

A Hub of Community Resilience: California's Expanded Learning Programs Respond to Crisis

A STATE OF THE STATE EXPANDED LEARNING BRIEF
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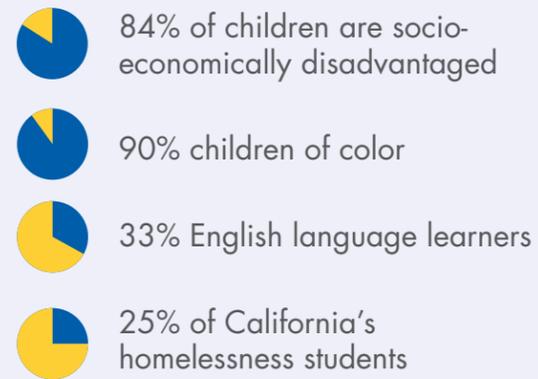
Expanded Learning Infrastructure in California

For over two decades, California has been successfully developing the nation's largest and highest-rated¹ Expanded Learning infrastructure in the nation. The California Department of Education (CDE) defines Expanded Learning as follows:

Expanded Learning programs are an integral part of young people's education, engaging them in year-round learning opportunities that prepare them for college, career, and life. Expanded Learning refers to before and after school, summer, and intersession learning experiences that develop the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs and interests of students. Expanded Learning opportunities should be hands-on, engaging, student-centered, results-driven, involve community partners, and complement learning activities in the regular school day/year.

Expanded Learning programs in California support programs at over 4,500 sites serving over 980,000² children and youth annually. These programs, funded through the state-funded After School Education and Safety (ASES) program and federally-funded 21st Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) program, operate and serve transitional kindergarten through high school students. These programs are administered by the California Department of Education (CDE) with the majority of these programs run by community-based organizations (CBOs) in contract with their local school districts or county offices of education.

California's publicly funded afterschool programs serve some of the state's most vulnerable children.



Expanded Learning in a COVID-19 Context

Today, these programs are well-positioned to meet the moment—serving students in high-need communities, and children of critical infrastructure workers.

Expanded Learning partners have a unique set of assets and expertise that are particularly important in any crisis and critical during the COVID-19 era. In particular, after-school and summer programs have an explicit commitment — as defined in Quality Standards for Expanded Learning in California: Creating and Implementing a Shared Vision of Quality³ — to build the positive relationships, safe and supportive environments, and engaging activities that students most need in this time of uncertainty and stress. California's vision of quality for Expanded Learning programs describes learning and enrichment settings that are proven to promote positive developmental outcomes in school and in life. A growing research base continues to document the positive impact these programs can have on students and their families.⁴ Because the physical and emotional safety and wellbeing of children and youth reside at the core of this work, Expanded Learning programs are excellent partners to support the reopening and recovery of California.

Helping California Respond, Heal, and Thrive

Expanded Learning programs are a critical partner to help California respond to crises and ultimately build back stronger. Staff care and nurture for children in their programs, providing positive relationships, safe and supportive environments, and engaging activities. This is what students need most in times of stress and this foundation provides critical supports to students and their families and communities during these unprecedented times.

Research Grounds Us in Why

Stress has a major impact on the developing brain. The Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance is a great resource⁵ to understand how stress affects students. During crises, like the COVID pandemic, students experience high levels of stress from the disruption of their daily lives, worries about their own and family members' health, and financial strains in the household and community. For children living in unstable or unsafe conditions, stress and trauma threaten to have long-term negative impacts on their bodies and brains. These students will likely return to school needing additional supports to refocus on the task of learning and being in a school community.

This is where Expanded Learning can play a key role — through the experience of trusting relationships and safe, calm, predictable environments — programs support children and youth to access the higher-order thinking, planning, remembering, and regulating functions of their limbic system.⁶ Expanded Learning programs are a largely untapped resource that not only complement academic skill-building, but more importantly, specialize in building positive relationships with young people and their families.

It is no surprise then that the SoLD Alliance recently (August 2020) released six priority actions⁷ for education leaders in the time of COVID-19 including a focus on Expanded Learning opportunities — “Design integrated systems of supports with the whole child at the center to meet student needs and expand learning opportunities.”

Significant Research Supports the Important Role of Expanded Learning

- The National Aspen Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development stresses positive youth development and the value of community-based youth development partnerships with schools during and out-of-school time.⁸
- The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine research details how, “supportive familial, caregiver(s), and adult relationships play a significant role in fostering positive outcomes for adolescents.”⁹
- The National League of Cities are promoting schools and Expanded Learning opportunities as important learning hubs to “address the holistic needs of children, youth, and families from food and housing insecurity to social-emotional development opportunities.”¹⁰
- Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: SEL Roadmap for Reopening School highlights the importance of partnerships between students, families, communities, and schools supporting social and emotional development and creating access to mental health and trauma supports.¹¹
- California's leaders have expressed strong support for the Partnership for the Future of Learning Pillars of a Community School, which include expanded and enriched learning opportunities.¹²
- The Practical Guide for Financing Social, Emotional, and Mental Health in Schools highlights California's Expanded Learning investment as a potential match to leverage Medi-Cal funding to support the health and wellness of children.¹³
- California's Social and Emotional Learning Guiding Principles describe Whole Child Development as the goal of education, committing to equity, capacity building of students and adults, and creating a partnership with families and communities.¹⁴

Crisis Response Across the State

This map highlights just a few ways Expanded Learning programs are supporting their communities across California's 11 County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA) regions.

Region 1

Serving As the Only Food Resource During Crisis

ASES programs are often the only food resource in rural parts of Region 1 during wildfires and other crises. Staff drive hours each day to elementary schools, including to the Hoopa Valley Reservation, to deliver hundreds of meal boxes to families that would not have access otherwise.¹⁵

Region 4

Staying Connected with Friends and Mentors

Early on during school closures the Bay Area Music Project converted their entire afterschool program to an online learning hub to ensure students could continue learning and stay connected to friends and mentors. Nearly 85% of students have engaged weekly in at least one class.¹⁸

Region 5

Providing Access to Healthy Meals and Gardening During COVID

Campbell Union's Expanded Learning programs collaborated with their district and community partners to offer curbside pick-up meals and provided families with plants and resource packets on how to care for a vegetable garden, family gardening activities, and tip sheets on how to use the vegetables.¹⁹

Region 7

Serving Children of Essential Workers

The Porterville afterschool program began serving school-age children of essential workers shortly after school closures. With limited staff, the team went to work developing student surveys and organizing activities around student voice. Additionally, program staff and students created nearly 1,000 handmade cards for local hospital staff and patients.²¹

Region 8

Connecting Homeless Students to Supports

The Oxnard School District afterschool program works with students daily, Monday-Friday. Mornings are spent helping 150 homeless students connect to synchronous and asynchronous instruction. From 3-6 PM the program provides homework support and enrichment online to over 1,200 students.²²

Region 11

Supporting Caregivers

Anticipating the digital divide, Woodcraft Rangers created BIRCH, a caregiver support program designed to keep kids ages 4-12 engaged in at-home enrichment activities, delivering them directly to mobile phones. Activities are in English and Spanish and can be done with household items. Over 7,000 families have participated since April.²⁵

Region 2

Providing Learning Opportunities Without WiFi

Project SHARE in Shasta County created engaging STEAM activity kits for students in rural areas who were not able to do distance learning due to limited broadband connectivity. The kits use common household items, allowing the activities to be accessible for more students and families.¹⁶

Region 3

Connecting with Missing Students

The Youth Development Department at Sacramento City Unified utilized community partnerships to reach out to youth not accessing virtual learning or checking in with their schools, and subsequently provided students and families with services and supports to reconnect with the school community.¹⁷

Region 6

Home Visits Identify Family Needs

When the Boys & Girls Club in Tracy shut down the club quickly created a virtual program, and made home deliveries of technology supplies. Through home visits, staff saw more unmet needs and coordinated the giveaway of backpacks, school supplies, masks, sanitizers, and more than 5,000 boxes of food.²⁰

Region 10

Ensuring Internet Access

Reliable internet is an issue for many Coachella Valley students and families. The district deploys hotspot-equipped buses throughout the community from 6:30 am to 6 pm so students have access to WiFi to connect to their virtual classrooms and programs during distance learning.²⁴

Region 9

Keeping Staff Employed

The Anaheim YMCA immediately shifted services during the shut-down, keeping staff employed. Staff and community partners go into the local neighborhoods to provide meals and supplies, and continue to shift programming to meet the evolving needs of the community.²³



COVID-19: Expanded Learning Infrastructure Responsive to Crisis

CAN collaborated with the UC Davis Center for Regional Change to build out an interactive map to help locate Expanded Learning programs and their proximity to hospitals and other essential services. While Executive Orders allow for ASES and 21st CCLC programs to provide service to children of essential workers it does not guarantee that these sites are currently or will provide these services. More details can be found at www.afterschoolnetwork.org/post/covid-19-expanded-learning-positioned-help

Legend

- Hospital location
- Expanded Learning Program Location

Expanded Learning Rising to the Moment

In the midst of crisis Expanded Learning is often the first to respond, first to address the trauma of the moment, and meet the needs of not just children and students, but their families and their broader communities. Many of the staff in these programs are from the same neighborhoods and have authentic caring relationships with students and know the families closely. During the pandemic, Expanded Learning staff have supported their communities in uncountable ways, but some crucial supports include:

- **Ensuring Families are Fed.** Building on connections with schools and community partners, Expanded Learning programs worked to ensure students who rely on school for meals were still fed, and in many instances provided meals for the family as well.
- **Finding Lost Students.** During distance learning, some districts have relied on their Expanded Learning partners to find and re-engage families that they could not reach remotely.
- **Providing Social and Emotional Supports.** Many programs quickly shifted their in-person programming to virtual programming, providing opportunities for students to connect with their peers and mentors, ensuring crucial caring relationships are kept intact.
- **Technology Access and Supporting Learning.** Expanded Learning programs have been crucial partners in supporting access and distribution to technology for students, as well as utilizing their program time to mitigate learning loss.
- **Serving Children of Essential Workers.** Through a partnership with the California Department of Education, California Governor's Office, and other stakeholders, Expanded Learning programs were able to offer in-person supports to children of essential workers allowing their parents to provide critical supports to the state.

See the inset map for highlights of the extraordinary work being done across the state.

A Supportive Policy Environment

The California Department of Education (CDE) Expanded Learning Division has worked closely with the California Governor's Office, the California State Legislature, stakeholders, and advocates across the state to ensure Expanded Learning programs had as much flexibility as needed. This flexibility, allows programs to be creative and fill gaps and needs that have arisen during the Pandemic. Legislation such as SB98 and additional guidance from the CDE ensured that program grants would remain intact, programs would receive attendance relief for COVID-19 closures, grant reductions were suspended, and hourly employees/classified staff could continue to be paid. Essentially administrative burdens were reduced to ensure programs could instead focus on meeting the evolving needs of their students and communities during this crisis—and indeed Expanded Learning programs have risen to the moment.

Expanded Learning Supports Whole Child and Health Wellness

There is a growing movement within the state to leverage the infrastructure and strengths of Expanded Learning programs to support equity-driven whole child health and wellness (WCHW). In December 2019 the California AfterSchool Network intentionally brought together youth allies from multiple sectors and communities to form the Whole Child Health and Wellness Collaborative with a mission to: *Build the foundation for, catalyze, and support multi-sector coalitions, including California's Expanded Learning programs, to realize positive and equitable health and wellness outcomes for whole children, whole families, and whole communities.*

Because the physical and emotional safety and well-being of children and youth reside at the core of this work, Expanded Learning programs represent excellent partners for local and regional whole child health and wellness organizing efforts. While their finances have been increasingly stressed in recent years due to rising costs and other factors, Expanded Learning programs are funded and found in the communities that could most benefit from whole child health and wellness partnerships. The collaborative will soon be releasing a Statement of Strategic Direction and other supporting materials to support the advancement of this work.



Conclusion

Expanded Learning programs are a vital part of not only California's education landscape, but also the broader California public structure, like roads, libraries, and the postal service. Pandemic or not, Expanded Learning programs need equitable and sustainable funding to ensure the economic success of young people and their futures, as well as the progress of California. An investment in Expanded Learning is an investment in our youth, our families, and our communities.

As the country, and world, is faced with multiple crises and disruption (COVID-19 Pandemic, growing economic disparities, ongoing racial injustice, etc.) many have called for us to not waste this opportunity to reimagine our education systems to better benefit our children, youth, and ultimately communities. Expanded Learning programs continue to be elevated as a crucial partner in reimagining our systems. These programs are better equipped to deal with crises, engage communities, and often provide critical wrap-around services. More than that, Expanded Learning programs are about relationships and bringing the community into schools to act as a collective when action is needed.

Any planning efforts—whether to respond to a crisis such as the COVID-19 crisis or to reimagine the way our education and communities are structured—must engage Expanded Learning partners from the beginning. Those closest to the problem, should be at the forefront of the solution—and the staff and students of Expanded Learning programs across the state are indeed often those closest to the issues we seek to address as a California community.

Endnotes

1. In the 2015 America After 3pm report, California was ranked number 1 in the country and in a 2020 report California was ranked number 2. California is one of the few states that has consistently made it in the top 10 states for afterschool since evaluating and ranking states' began in 2009.
2. In the 2017-18 school year there were 980,684 students enrolled in California Expanded Learning programs according to CDE's Expanded Learning Division. There currently has not been data collected to identify all students served during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
3. https://www.afterschoolnetwork.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/quality_standards.pdf
4. The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project, "Expanding Minds and Opportunities," 2013.
5. Find SoLD Research and Resources at: www.soldalliance.org/resources
6. Turnaround for Children, n.d., "The Science." www.turnaroundusa.org/what-we-do/the-science.
7. The Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance, "Education in the time of COVID: 6 Priority Actions from the Science of Learning and Development"
8. Aspen Institute, "Building Partnerships in Support of Where, When & How Learning Happens," 2018.
9. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, "The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth," 2019.
10. National League of Cities, "Supporting Schools Requires a Collective Action," 2020.
11. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, "Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: SEL Roadmap for Reopening Schools"
12. Partnership for the Future of Learning: Community Schools Playbook.
13. The California Children's Trust and Breaking Barriers, "Practical Guide for Financing Social, Emotional, and Mental Health in Schools"
14. California Department of Education, "California's Social and Emotional Learning Guiding Principles," 2018.
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16. Halley, Gloria. "Re:Region 2 Stories." Email Correspondence to Heather Williams. Received October 2020.
17. Fireside Chat #5: Interview with Sacramento City Unified School District. April 29, 2020. <https://youtu.be/AioFl5qm3hI>
18. Gathering Expanded Learning Stories. Survey Data. Received April 2020.
19. Gathering Expanded Learning Stories. Survey Data. Received April 2020.
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23. Fireside Chat #3: Interview with Anaheim Family YMCA. April 23, 2020. <https://youtu.be/PKx8wi-Grb0>
24. Xiong, Teng. "Re:Region 10 Stories." Email Correspondence to Heather Williams. Received October 2020.
25. Brooks, Julee. "Re:Woodcraft Ranger Story." Email Correspondence to Heather Williams. Received October 2020.

Images by Allison Shelley for *American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action*.