

CLOSING THE GAP IN VERMONT: THE EXPANDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES (ELO) SPECIAL FUND



Key points from the ELO Working Group's November 2015 Report Vermont's PreK-16 Council

PURPOSE

In May 2015, the Vermont Legislature passed H. 480/Act 48 which included language establishing a state fund for Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO). The purpose of the ELO Special Fund is to expand access to programs that serve prekindergarten through secondary school-age children and youth outside the school day on a regular basis, including before and after school and during the summer. While no money has yet been allocated to the Fund, the Fund is able to receive both public and private grants, donations, and contributions. Along with establishing the ELO Special Fund, H.480 charged the Prekindergarten-16 Council's Working Group on Expanded Learning Opportunities with developing recommendations in partnership with Vermont's Secretary of Education on how to administer the Fund, award grants to communities from the Fund, and build the funding in the Fund. This report presents the ELO Working Group's recommendations.

OVERVIEW OF THE ELO SPECIAL FUND

Funding Priorities. While all communities in Vermont should be allowed to apply for funding, the ELO Working Group recommends targeting grants to expand: (1) access to programs for children and youth who qualify as low-income and (2) programming in areas of the state where few or no options are currently available.

Eligibility. The report recommends that a broad array of entities be able to apply for a grant from the ELO Special Fund. Eligible programs could be run by a school, district, or supervisory union or by a community organization, nonprofit, business, or licensed childcare center.

Allowable Uses. The ELO Working Group recommends that the grants awarded to communities from the ELO Special Fund be used for starting new programs, increasing participation in existing programs, making quality improvements, sustaining or matching funds, or conducting community assessments to determine local needs and priorities for ELOs.

Match Requirement. In order to stretch funding and support sustainability over the long run, the ELO Working Group recommends that a one-to-one local match be required for all grant awards from the Fund. Grant recipients should be allowed to satisfy the match requirement through in-kind support and through the use of federal, state, local, or private funds. The match requirement will also provide a tangible way for the private sector to contribute to the sustainability of the Fund while still being able to target their contributions locally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) **Establish the ELO Committee with Broad Representation and Clear Responsibilities.** The ELO Special Fund creates a unique opportunity to eliminate funding silos by bringing together all those working to improve afterschool, summer, and expanded learning programs in Vermont. A state level ELO Committee, established to oversee the Fund, can work to create a collaborative and inclusive grant process.
- (2) **Ensure that the Funding Process is Flexible, Aligned, and Streamlined.** The grant process for the ELO Special Fund should be flexible and responsive to the needs of the local community; aligned with other grant processes in the state; use Agency resources and staff capacity wisely; and streamlined so that applying and utilizing the funds ensures quality without placing undue burdens on local communities and schools. The grant process should be designed so as not to exclude in particular Vermont's small, rural communities
- (3) **Continue to Support Quality Programming.** Vermont benefits from a strong statewide structure for professional development, resources, and technical assistance for Expanded Learning Opportunities. Increasing the number of programs across to state must be accompanied by appropriate support and resources for these programs,
- (4) **Bring in Public-Private Partnership for Funding.** While it is clear that the Fund cannot be funded solely with private donations, the private business and philanthropic communities have an important role to play in supporting this work through local matches and other contributions to the Fund. A strong private-public partnership around this issue will be essential in order to build sustainable and sufficient financial support for the Fund.
- (5) **Claim a Strong State Leadership Role.** A statewide effort to ensure access in every Vermont community requires state vision, investment, and action with a long-term view. If eliminating the academic achievement gap, ensuring equity in educational opportunities, and fulfilling the vision of Vermont's Education Quality Standards are indeed priorities for the state, then it is critical that the Legislature and Administration take leadership with investment and action on this issue by following the recommendations above and allocating state funding to work toward providing access to ELOs for the children and youth in every Vermont community.

CLOSING SUMMARY

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.