowing students to dive deeper or expand upon learning in the classroom;
- Pushing students to apply knowledge and skills in a real-world setting; and
- Helping students to develop skills essential to college and career success, such as communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. **(Rethink High School Credit, RIASPA)**



Several states have fairly developed models for learning where students are able to earn high school "credit" for ELO's. One example supported by the Rhode Island After School Plus Alliance (RIASPA), an education initiative of the United Way of Rhode Island, centers on courses or programs around specific themes or interest areas that are offered in the out-of-school time. Students can choose to participate in these group learning experiences outside of the school day and earn elective credits towards their high school diploma. The ELO courses and programs are designed to align with the Common Core State Standards and have a community partner as an integral component of each. ELO's in the Rhode Island model vary from "Critical Thinking, Writing, and Media Literacy" in partnership with Providence College where students improve their writing skills while developing a multimedia marketing

and advertising campaign to the ACE Mentor Program where students explore careers in architecture, construction, and engineering under the mentorship of industry professionals through design projects and job-site tours. Other key ELO partners in Rhode Island include the Rhode Island Urban Debate League; Brown University Engineers Without Borders; University of Rhode Island College of Pharmacy; Young Voices; and the RiverzEdge Arts Project.

The ELO model that has been in development in New Hampshire over the last ten years is based more on individualized learning. Following this model, a number of New Hampshire high schools have added an ELO Coordinator position on staff with the role of working with students on developing and carrying through on independent learning projects. In this model, students self-select to do an independent learning project on a topic of their interest. They meet with the ELO Coordinator to map out the project, set goals, and talk about what type of evidence they will need to create. Amy Yeakel, the ELO Coordinator at Newfound Regional High School in Bristol, New Hampshire, supports about 120 students per year working on ELO's. ELO's at Newfound Regional High School are completely student-driven and range in topics from dance to aquatic ecology to ceramics. Each ELO project is supported by a highly qualified teacher, the ELO Coordinator, and the community partner. The ELO Coordinator helps the student develop their project and makes sure that they are staying on track. The project is carried through under the support and guidance of a community partner or mentor with specific expertise in the area of study. The highly qualified teacher is responsible for certifying that the student has met the learning standards as outlined in their plan.¹

Vermont has not yet settled on a single model for recognizing the learning that happens in ELO's and should be able to create a system that encompasses both individualized, independent learning, as well as group programs and courses in the out-of-school time. At this time, many schools in Vermont are just beginning to develop their systems for supporting personalized learning plans and defining graduation standards. However, strong working examples exist as well. **Who should we cite- Montpelier, Mt. Abe, Peoples Academy? Do we want to mention concerns about the disconnect between personalized learning and PLP's; also concern about time-based ELO model as being piloted in Burlington.**

¹ Based on testimony by Amy Yeakel, the ELO Coordinator at Newfound Regional High School in Bristol, New Hampshire, on July 30, 2015.

READYING THE FIELD

As Vermont schools begin to implement personalized learning plans and flexible pathways to graduation, we need to ensure that the system does not fall back into the status quo or that personalized learning plans do not become simply a standardized piece of paper in a student's file tracking which courses they plan to take in which years. Having the following considerations and recommendations firmly in place will help to ensure meaningful change and create a system that more fully integrates ELOs and personalized learning.



What Schools Need to Have in Place

Strong school-community partnerships.

ELO's recognize that learning can happen anytime and anywhere and that learning experiences are not limited to the school classroom or traditional school year. In order to support this vision, schools must be able to work in close partnership with external partners, organizations, and professionals in order to take advantage of this broader landscape of potential learning opportunities. ELO providers are organizing in Vermont and interested in working more closely with schools. Having a clear entry point or designated point person for ELO providers at each school, district, or supervisory union would greatly facilitate good communication and the creation of strong school-community partnerships.

Flexible, transparent, and permeable systems.

School-based systems in support of personalized learning need to be understandable to those outside the traditional education system, including parents, community members, and ELO providers. These systems cannot be too complicated or too burdensome for ELO providers to get involved in or for students to incorporate ELOs into their personalized learning plans. Schools should keep ELO providers in mind when they are designing systems and creating information and communications for the families and community members.

School policies and staff awareness.

ELO's look different than the traditional classroom teaching/learning model, and good ones are driven by student interests and ideas and focus on project-based, applied experiences that help students connect their learning to real-world problems and situations. Schools need to have policies in place that promote ELO's as a valuable part of any student's personalized learning plan, and teachers and guidance counselors need to know what ELOs are available in their community and around the state.

What ELO Providers Need to Have in Place

Knowledge about proficiency-based systems.

Act 77 moves the state away from students earning credits towards graduation and towards students developing proficiencies across a defined set of standards. ELO providers need to understand of how these changes are being implemented and be open to working with some level of variation from school to school. In addition, the focus on proficiency means that students will meet standards in more individualized ways and on more personalized timetables (in contrast to course credits, seat time, and grades). ELO providers, if knowledgeable of students' strengths and weaknesses as well as their personal learning plans, could support students in building proficiency in various ways ranging from mastering basic skills, to revision and polishing of work products, to documenting/ demonstrating proficiency.²



Materials that show what standards each ELO incorporates.

ELO providers need to not only think about which standards their programs help students achieve but also develop materials and documentation that clearly outline these connections. These materials will help schools, parents, and students investigate different ELO options and make informed choices about what types of experiences may best support a particular student's personalized learning plan. At the same time, ELO providers should be aware that not all students participating in a particular ELO will be working on the same standards at the same time.

Emphasis on student-created evidence and artifacts.

ELO providers need to be knowledgeable about what constitutes "evidence" in a personalized learning plan.. It is recommended that ELO providers build time into their programs for students to not only create evidence and appropriate artifacts but to also enter it online in their school's system for tracking plans and portfolios.

Scaffolding for different ages and experience levels.

While Act 77 only requires personalized learning plans for students in certain grades, the concept of student-centered learning is applicable to all ages. ELO's should be offered for students at all grade levels, and students should start building the skills needed to actively engage in personalized learning (e.g., goal setting, planning, exploring interests) in elementary school. Similarly, ELO providers and community members can benefit from a gradation of involvement from coming into a school as a guest speaker, to offering a six-week program after school, to supporting a student through a work internship.

² Adapted from testimony by Kathleen Kesson on July 30, 2015. Dr. Kathleen Kesson is on sabbatical from Long Island University, Brooklyn, and is studying Vermont's implementation of personalized learning plans.

What the System Needs to Have in Place

Statewide communication plan.

A statewide communication plan could help build public understanding and support for a fundamental change in how students, teachers, and the community perceive the purpose of education and learning. People need to understand why this change is necessary, what this new way of learning would look like, and how it would feel when they are part of the new model.³



Training and support for schools and for ELO providers.

Additional training and support is needed for both schools and ELO providers in order to more fully integrate ELO's into students' personalized learning plans. Common language must be used and roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined.

Broad-based participation and access for all students.

In creating and promoting ELOs, both schools and ELO providers must think about issues of equity and access. Integrating ELO's into the education system through personalized learning plans cannot be allowed to result in a widening of the income-based opportunity gap in Vermont with students of means taking advantage of a wide array of programs and options while the personalized learning plans of their lower-income peers remain limited to a narrow, pre-determined set of pathways to graduation.

Funding mechanisms to ensure access to ELO's for all students.

It is currently unclear what funding will be available to support a greater number of students in accessing and participating in ELOs as part of their personalized learning plans. Vermont needs to consider what it means for education funding if students are working on and building proficiency on standards that led to graduation not only in the classroom but also out in the greater community. Are community members, businesses, and other organizations expected to pick up the cost of supporting student learning when it happens through ELO's? Will it be left up to parents and families to cover the cost of any ELOs that their student participates in? Or does Vermont create mechanisms that allow the funding to follow the students? Without some way to address cost and ensure access for all, the state risks creating a system where the ELO's that student can access will depend greatly on their family's income and ability to pay.

³ Adapted from testimony by Helen Beattie, Director of Up For Learning, on November 7, 2015.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEXT STEPS

(NOT FINISHED)

- 1) **Communication Plan.** Expand on and coordinate existing communications to support a broad-based, statewide messaging campaign about the role of ELO's in supporting personalized, student-centered, and proficiency-based learning.
- 2) **Regional Discussions.** Host discussions in every region of the state with students, schools, and ELO providers to document stories of Vermont-based examples of what works when integrating ELO's into personalized learning plans
- 3) **Pilots and Exemplars.** Develop pilots and exemplars based on existing ELO providers, including afterschool and summer learning programs
- 4) **Resources and Training.** Create and compile resources and offer training on personalized learning plans and proficiency-based graduation requirements for ELO providers
- 5) **Statewide ELO Summit.** Hold a statewide ELO Summit to bring together school personnel, ELO providers, and students to co-imagine what a fully integrated ELO system would look like. Craft tools and strategies so that each stakeholder group is actively engaged in shaping education from their unique perspectives. Harness the wisdom of students, teachers, and community/business members who understand ELOs—both their intention and the challenges to integration. (Helen Beattie- last two sentences)
- 6) **Quality Assessment Process.** Include ELO's in VTAOE's quality assessment process
- 7) **ELO Working Group.** Continue the ELO Working Group under the PreK-16 Council

