

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



A Report from the Working Group on Expanded Learning Opportunities Vermont's PreK-16 Council 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.

WORKING GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Tom Alderman

Vermont Agency of Education
Barre

Heather Bouchey

Vermont Agency of Education
Barre

Ginny Burley

Founding Director of Community Connections
East Montpelier

Senator Brian Campion

Vermont State Legislature
Bennington County and Wilmington

Jim Fitzpatrick

Former Superintendent and Principal
Founder of School Spring
South Burlington

Dave Gurtman

Dinse, Knapp, McAndrew
Vermont Business Roundtable
South Burlington

Harry Frank

Vermont School Boards Association
Montpelier

Representative Ann Manwaring

Vermont State Legislature
Wilmington

Katie Mobley

Director of Outreach and Development
Community College of Vermont
Burlington

Holly Morehouse

Executive Director
Vermont Afterschool, Inc.
Burlington

Barb Russ

Educator and Former 21st CCLC Director
South Burlington

Karen Scott

Vermont Afterschool, Inc.
Plainfield

Sarah Teel

Research Associate
Voices for Vermont's Children
Washington



The Working Group also benefited from staffing support from Marjorie Zunder.

INTRODUCTION

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.



With the student at the center of the learning experience, we envision a continuum of high-quality educational experiences some of which are school-based and some of which are made available by organizations in Vermont beyond our schools. These “Expanded Learning Opportunities” or ELOs can be accessed and used to meet the learning expectations and to achieve the standards we have for our students. ELOs 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 ELOs can also be an integral component of building career awareness and supporting college/career decision making. As 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 ELOs and personalized, student-centered, and proficiency-based learning in Vermont. Questions that guided our work 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 ELOs 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 ELOs?

While our exploration of this issue is by no means complete, *All Learning Counts* 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 ELOs 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 ELOs for Vermont students, particularly for students from families with limited resources and/or living in underserved areas of the state. *All Learning Counts* takes the discussion further by exploring how ELOs can support Vermont’s vision for educating students in a way that is flexible, personalized, student-centered, and proficiency-based.

WHY ELO’S?

Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELOs) 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, museum- or public library-based programming, etc.). As Vermont moves towards a more flexible and personalized approach to education, ELOs 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.¹



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.

¹ *Rethink High School Credit*, Rhode Island After School Plus Alliance.

ELOs FOR CREDIT IN RI AND NH

Several states have fairly developed models for learning where students are able to earn high school credit for ELOs. 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. ELOs 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. As one example, Amy Yeakel, the ELO Coordinator at Newfound Regional High School in Bristol, New Hampshire, supports about 120 students per year working on ELOs. ELOs 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.²

² Based on testimony by Amy Yeakel, the ELO Coordinator at Newfound Regional High School in Bristol, New Hampshire, on July 30, 2015.

IMPORTANT POINTS FOR VERMONT

Recognizing Proficiency vs. Time

Vermont has not yet settled on a single model for recognizing the learning that happens in ELOs and has the opportunity to create a system that encompasses both individualized, independent learning, as well as group programs and courses outside of school. At this time, many schools in Vermont are just beginning to develop their systems for supporting personalized learning plans and defining graduation standards. How ELOs will be included in these systems is yet to be seen. However, the Working Group heard testimony from one school district in Vermont that raised specific concerns. In this particular pilot, course credit was being awarded to students based on 120 hours of participation in the afterschool program rather than on any measure of proficiency. As ELOs are integrated into students' personalized learning plans they should be aligned with proficiency-based models for recognizing learning rather than models that rely on "seat-time" to award credit.

Building Strong School-Community Partnerships

ELOs 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. However, many of the educators that we spoke with over the course of the summer, while supportive of the idea of ELOs, had not yet thought about how to incorporate personalized learning experiences outside of what was currently being offered and/or developed by the school. Training and materials, such as those developed by the Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) work group through the Vermont Agency of Education should include specific references to ELOs and provide supports and resources for schools looking to explore additional learning opportunities for students. In addition, 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.

Focusing on Transferable Skills

Perhaps more so than almost any other format, quality ELOs create experiences for students to develop social-emotional skills, as well as transferable skills including communications, collaboration, creativity, innovation, inquiry, problem solving, and the use of technology. A sample set of graduation proficiencies for different content areas is provided on the Agency of Education's website (<http://education.vermont.gov/pbgr/sample-pbgr>), and while ELOs can support students in building proficiency in many different areas, when looking at how to integrate ELOs into personalized learning plans, attention should be paid in particular to how ELOs can support students in developing transferable skills.

RECOMMENDED SYSTEMS CHANGES

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.

Consistency in Training, Tools, and Expectations

Additional training and support is needed for both schools and ELO providers in order to more fully integrate ELOs into students' personalized learning plans. Common language must be used and roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined. Districts and supervisory unions should strive to have policies in place that promote ELOs as a valuable part of any student's personalized learning plan, and teachers and guidance counselors need to know which ELOs are available in their community and around the state.



Act 77 moves the state away from students earning credits towards graduation based on seat time (i.e., Carnegie units) and towards students developing proficiencies across a defined set of standards. ELO providers should understand 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 proficiency.³

ELO providers will need to not only think about which standards their programs help students achieve but also how to 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. Finally, 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. ELO providers may also need to work closely with teachers charged with evaluating such evidence.

³ 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.

Gradation and Continuum

While Act 77 only requires personalized learning plans for students in certain grades, the concept of student-centered learning is applicable to all ages. ELOs 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 experience.

Data and Examples

ELOs 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. Working examples of where students have used ELOs to build and demonstrate proficiency along different standards should be collected, documented, and shared. Vermont would also benefit from data on what types of ELOs are most beneficial to students and what it takes to create and run a quality ELO in support of proficiency-based learning. For these reasons, it is essential to include fields in the longitudinal dataset being developed at the Vermont Agency of Education for tracking student participation in ELOs, including measures of dosage and regular attendance (e.g., days or hours of participation per year), as well as incorporating full consideration of ELOs in the Agency's education quality review process.



Communications

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. In addition, a statewide communication plan that includes ELOs in an integral way 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.⁴

Funding and Teacher Contracts

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 and teacher contracts 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 ELOs? 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 ELOs that student can access will depend greatly on their family's income and ability to pay.

Equity of Opportunity

In creating and promoting ELOs, both schools and ELO providers must think about issues of equity and access. 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.



⁴ Adapted from testimony by Helen Beattie, Director of Up For Learning, on November 7, 2015.

NEXT STEPS

- 1) **Broad-based, Statewide Communications Plan.** Expand on and coordinate existing communications to support a broad-based, statewide messaging campaign about the role of ELOs in supporting personalized, student-centered, and proficiency-based learning. This should include updating the work of the former Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) working group and including ELOs in any PLP resources and materials from VTAOE and on the agency’s website.
- 2) **Pilots and Exemplars in Vermont.** Develop pilots and exemplars based on existing ELO providers, including afterschool and summer learning programs. Host discussions in different regions of the state with students, schools, and ELO providers to document stories of Vermont-based examples of what works when integrating ELOs into personalized learning plans.
- 3) **Training and Resources for Schools and ELO Providers.** Create and compile resources and offer training on personalized learning plans and proficiency-based graduation requirements for ELO providers. Support schools in understanding how to better access and utilize ELOs to support student learning.
- 4) **Common Tool(s) for Personalization.** Encourage the adoption of a common tool or set of tools for personalization that can be used by all schools. The selected tool(s) should be portable and accessible to teachers, parents, and students. The tool(s) should allow for the inclusion of ELOs as part of a student’s personalized plan and documentation of learning, and also be able to follow students if or when they change schools.
- 5) **Statewide ELO Summit.** Hold a statewide ELO Summit to bring together school personnel, ELO providers, students, business owners, and representatives of higher education to co-imagine what a fully integrated ELO system would look like. The ELO Summit should utilize tools and strategies so that each stakeholder group is actively engaged in shaping education from their unique perspectives. The ultimate goal of the ELO Summit is to capture, document, and learn from the wisdom of students, teachers, and community/business members who understand ELOs—both their intention and the challenges involved in their integration into students’ personalized learning plans and experiences.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work of the ELO Working Group over the last two years would not have been possible without the testimony and contributions of so many. Thank you to the following individuals for providing information and insights to support our work: Raquel Aronhime, Community Impact Manager- Education and Health, United Way of Chittenden County; Helen Beattie, Co-Founder and Director, Up for Learning; Emanuel Betz, 21st Century Community Learning Centers State Coordinator, Vermont Agency of Education; Penny Bishop, Associate Dean, Professor of Middle Level Education, University of Vermont; John Castle, Superintendent, North Country Schools Supervisory Union, Newport; Julia Chafets, Girls Program Coordinator, Vermont Works for Women; Stuart Comstock-Gay, Executive Director, Vermont Community Foundation; Paul Costello, Executive Director, Vermont Council on Rural Development; Brooke DeBonis, Principal, Mettawee Community School, West Pawlet; Maureen Deppmann, Personalized Learning Department, Mt. Abraham Union High School; Kathleen Dolan, Board of Directors, Dolan Family Foundation; John Downes, Associate Director for Innovative Education, Tarrant Institute, University of Vermont; Karin Edwards, Director, Vermont Agency of Education; John Fischer, Deputy Secretary (former), Vermont Agency of Education; Amy Fowler, Deputy Secretary, Vermont Agency of Education; Christy Gallese, Expanded Learning Director, Burlington School District; Fagan Hart, Executive Director, Vermont Children’s Trust Foundation; Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary, Vermont Agency of Education; Kathleen Kesson, Long Island University, Brooklyn, NY; Derrick Lambert, Child Nutrition Advocate, Hunger Free Vermont; Margaret MacLean, former Member, Vermont State Board of Education, and Lead Trainer at the Rural School and Community Trust; Martha Maksum, Executive Director, United Way of Chittenden County; Ellie Mitchell, Director, Maryland Out of School Time Network; Reeva Murphy, Deputy Commissioner, Child Development Division, Department for Children and Families, Vermont Agency of Human Services; Jay Nichols, Superintendent, Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union, Enosburg; Julie Peterson, Director of School Age Programs (former), Greater Burlington YMCA; Todd Rivver, Principal, Albany Community School; Kate Toland, UNBOUND Director and Social Studies Teacher, Peoples Academy, Morrisville; Amy Yeakel, ELO Coordinator, Newfound Regional High School, NH.

PHOTO CREDITS

Thank you to the following programs for the photos used in the report. Photos were taken by Cassie Willner, Vermont Afterschool, with the exception of the photos on the Working Group Membership page, page 3, and page 5 which were submitted by the programs.

Cover Page: Hunt Middle School, Burlington Afterschool (upper left); Edmunds Middle School, Burlington Afterschool (upper right); Brattleboro Area Middle School, BEAMS Program (Lower left); Rutland South Supervisory Union, Wallingford (lower right); Working Group Membership Page- Brattleboro Area Middle School, BEAMS Program; Page 1 - UNBOUND, Peoples Academy, Morrisville; Page 2- Crossroads Program, Swanton; Page 3- Wings Community Program, Twin Valley Middle School; Page 5 – Student Success- Winooski and Beyond Program; Page 6 - UNBOUND, Peoples Academy, Morrisville; Page 7 – Hunt Middle School, Burlington Afterschool; Page 8 - EPIC Program, Rutland, Proctor, West Rutland