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When we got the chance to work on afterschool and summer learning in the work group last summer, we chose “Equity and Access” as the key issues. Here’s why:

Those of us who have worked in the field for a long time – 15 years in my case, creating and running Community Connections, which provided pre-K through adult programs in 10 schools in Montpelier and Washington Central – already understood the **value** of Expanded Learning Opportunities. We have seen the difference these opportunities make in the lives of kids and families by effectively using the “third space” for learning. The first space kids learn is in the home and family; the second space is at school; and the third space is all the time that kids are not in school – afterschool, weekends, school vacations, and summer. What happens – or does not happen – in the third space makes all the difference in the ability of young people to achieve their potential.

In the programs I helped develop, our priority was not to offer more of the same things that happened during the school day. We focused on enrichment, enhanced experiences, exposure to opportunities and events. We let kids try new things, experiment without risk, learn to fail and learn how to deal with it and turn it into a learning experience. We provided caring adults (not necessarily licensed educators) who worked closely and developed supportive relationships with the kids. We encouraged inquiry, exploration, discussion, and risk-taking in a safe and supportive environment. Positive youth development was the primary curriculum. While youth were learning hard skills like cooking, rocketry, hip hop, mural painting, chess, poetry, mountain biking, winter camping, and more, they were also learning leadership, persistence, grit, collaboration, problem-solving, empathy, and communication. At times I worried that I was not running many programs that directly addressed remedial academic skills – a strong recommendation of the Agency of Education – but research in Expanded Learning supports my approach. The lack of competency in the social skills arena and the lack of exposure to ideas and experiences will get in the way of learning in ways that no amount of extra drill can fix.

We chose Equity and Access as our focus because while it was obvious that Expanded Learning Opportunities bring great value and directly address the opportunity gap, it was equally apparent that there is great disparity in the way these opportunities are deployed. The primary government-supported program is the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, originally a federal program (like the one I started out with) and more recently a dedicated block grant administered by the Agency of Education. In addition to 21C, there are licensed fee-based programs that can offer child care subsidies from the Department of Children and Families for low income families to help them afford fees that can be as much as \$20 per child per day. This support ends when a child turns 13. A few schools use budget or Title money to support limited afterschool programs, but we all know the pressures on school budgets. There are some free programs, like Scouts, that depend on volunteers to deliver services. And there are

still some households where one parent stays home, although they are increasingly rare. And the experiences provided at home may not be those that will help bridge the opportunity gap.

Here are a few of the systemic problems that prevent every family who wants quality expanded learning opportunities from having access to a high quality program nearby to where they live, work or go to school:

- The current competitive 21C grant structure favors communities that have good grant writers. It is a bureaucratic system with burdensome regulations.
- The income cut-off of 40% poverty restricts access. There are plenty of low income families in schools and communities below 40% that are shut out of unsubsidized fee-based programs.
- The minimum threshold disqualifies many small schools.
- Only a fraction of the applicants under the current system are funded.
- Geographical distribution is random.
- Programs lose funding and discontinue, leaving nothing for families.
- Many towns have nothing.
- Age is a factor in equity. There are very few high school opportunities and relatively few middle school programs unless they can be delivered free of charge. As children get older, parents are more willing to let them go home alone in order to save money. Juvenile Justice data shows that the hours of 3-6 are peak times for kids getting into trouble.
- When programs are unavailable or too costly, there is a pattern of asking older children – sometimes as young as fourth grade – to look after younger siblings.
- The hodge-podge of programs and delivery systems raises huge questions about quality. The data on the efficacy of Expanded Learning Opportunities is predicated on “quality” programs.

While 21C and child care licensing have brought opportunities to many children and families, there are thousands more who would take advantage of quality programs if they were available. As a state, we would have better outcomes for our youth if these programs were widely available. The creation of the Committee to expand and oversee a diversity of funding streams supporting Expanded Learning Opportunities is a critical first step in bringing equity and access to all of our children.