

Expanded Learning Opportunities

The VT Legislature, and this committee in particular, has undertaken important work, including Universal PreK and Flexible Pathways, and most recently, Act 46. We realize that the work is not yet finished. We appreciate the strong support from this committee for Expanded Learning Opportunities and the creation of the ELO Special Fund last year. You are already aware of much of the key data and research on this issue (see data sheet submitted with this testimony).

As our state leaders we ask that you address many difficult issues: poverty, addiction, hunger, the academic achievement gap, the shrinking middle class. While access to quality afterschool and summer learning programs won't solve all our problems, research tells us that without adequately addressing what is happening with our children and youth outside the school day and over the summer, we won't be able to make meaningful progress on some of our most critical issues affecting Vermont kids and families.

Important Role of Expanded Learning Opportunities

- Take for instance the persistent academic achievement gap in Vermont. Research has shown that where our students fall behind is not in the classroom but outside the school day and over the summer. In fact, up to 2/3 of the academic achievement gap can be attributed to differences in summer learning opportunities.
- Consider working families. Over 79% of Vermont children have all available parents in the work force. For working families there is often a gap of 15-25 hours per week when parents are working and children are out of school. This gap is even bigger during the summer months and school vacation weeks.
- Consider addiction. We know that the afterschool hours of 3-6pm are the peak hours for children and youth to engage in risky behaviors, experiment with alcohol and drugs, and commit crimes or be victims of crime. Every dollar invested in afterschool and summer learning programs can save Vermont tax payers \$2.18 down the line.
- How about access to food? In many schools, lunch is served at 11:30am or even earlier. The snacks and suppers provided during an afterschool program may be the only healthy food a child has access to until the next day. In summer, access to food is even more important, and summer food sites reach many more kids when they are an integral part of a summer learning program than when they are a stand-alone meal site.
- The benefits of regular participation in afterschool and summer learning programs are many. Currently over 21,000 children and youth participate in afterschool and summer learning programs; however, there are more than 22,000 kids who would be in programs today if more were available and accessible. One of the biggest barriers in Vermont is program cost. While a national report in 2014 ranked Vermont 4th in the nation in 2014 for afterschool programming, that same report put us at 51st in the nation for the percentage of low-income children and youth participating in these programs (14% in VT compared to 45% nationally).

All Learning Counts: How Expanded Learning Opportunities Support Flexible, Personalized, Student-centered, and Proficiency-based Learning in Vermont

Vermont has taken important steps over the past few years to move toward a system for learning that is more flexible, personalized, student-centered, and proficiency-based. In order to take full advantage of the opportunities being presented to students, ELOs must be an integral part of this re-envisioned system. If implemented with intentionality and care, embedding ELO experiences within student PLPs has the potential to not only support student learning but to help Vermont close the academic achievement gap. This report discusses and explores some of the systems changes that will be needed in order to achieve this full vision for learning:

- Consistency in Training, Tools, and Expectations
- Gradation of Experiences and Continuum of Learning
- Data, Pilots, and Working Examples
- Communication
- Funding and Teacher Contracts/ ELO Provider Roles
- Equity of Opportunity

Integrating ELOs 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.

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

The Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Special Fund was established to increase access to these important programs. 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 points include:

- Funding priorities and eligibility requirements
- Attracting private dollars
- Importance of establishing a state ELO Committee to help with private funds and address limited capacity of VTAE
- Matching grants- good way to leverage "found dollars" created through Act 46
- \$2.5 million in state dollars, combined with private contributions and required match, would help to ensure access to programs for all high-needs communities

I appreciate this committee's focus on some of our toughest issues and hope that you will make the financial commitment to "zap the gap" by recommending funding for the ELO Special Fund.