

Creating Opportunities for Young People: Statewide After-School Networks

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Abstract

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress made a once-in-a-generation investment in after-school and summer learning programs with the potential to provide supports and opportunities for children and youth across America. At the same time, after 2 decades of development, networks in all 50 states were poised to advise and support the investment in innovative quality programs. This thought leader piece explores impact of the statewide after-school networks, funded in part by the Charles Stewart Mott foundation, and how they increase access for millions of children and youth in quality after-school and summer learning programs. The piece makes the case for increased recognition of the role of statewide after-school networks and increased collaboration between network leaders and researchers interested in positive youth development.

Key words: networks, after-school, policy, funding, innovation

Introduction

In March 2021, the United States Congress passed the American Rescue Plan with an unprecedented \$8.45 billion in funding allocated specifically for after-school and summer learning programs, a nearly unheard-of commitment to supporting learning beyond the formal school day. It was estimated that those funds could create and expand learning opportunities for nine million more young people, effectively doubling the number of youth benefitting from the academic, social, emotional, and health supports that these programs provide. From the White House to state houses in all 50 states, it was acknowledged that after-school programs are ready to help kids recover in a historic time when young people need more supports than ever before.

I would say honestly, if it weren't for my after-school program, I would not be the person I am today. Definitely it is my second home, it is where I feel



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accepted and loved. Especially during this time of COVID my program was still there and they were still checking up on me, making sure that I was okay during such a time. — Angie Mejia, Afterschool Ambassador (Collaborative Communications, June 16, 2021)

Poised to inform, advise, manage, and innovate with the new funding are the statewide after-school networks. Established in every state—with funding in part from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation—these networks are cross-sector statewide coalitions of partners from education, business, state government, philanthropy, law enforcement, health, and nonprofits working with a common vision and coordinated strategy to advance quality after-school and summer learning programs. For more than 20 years in some states, these networks have been building momentum and support for after-school programs. With data, research, stories, and champions, the networks make the case for the need and potential of after-school and summer learning programs.

Now in an extraordinary era of growth, networks are informing and coordinating the systems and strategies that ensure the investment is well-managed, focusing on quality and sustainability. In this commentary we share examples of where the networks are leading meaningful change with impact. While not exhaustive, these examples exemplify the needed creativity, resourcefulness, and coordination that networks bring to youth development broadly, and how they are a necessary cornerstone for field-building work. We hope the commentary will bring increased partnerships with the networks and open the door for a research agenda demonstrating how networks amplify impact of programs.

Remarkable Network Impact

The statewide after-school networks formed and developed over 2 decades in parallel with a growing body of research on social impact networks. Researchers might recognize these efforts as “generative social-impact networks” (Plastrik et al., 2014) for their sophisticated approach of presenting after-school programs as part of nearly any solution needed in a community, from providing more literacy supports to building workforce skills to reducing risky behaviors. More recently researchers have noted that networks grow in response to complex problems and how they uniquely take a systems approach in aligning resources (Shumate & Cooper, 2021) and, in out-of-school time, by applying the science of learning and development (Boyd-Brown et al., 2022). In *Networks for Social Impact (2021)*, Shumate and Cooper urge us to look for impact from network activity that is “above and beyond what would have happened anyway”

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(p.44) and that includes both what can be directly attributed to the network and that to which the network contributes.

In states large and small, we see measurable impact of more and better opportunities for young people that may be attributed to network activity. Linking the network impact to the body of definitive research on the impact of after-school programs on youth outcomes would contribute to a compelling examination of how networks amplify and scale program impact. In the meantime, we offer two examples of how networks are changing the game at a systems level to benefit more programs and more young people.

Vermont: Call for Universal After-School and Summer Opportunities

In Vermont, more than 26,000 youth are waiting for an available program. This growing need, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has had policymakers in Vermont concerned for the well-being of children, youth, and families. Vermont Afterschool—the statewide after-school network—has worked for decades to educate policymakers about both the crisis and the opportunity to support young people with after-school programs.

In 2020, Governor Phil Scott announced his goal to offer universal after-school across the state—meaning after-school and summer programs would be accessible and affordable for all families and youth who want to enroll, particularly those who have low incomes and/or live in rural locations. Now Vermont Afterschool is bringing together partners to build a sustainable, fully funded universal after-school and summer system by 2025. To get there, Vermont Afterschool is taking a multi-year approach, using current funding sources as a bridge. They have identified six keys to success: commitment, collaboration, coordination, improving program quality and data systems, reaching youth and families, and sustainable funding. Once this vision is realized, Vermont will be the first state in the country to offer such a model to children, youth, and families.

California: Whole Child Health and Wellness Collaborative

With more than six million students, California has immense scale and bold solutions. More than a billion dollars have been invested in after-school programs, known there as expanded learning programs. Approximately 50% of schools provide publicly funded expanded learning programs, prioritizing the state's most vulnerable students, with these programs operating at over 80% of California's low-income elementary and middle schools.

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With a growing system of supports, the California AfterSchool Network (CAN) took the vision one step further. They intentionally brought together youth allies from multiple sectors and communities with the intent to advance expanded learning programs as partners in creating hubs at schools and other community sites to promote whole child, whole family, and whole community health and wellbeing. With hundreds of cross-sector partners from mental health, social services, substance use prevention/intervention/ treatment, education, expanded learning, and child and family advocacy, CAN formed the Whole Child Health and Wellness Collaborative. In 2021 they released a Statement of Strategic Direction Towards Equity-Driven Whole Child Health and Wellness outlining a vision where every child is well known, well cared for, and well prepared to thrive. (California AfterSchool Network, 2021) The statement also includes “shared equity strategies” that can be implemented from the state to the site-level through cross-sector partnership with expanded learning programs to meet critical needs and create a new future free of the deeply entrenched inequities that remain embedded in educational and health systems.

Follow the Money: Networks and the American Rescue Plan (ARP)

An ideal alignment happened in 2021: Historic investments flowing through states specifically for after-school and summer programs and networks were positioned as experts and resources able to connect state departments of education with programs throughout their states. Many networks played formal and informal roles in helping policymakers understand the opportunity through briefings, town hall meetings, and youth summits, providing data and stories from the field and more.

The funding flowed quickly, and in many states, networks offered the expertise and capacity to ensure state grant competitions were informed, fair, and well-managed, including

- The Arkansas Out-of-School Network and Arkansas State University partnered with the Arkansas Department of Education to administer the state's \$25 million set-aside for after-school and summer programs. The plan is aligned with the Arkansas Positive Youth Development Grant Program Act (166).
- The Connecticut After School Network was integral to the design, development, and implementation of the Summer Expansion Grant Program in 2021, funded by ARP/ESSER (elementary and secondary school emergency relief) dollars, which provided \$8,652,870 in funding to 235 grantees, serving over 96,000 students statewide.
- The Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network informed the allocation of over \$95 million of ARP funds to support community-based out-of-school time programs and school-age childcare. The network worked alongside three state agencies from ideation to

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implementation and served as the primary thought-leader on all initiatives creating a new public–private model.

- Ignite Afterschool—the statewide network of Minnesota—was tapped by the Minnesota Department of Education to administer \$13.2 million in ESSER III funds to culturally specific community-based organizations.
- Beyond School Bells—the statewide after-school network of Nebraska— is working with the state Department of Health and Human Services to administer \$4.5 million in Child Care CARES¹ Act funds and partnering with the Nebraska Department of Education to help support their ESSER III roll out.
- The Utah Afterschool Network coordinated with the state department of education to provide \$20 million of ARPA funds to after-school and summer providers.
- In every state, the networks played a key role in informing the field about policy and funding opportunities. All networks share regular communications via newsletters and social media, and many networks host regular forums to engage and educate both program leaders and policymakers.

Leading Innovation: Quality Systems and Partnerships

Complex problems have many unknowns and networks have great potential for innovation with appropriate time and resources (Shumate & Cooper, 2021). The statewide after-school networks have acted as conduits of change creating better systemic alignment and new approaches in areas including readiness, workforce, youth development, social and emotional learning, STEM learning, and more.

To innovate and support programs with skill-building strategies, states first seek to establish a shared definition of quality, create a culture of improvement, and shape systems of professional development. As of 2020, 42 states have developed quality standards and guidelines, and another seven states are in the process of developing standards. (American Institutes for Research, 2020). These quality standards frequently include guidance on safety, health, and nutrition, physical environment, curriculum/activities, staff engagement/interaction, and family involvement.

There are large and small examples of innovations by networks where new partnerships are developed to provide engaging learning opportunities for young people in large-scale, systemic

¹ The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act is a \$2.2 trillion economic stimulus bill passed in March 2020 in response to the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

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ways. We'll focus on three areas here where the Mott Foundation has invested additional resources to seed increased activity:

STEM Learning

In all 50 states, after-school and summer programs are sparking students' interest in STEM subjects, helping them explore future STEM careers, and developing STEM skills like problem-solving and collaboration. Innovative programs are creating deep learning experiences like in Maine, where girls are applying an engineering mindset to build igloos, or in Alaska, where summer camps are teaching young people filmmaking and technology skills. In Nebraska, understanding that young people lacked access to engaging hands-on STEM learning opportunities, Beyond School Bells (the Nebraska network), created mobile TMC (Think, Make, Create) labs housed in a 6'x12' trailer that brings hands-on, interactive learning resources including electronics, textiles, various arts, robotics that encourage young people to "make" and be creative. The mobile makerspace is equipped with roll-out carts, tables, and a canopy so that work and creativity can occur indoors or outdoors. There are now 13 TMC labs in Nebraska, and the demand is growing. The idea has been replicated in other states.

Entrepreneurship

In Ohio, 82 youth created and pitched solutions "to promote health, address racism, marshal peer support, and bring more art and sports into students' lives" as part of the Ohio Afterschool Network's Winter Pitch Challenge reported by the Mott Foundation (2021). The winners won Amazon gift cards, an opportunity to work with successful entrepreneurs, and scholarships for entrepreneur-focused programs. This is just a small part of a web of activities across the state where different partners foster an "entrepreneurial mindset" in young people and develop an entrepreneurial ecosystem for out-of-school-time programs statewide. State leaders found that these innovative, high-quality programs engaged young people with new levels of creativity and problem-solving skills that help accelerate learning.

College and Career Readiness

The state networks create comprehensive frameworks that include all parts of the systems needed to support innovative programs, including professional development, quality standards, research, and partnerships. This is particularly notable in college and career readiness, where there are many potential opportunities to support young people in planning for their future. The Maryland Out of School Time Network has developed a College and Career Readiness Toolkit as a comprehensive guide to help middle and high school out-of-school-time programs get laser

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focused on building 21st century skills and supporting young people as they navigate through the complex world of planning for their advanced education and careers.

Conclusion

Among his bestselling management ideas detailed in *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* (2005), Jim Collins describes a “flywheel,” where with persistent effort, organizations gain momentum, and inch-by-inch there’s eventually a “breakthrough,” where the ambition looks unstoppable. In many places the statewide after-school networks are leaning into that moment when conscious choice and discipline leads to greatness. But the wheel doesn’t keep flying without effort and intention, the landscape keeps changing, and the human need continues to grow.

We urge researchers and network leaders to work together to align their efforts and ideas. The networks have access to tremendous data and strategies that could benefit from a researcher’s keen eye and deliberate study. And the academic community will find the network an ideal place for action research and thought partnership in shaping studies that will have broad impact.

We urge funders and corporate partners to connect to statewide after-school networks to realize their goals of scale and impact. By investing in core operations, we give the networks room to innovate and find the solutions most needed by their communities for their youth.

And we urge the statewide after-school networks to keep innovating. This is a unique moment to be bold, to build on the decades of forming partnerships, and to push toward greatness.

In closing, we remind ourselves of how all of these systems and strategies are designed to change the lives of young people. There are now nearly 25 million young people who are not able to access after-school programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2020). We need everyone connected with youth development to join with the statewide after-school networks to identify the resources and solutions so that all children and youth have access to engaging, powerful learning, mentors, and supports so they can thrive.

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