

Navigating Partnership Model for Expanded Learning Opportunities: A Case of the State of Oklahoma

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Background

Schools nowadays have been confronted with unprecedented pressure from nationwide accountability systems which in order to get rid of learning barriers and/or improve the achievement of all students (Bathgate & Silva, 2010). Consequently, school leaders are seeking a variety of ways to increase the learning opportunities of students both inside and outside of schools. Corresponding to this trend, extending school time, which increases the number of days in each school year or adds hours to the school day, has been introduced as a popular strategy. In the United States, this approach emerged with the Time for Innovation Matters in Education Act (2009), which focuses on offering expanded learning time (Weiss et al., 2009). As educational reform initiatives, the rationale of this strategy is that increased time in- and out-of-schools probably leads to students' increased learning and achievement. Evidence from research shows that increased learning opportunities serve as a pipeline not only in bridging race- and class-based achievement gap but also successful childcare, particularly for disadvantaged groups (e.g., Blau & Currie, 2004; Cooper et al., 1996; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olsen, 2007).

In a facet of supporting increased time for learning at the outside of schools, school leaders and community providers are adopting partnerships with a perception that fully integrating schools and afterschool community-based organizations serve as a vehicle for expanded learning opportunities (ELO). As a core component of school-community partnerships, ELO has become a primary principle in (a) widening the spectrum of learning environments at the outside of the classroom, (b) spurring a more dynamic network that elevates student engagement, and (c) preventing a dropout crisis that plagues poor communities disproportionately (Bathgate & Silva, 2010). Moreover, ELO strategy grants greater benefits in collaborating program planning, resource alignment, instruction, data use, and professional development in between schools and community (Gannett, 2012). Broader influences in school attendance, behavioral and socio-emotional aspects, and academic achievement are reported as the positive outcomes of applying ELO by school-community partnerships. Thus, it can be accomplished by not simply extending the school day or school year but by promoting students' participation in constructive activities (America's Promise Alliance, 2015; National Education Association, 2008).

Given the significance of school-community partnerships in redesigning school structure and culture, connected engagement approach, which refers to the direct association between a school and (one or more) local companies, community providers, and nonprofit or-

ganizations, is being used in general (Balfanz et al., 2012). Known as a partnership model (Lawson, 2010), this approach commonly attempts seamless integration with community partners and schools to promote enriched learning. By embracing inclusive multi-partner collective impact initiatives, it also aims to provide a potentially transformative way to engage students to build social capital which is required when they transit into local society (Belfiore & Lash, 2017). Therefore, a wide variation of forms and education programs appear, which are offered by varying community organizations in the collective learning network. These range from community-mediated learning that is for youth development in their identity and social capital to service learning that is highly linked to address community issues such as lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and juvenile crime (Bosma et al., 2010; Perkins, 2015).

While more districts and communities are applying the partnership models to meet student needs and enrich learning opportunities (Epstein, 2010; Hands, 2010). Consistent standards of practices are yet clearly illustrate. This not only stems from the fact that it is hard to find a widely accepted term for describing ELO but also each community has a different stage in utilizing a partnership model and they are not merely following one successful model (America's Promise Alliance, 2015). Therefore, navigating cases which experience distinctive trends and challenges that individual communities face in particular contexts might be able to contribute to exploring implications about how they advance their own efforts as well as to broaden the horizons in demonstrating diverse aspects of the partnership model. In this sense, the case of Oklahoma Partnership for Expanded Learning (OPEL), which was launched in 2015 in order to connect stakeholders throughout the state of the Oklahoma, is described in this paper. Based on the investigation of distinctive features and facets of OPEL case, implications for improving ELO practices in the vein of the partnership model are also discussed.

Partnership Model for Accomplishing ELO Initiatives: the OPEL Case

This section examines the broad profile of OPEL via comprehensive documents reviews such as state reports published by the government of Oklahoma, OPEL website, and data from various sources. In order to address the purpose, this paper explores the developmental process, challenges, and innovation of the case of OPEL, by following two sub-categories: (a) overview of OPEL, which includes legal and contextual bases of ELO in Oklahoma, and (b) desired outcomes of OPEL.

Overview of OPEL

In the United States, expanded learning practices (e.g., afterschool, summer learning) are being introduced with a wide perception that they might be able to serve as leverage in developing students' own interests and skills, enriching interactions with peers and/or adults, and addressing risky behaviors, particularly for low-achieving groups. According to Duncan and Murnane (2011), annual trends in spending on enrichment activities show that the financial gap between top quintile income and bottom quintile income groups has been growing con-

tinuously since the 1970s. For example, when comparing children who come from families with an annual income of \$72,000 and over with families earning \$18,000 or less, the children in the lower bracket have considerably less (50%) the access to enrichment activities such as sports, clubs, lessons, and after- and before-school care programs (Laughlin, 2013).

Especially in Oklahoma, approximately 20% of children were left alone and unsupervised from adults for an average of 7 hours per week in 2014. According to Stanek et al. (2017), also, 28% of 8th-grade children were not proficient in math during the 2011-2012 school year and 23% of children dropped out between 9th-grade and graduation in 2011, respectively. Moreover, the state of Oklahoma has an important context for implementing expanded learning practices since it ranks within the bottom few states in total per-pupil expenditures (Cornman, Zhou, Howell, & Young, 2018). It also shows consistently lower performance in reading and math compared to the national public average (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Given the current situation, it is not surprising that building a productive educational system and offering a wide range of learning opportunities is imperative to close the opportunity gap amongst students (Carter & Welner, 2013) and also to reduce the occurrence of potential problems.

These demands for ELO practices could also be found in a series of legal statements in a 2015 School Law Book published by the state of Oklahoma (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2015). In both sections 395 (Quality Afterschool Opportunities Act) and 400 (Creation of Quality Afterschool Opportunities Initiative), quality afterschool opportunities are expected to be an effective way to reduce childhood obesity and improve academic performance. What is more, it states that guidance from a statewide non-profit afterschool network could foster necessary collaboration needed between the State Department of Education, the State Department of Health, and the State Department of Human Services for successful quality ELO initiatives. Consequently, it served as legal basis in introducing a community-based partnership model for improving ELO in Oklahoma.

In response, OPEL, a statewide network of organizations which acknowledges the success of and consistent need for ELO throughout Oklahoma, was launched in 2015. With a grant of \$225,000 from the C.S. Mott Foundation in 2015, the partnership which focuses on developing a comprehensive communication and outreach plan about the importance of out of school programs were created. The mission of OPEL is “to build and sustain a statewide alliance that connects partners, promotes quality and advances public policy to increase ELO” (Stanek et al., 2017, p. 19). Along with the mission of the organization, OPEL endeavors to offer a wide range of learning activities for youth that enhance their academic, physical, social, and emotional development. In order to make program implementation successful, partnerships among stakeholders are serving as a key driver. More specifically, partnerships, which seek an intimate collaboration of agencies and organizations within the state of Oklahoma, play a central role in building expanded learning-based programs and providing technical support to newly established programs.

Positive impacts of partners’ work meant to increase equitable high-quality of ELO programs can be found in the following three areas: (a) increasing quality ELO, (b) sustainability of ELO, and (c) advocacy on behalf of expanded learning professionals. In this process, OPEL performs a leading role in solidifying a network by wide range of efforts such as (a) sharing best practices and providing associative support, (b) identifying funding

sources and provide information to ELO providers to build firm relationships that address achievement gaps and maximize resources in a community, and (c) providing legislative updates on policies to stakeholders and performing a series of assessments toward ELO programs to distinguish barriers and to determine future directions responding to tendencies on policies and/or consumer preferences changes. Simply put, as a statewide afterschool network of Oklahoma, the partnership plays a pivotal role in raising awareness, building capacity and sustainability, and promoting the importance of ELO.

Desired Outcomes of OPEL

In 2014, approximately 11% (68,751) of Oklahoma's students were participating in after-school programs and the ELO participation rate is growing consistently. Also, more than 40% (230,198) of students in Oklahoma responded that they would participate in ELO programs if one were available to them. Moreover, children and families in the state positively recognized that ELO programs provide a wide range of benefits to them. The survey results conducted by America After 3PM shows that higher rates of parents are satisfied with after-school program overall (94%), its quality of care (88%), the degree of variety of activities (88%), and affordability of the program costs (81%) (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). According to the 2017 State Report of Expanded Learning in Oklahoma, the outcomes from applying partnerships for ELO can be separated into two aspects: academic and behavioral/social development for youth.

Academic Development. In a sense that children who have high-quality afterschool experiences tended to behave better in school, perform better on tests, and receive higher grades compared to non-participants (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010), academic development is a critical goal of ELO. In Oklahoma, ELO practices help to close the achievement gap for underserved students by promoting in schools. More specifically, students who regularly attend high-quality ELO programs earn the equivalent of up to 90 days of learning. Particularly, 28.5% of people in Oklahoma are in poverty and the class-based education gap continues to grow (Oklahoma Policy Institute, 2012). As some of the research indicated, considering the correlation could be found between high school dropout rates and the lack of ELO and little employment opportunities (Stanek et al., 2017), providing expanded learning times and opportunities probably serve to a key for narrowing the achievement gap, especially for low-income children. As some of the research indicated, correlations can be found between high school dropout rates, lack of ELO, and little employment opportunities (Stanek et al., 2017). As such, providing expanded learning times and opportunities may be a key for narrowing the achievement gap, especially for low-income children.

Establishing sound school-community partnerships has also positive effects on enhancing STEM skills of students. For instance, as one of the partners of OPEL, 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) currently provides expanded learning to over 12,000 children in Oklahoma at over 100 sites throughout the state with 59 grantees. By collaborating with local organizations, 21st CCLCs are providing ELO programs which focus on offering basic and advanced skill sets which recent corporates are heavily emphasize on. In this process, partnerships function as leverage in incorporating a quality improvement and assessment system with professional learning communities in the state. Furthermore, with collaboration with an individual, private-sector agencies, public institutions, and associations to provide services

and resources for program offers, it grants children broader opportunities to learn STEM skills via project-based curriculum in an informal setting. Given the prediction that approximately 80% of jobs in Oklahoma will require some sort of education beyond high school level by 2025 (Stanek et al., 2017), engaging in ELO experiences would be beneficial in acquiring such qualifications for a future career as well as improving workforce readiness of students.

Behavioral/Social Development. Providing expanded time in- and out of-schools is important to prevent students from being exposed to teenage crime, especially to those who are unsupervised after school. In 2011, more than 18,000 youth in Oklahoma were arrested for crimes or for experimenting with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and sex. Moreover, the state ranks higher in rates of parental incarceration, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, mental illness and substance abuse (Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy, 2014). According to the 2014 report from the Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, Oklahoma ranks fourth in imprisonment rate and the state leads the country in terms of female incarceration rates. The problem is that prison populations are increasing continuously over the past several decades in Oklahoma. Additionally, Oklahoma ranks 2nd highest terms of birth rates of teen females aged 15-19 in the nation (Oklahoma State Department of Health, 2014). In order to manage the youth who encounters juvenile crimes, the state allocated approximately \$266 millions of appropriations in 2015. The majority of these costs are associated with children and their parents, who are likely to be lower socioeconomic status and achieve lower levels of educational attainment over their lifetime.

Considering these current social problems in Oklahoma, ELO practices are vital to keeping students safe and out of trouble. In general, from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. is a peak time that youth are most likely to commit crimes or become victims of crimes (Stanek et al., 2017). When engaged in a variety of health and wellness programs and physical activities in afterschool times, children could get a chance to improve their behavioral/social skills. The numbers of students coming into contact with Oklahoma's juvenile justice system has been decreasing in recent years due to increasing treatment programs and diversion services. For this reason, 66% of parents in Oklahoma are agreeing that ELO programs, as a "safe haven," are able to help in reducing the likelihood of what youth will engage in risky behaviors (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Furthermore, the cost for one student who attends ELO programs is approximately estimated at \$3,380, compared to \$28,652 to incarcerate one youth for one year, respectively. To sum up, in a viewpoint of behavioral/social development, the effectiveness of ELO could be found in a higher return on educational investment by reducing crime and welfare costs of the state.

Discussion and Implications

Building school-community partnerships which emphasize community-driven support is recognized as an essential strategy to successfully implement ELO in Oklahoma. In order to develop and sustain the effective human capital systems, highly required is that schools and districts should from properly informed, engaged, and demanding community (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). OPEL is functioning as a turnaround unit which identifies partners, establishes local partnerships, and seeks resources that will address the achievement gap of an un-

derserved group of students and strengthen school and community engagement. As a noteworthy case of the partnership model, OPEL helps to meet the social services needs of Oklahoma's youth and their families, including on-site access to health clinics, positive behavior intervention programs, out-of-school programming opportunities for their academic, emotional, and physical development. Thus, it is important to note that a close association with a bunch of local agencies and organizations apparently allow providing a variety of meaningful educational opportunities to children by both in a formal and informal way. From the above brief description of OPEL, several implications for the efforts of ELO practices are discussed as follows.

Firstly, community collaboration is a critical but challenging task for the fulfillment of partnerships. In effect, schools simply cannot provide all of the resources to children needed their success. Thus, in the long run, required is involvement of the business community and political support in the partnerships and it might be as significant as the hands-on efforts of learning providers (America's Promise Alliance, 2015). A systematic approach which establishes common goals and addresses an array of potential barriers among partners is also needed for effective collaboration. For this, a greater consideration must be given to performing a series of practices: building standards of quality; sharing data; connecting ELO programs in beneficial ways with students' needs rather than merely extending school days. Secondly, academic achievement is not the only important outcome of ELO practices. In the case of OPEL, increasing access towards ELO has been guaranteed in reducing juvenile crime. While academic improvement might create the impetus for coordinated ELO initiatives, greater emphasis must be placed on encompassing students' behavioral/emotional development and helping them to retain social skills.

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