

**Expanded Learning Opportunities Working Group  
(Subcommittee of the PreK-16 Council)**

**Testimony**

**Dr. Kathleen Kesson**

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After school programs meet a number of different needs: increasing opportunities for young people's socialization with peers, improving academic skills, offering academic enrichment, supporting creative uses of free time, and providing supervision for the times when students are most likely to engage in unproductive behaviors. We are in a position now to add to this list support for and coaching in helping students develop and meet the standards and proficiencies in their Personal Learning Plans.

### **Personalized learning in Vermont.**

In 2013, the General Assembly of the State of Vermont passed and the Governor signed into law legislation encouraging "flexible pathways to secondary school completion." Driven in part by a desire to improve high school graduation rates (already among the highest in the U.S.) and increase state college enrollments and retention, the initiative encompasses a number of components: concurrent enrollment in college, in which credits earned apply both to secondary school graduation and postsecondary credit; online and blended learning opportunities; career related internships; and project-based learning carried out with mentors in the community. At the heart of the initiative is the Personalized Learning Plan (PLP), commencing in middle school, which is designed to be developmentally appropriate and reflect the student's emerging abilities, aptitudes, and disposition. Its purpose is to identify the kinds of academic and experiential opportunities necessary for a student to complete secondary school successfully and be well prepared for both economic and civic life.

**Proficiency-Based Graduation Requirements** (PBGRs) are the school-based sets of content knowledge and skills connected to state standards that, when supplemented with additional locally-developed requirements, qualify a student for earning a high school diploma. Vermont's Education Quality Standards (EQS) require that schools' graduation requirements be rooted in demonstrations of student **proficiency**, as opposed to time spent in classrooms and course grades. This requirement will take effect in Vermont beginning with the graduating class of 2020.

I have been working with a team of researchers this past year to examine many aspects of the personalized learning initiative, including the student experience, the role of communities and community mentors, and school restructuring efforts. We've looked at a number of pilot projects, wherein schools aim to implement some part of the legislation. Our findings are preliminary as this coming school year is really the "roll out" year. Already, however, it is clear that there are a number of issues that have implications for after school and extended learning.

### **Some points for discussion and initiative.**

1) Much of the preparation and guidance for student designed, independent learning and the development of the Personalized Learning Plan rests in "Advisories" (special segments of time ranging from 10 minutes a day to larger blocks of time on some days of the week) spent with a consistent advisor (in some cases advisors will see the same students for the four years of their high school experience). Given the limited amount of time for Advisory activities, I anticipate a role for supplemental advising and coaching. Many activities will be initiated in advisories: goal setting, reflective writing, brainstorming about independent projects, etc. With good communication between regular day and extended day staff, meaningful follow-up activities could be initiated and sustained in extended day programs.

2) Many students, especially in the middle grades, have little experience in goal setting, or even identifying personal interests. Afterschool programs have unique opportunities to provide “catalyst” experiences (i.e. botanical walks, fine and performing arts activities, computer programming, etc.) to assist young people in discovering aptitudes and talents that they might want to develop. Extended learning providers could provide exposure to community members and organizations that offer educational opportunities, as sources of inspiration and ideas for young people to build into their plans (one great local example is WGDR’s Indie Kingdom Youth Training in the arts and sciences of radio programming.)

3) The focus on “proficiencies” means that students will meet standards in more individualized ways and on more personalized timetables (in contrast to the Carnegie unit, seat time, and course grades). Extended learning providers, if knowledgeable of students’ strengths and weaknesses as well as their Personal Learning Plans, could support the attainment of proficiencies in various ways ranging from mastering basic skills, to homework help, to revision and polishing of work, to documenting/demonstrating proficiency.

4) The PLP’s (Personalized Learning Plans) include non-academic goals such as social and emotional development and developing physical skills. Extended learning programs, with their ability to provide supplemental cultural and recreational experiences, are well positioned to help students meet some of these goals.

5) In some of the programs we have studied, independent learning takes place outside the normal school hours – during vacations, travel time, after school, and on weekends. In some cases, afterschool hours could be well spent both in learning from community mentors and in documenting work that has been done. One essential contribution of extended learning programs could be transportation provided to learning sites. Another could be staff mentoring in documentation – (making web sites, writing assistance, video-making).

5) There is nothing to preclude personalized learning from happening in cooperative groups. If a group of young people in an afterschool program were guided to design group projects of great interest to them (gardening, a newspaper, a theater production) this could be built into their Personal Learning Plans and help them to meet proficiencies. I see this as particularly valuable for middle school students, who are highly engaged in social learning in early adolescence. Well-facilitated, extended group projects could provide them a solid foundation for later independent study or more advanced self-initiated group projects.

### **Suggestions for key areas or issues to focus discussions and attention**

1) **Equity** will be a key issue to be addressed with personalized learning. Young people with well-resourced families and those living in more urban centers are likely to have more opportunities for community projects and career related studies and internships than young people in under-resourced, isolated areas. Extended learning opportunities could go a long ways towards addressing the differential opportunities. *How can this committee ensure widespread availability of quality extended learning opportunities?*

2) **Setting up effective channels for communication** between school staff and extended learning staff is essential if meaningful synergies are to be created between school and

afterschool learning. The Personalized Learning Plan (with its intended outcomes of increased student engagement in productive activity, enhanced academic achievement, and identification of desired futures) has the potential to **integrate and address** all of the aims of extended learning programs mentioned in paragraph 1. However, communication is vital, as is extended learning staff access to student portfolios, knowledge of advisory activities, familiarity with school proficiencies and graduation requirements, and ultimately, inclusion in parent/teacher/student conference committees. The extended learning specialist sees the child outside of traditional 'academic hours' and can add important perspectives on behaviors, needs, skills, and interests. All of this has implications for the professional development of extended learning providers. *What structures and processes are necessary to facilitate enhanced communication between school and extended day staff? What are the most effective formats for professional development for extended learning providers?*

3) One of the biggest challenges for schools will be **identifying community resources** that could be made available to young people – community asset mapping. In my work I have identified a number of categories of resources that need to be mapped: 1) public educational sites (museums, planetariums, gardens, etc.); 2) non-profit organizations that offer classes (arts groups, crafters, nature centers, etc.); 3) community mentors (retired engineers, artists, farmers, teachers); 4) potential business, service, or government internships. Another important strategy will be peer-matching – linking up kids who want to pursue common projects from the same or different schools. I see a role for extended learning providers in all of these arenas, and it will be important to work closely with school staff so as not to duplicate efforts. *What are some effective ways to initiate community mapping so as to provide the widest range of resources to young people as possible?*

4) If best practices are to be developed and replicated, there must be **evaluation of program effectiveness** in place. In more cases than not, after-school programs and the regular school-day programs are not directly connected. Studying the effects of the after-school program on the attainment of academic goals has proven difficult. Developing a comprehensive evaluation system that documents improvements in meeting the goals of the Personalized Learning initiative will be important in sustainability of both the personalized learning initiative and afterschool programming, obtaining grant funding, and communicating success to the wider community.