

Expanded Learning in California: Fostering Success Among High-Need Students— 2017 Executive Brief

The California Department of Education (CDE) has made expanded learning programs—after school, before school, summer, and intersessions—one of its central statewide strategies for fostering academic achievement and positive youth development.¹ Its Expanded Learning Division oversees the nation’s most extensive system of high-quality public, school-based programs through two grant initiatives:

- The state-funded After School Education and Safety (ASES) Program for students in grades kindergarten through nine; and
- The federally-funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) Program for grades kindergarten through eight, and the 21st Century High School After School Safety and Enrichment for Teens (ASSETs) Program for grades nine through twelve.²

Both programs aim to provide low-income students with enriching academic and developmental supports and opportunities, in physically and emotionally safe environments, that will help them succeed in school and thrive personally. The 21st CCLC Program further gives priority to funding expanded learning in low-performing schools.

The independent Afterschool Alliance (2014) ranked California as the number one state in the nation for after school programs based on student participation, access, public support, and family satisfaction. This Brief summarizes the findings of a new report to the California Legislature³ on the schools that received expanded learning funding from

¹ The end of this Brief provides an overview to the CDE’s Expanded Learning program.

² This Brief’s Appendix provides an overview to CDE’s Expanded Learning Division and its ASES and 21st CCLC/ASSETs programs.

³ CDE, Expanded Learning Division (2019), *Report to the Legislature: Characteristics of Schools and Students Participating in After School Programs, 2017 Report*. The report was prepared in compliance with Senate Bill 1221 (Hancock, Chapter 370, Statutes 2014). Signed by the governor on September 16, 2014, the Bill requires the CDE to submit a Biennial Report to the Legislature regarding the type, distribution, and quality of these programs and the characteristics of the students participating in them, including their number and demographics, programs attendance, academic performance, behavior, and skill development.

the CDE, the students the programs served, and the evidence of program outcomes. Using data from the 2015–16 academic year, the report compares schools that received ASES, 21st CCLC, and ASSETs grants to non-grantee schools, and also compares the students who participated in these programs to non-participants within grantee schools. The report also provides an overview of why expanded learning programs are important, as well as, the actions the CDE has taken to ensure that ASES and 21st CCLC grantees implement high-quality programs to high-need students.

The report reveals that, as intended, the CDE expanded learning programs serve high-need youth throughout the state and that the expanded learning programs had a positive overall impact on school attendance for participants, increasing their opportunity to learn and potentially preserving over \$183,000,000 in average daily attendance (ADA) funding from the state.⁴

Findings

How Many Schools and Students are Served by the Programs?

In 2015–16, the CDE's expanded learning programs served a total of 813,985 students in 4,565 schools.⁵ Within these grantee schools, the programs served an average of 33 percent of the student population. ASSETs programs served 257,100 of these students in grades nine through twelve in 286 schools. After school programs in elementary and middle schools served the greatest number of students (632,289); before school programs served the fewest number of students (36,717). The grantee schools were geographically inclusive of the entire state, including rural and urban communities, in the north and south, from the coast to the desert.

How Often Do Participants Attend the Programs?

Research emphasizes that, even in quality expanded learning programs, the degree to which a student is likely to experience positive outcomes is related to the frequency of attendance and exposure to programming. Youth need to attend regularly to measurably benefit. Thus, McCombs, Whitaker, and Yoo (2017) recommend that agencies and programs work to maximize youth attendance.

⁴ This amount includes afterschool participation for elementary, middle, and high school students. It does not include before school or supplemental participation.

⁵ In 2017–18, the number of total CDE expanded learning program participants rose to 915,709.

In elementary and middle schools, participation in the CDE-funded after school programs was very high and consistent.

- Participants attended an average of 111 days—the majority of the 180 days in the academic year.
- Of the students who attended at least one day of after school programs, 44 percent attended 150 or more days—representing nearly the entire school year. Almost three quarters (74 percent) participated 60 or more days—a standard threshold used in after school research to identify the students who participated regularly enough that a meaningful program effect could be expected to be identified (Vinson, Sniegowski, & Liu, 2015; American Institutes for Research, 2013, 2016).

At the high school level (ASSETs), the attendance data is more complex. Overall program attendance is higher than in elementary and middle schools, however the frequency of attendance is lower. An average of 71 percent of enrolled students attended one or more days of after school programs, but the average attendance was only 25 days. Only 27 percent of students attended 30 or more days; and only 14 percent attended 60 or more days. This difference in attendance rates brings to light the unique challenges in high school programs meeting the needs and interests of older adolescents. Many high school students attend to participate in specific extracurricular activities that are relatively short-term or seasonal.

Who Do the Programs Serve?

The CDE's goal is to foster high-quality expanded learning programs that holistically provide students with supports and opportunities that will help them thrive and succeed—and which many students do not sufficiently receive, particularly in low-income and marginalized populations. To ensure that services reach those students most in need, new ASES programs are only funded in districts that have at least half the enrollment eligible for Free and Reduced Price Meals (FRPM). The 21st CCLC schools must be eligible to participate in the federal Title I Program, or otherwise determined to be in need of intervention and support.

As intended, the schools that received the CDE expanded learning funding predominately serve economically disadvantaged students. They also predominately serve students of color. The following compares the demographics of the students in grantee schools to averages statewide:

- Eighty-three percent of students served in grantee schools were socioeconomically disadvantaged—compared to a state average of 61 percent.⁶
- Thirteen percent of students served were White—compared to the state average of 24 percent statewide.
- Sixty-nine percent of students served were Latino—compared to a state average of 54 percent statewide.
- Thirty-five percent of students served were English learners (EL)—compared to 22 percent statewide.

Moreover, within grantee schools, the 33 percent of students who participated in the CDE expanded learning programs were representative of the larger student body. There was no significant difference in the demographic characteristics of program participants and non-participants.

How do the programs affect school attendance?

Consistently across grades, expanded learning participants in 2015–16 who attended the programs at least 60 days—the standard in research to identify regular, meaningful participation (see above)—had significantly higher school attendance than did non-participants. The school attendance among these regular program participants ranged from 161–171 days out of a 180-day academic year, depending on the type of expanded learning program. The following compares regular program participants to their non-participating peers:

- Regular program participants overall attended an average of 3.5–17 more days of school than their non-participating peers.
- Regular program participants in elementary and middle school attended 6.99–8.52 more days of school than their non-participating peers.
- Regular program participants in high school programs attended 14.5–17 more days of school than their non-participating peers.

Differences Among English Learners

The positive impact on school attendance was especially evident among high school ASSETs participants who were ELs, suggesting that the CDE expanded learning program participation is particularly beneficial for them. Among non-participants, ELs attended an average of 2.3–7.4 fewer school days to their non-EL peers, depending on

⁶ Socioeconomically disadvantaged is defined by the CDE as a combination of being eligible for FRPM and parent education level.

grade level. However, among ASSETs participants this gap diminished, and in some cases disappeared. This significant benefit was not found among elementary and middle school participants.

Financial Benefits to Schools

The increases in school day attendance for expanded learning participants specifically is equivalent to \$163,251,341 in ADA funding for schools serving grades kindergarten through eight, and \$19,978,204 for schools serving grades nine through twelve. Without this positive gain in school day attendance, grantee schools may have lost a total of \$183,229,545 in ADA funding from the state.

Discussion

Supporting Students in Need

In short, within the confines of the money available through the state ASES and federal 21st CCLC programs, the CDE has funded expanded learning programs in over 4,500 schools that have served over 800,000 students throughout the state. The students enrolled in these schools and participating in the programs were overwhelmingly from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities and were overwhelmingly students of color, with a high proportion of them being ELs. These programs are inclusive. An average of one-third of the enrolled students within grantee schools were program participants and demographically reflected the overall student body.

These are, in general, high-need students that are particularly likely to benefit from the supports and opportunities that the CDE's expanded learning programs provide, especially in regard to overcoming the state's persistent racial/ethnic and socioeconomic achievement gaps and the underlying opportunity gap.

The Income and Racial Achievement Gaps

In California and nationally, educators have long struggled to close two inter-related gaps: the poorer academic performance by students of color and low socioeconomic status compared to their peers who are White and of high socioeconomic status. California has a persistent racial/ethnic achievement gap; although in 2018, state standardized test scores showed a slight narrowing of the gap. White and Asian students performed at rates roughly double, and in some cases triple, that of Latino and Black students (CDE, 2018). Similar racial/ethnic disparities are found in self-reported grades on the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) (Hanson, Austin, & Li 2012; Voight, et al. 2013). In addition, poverty has been rising in the United States, affecting 22 percent of youth, the second highest rate in the developed world, and has become more concentrated in segregated neighborhoods. Economically disadvantaged students are at a high likelihood of trailing substantially behind more-affluent peers on academic

achievement tests. According to Sean Reardon (2013, 2016) at Stanford University, the income achievement gap is now twice that of the Black-White gap.

The Opportunity Gap

These two achievement gaps are inextricably connected, as a disproportionate and rising number of economically disadvantaged families are people of color. Underlying both problems is an *opportunity gap* that many youths in poor and marginalized communities experience—a dearth of supports, resources, and enriching experiences that have been linked to achievement, positive youth development and resilience, and overall well-being.

It has been estimated that, nationally, youth from higher-income families are twice as likely to access enrichment and skill-building opportunities than their peers from lower-income families (Putnam, Fredrick, & Snellman 2012). Results of the CHKS have shown that Black, American Indian, and Latino students have generally and consistently reported lower levels than their White and Asian peers on positive school climate indicators such as school safety, connectedness, and three essential developmental supports: caring adult relationships, high expectations, and meaningful participation. Schools that serve mostly Black and Latino students also have lower overall positive school climate ratings on these indicators than schools that serve mostly White and Asian students—even when adjusting for student socioeconomic status.

These CHKS indicators are inter-related conditions that have a profound influence on school success, overall well-being, and whether youth thrive, especially in communities challenged by adversity and marginalization. Research has shown that the three developmental supports can serve as protective factors that mitigate against the adverse effects of poverty, marginalization, trauma, and other risk factors, as well as help promote resilience and positive educational and personal outcomes (Benard 2004). Safe schools, rich in these developmental supports, help foster school connectedness and the acquisition of social-emotional competencies linked to success. The lack of these conditions in schools may be one of the contributing factors in the achievement gaps (Austin et al. 2007; Voight 2014).

How California Department of Education’s Expanded Learning Program Meets These Needs

The CDE’s expanded learning programs are an important means to address the achievement and opportunity gaps because they provide the additional educational and developmental enrichment that so many students need, particularly in disadvantaged communities. A large and growing body of research has documented that programs that have the most positive outcomes are those that do not simply provide a safe and supervised place for students beyond the end of the normal school day. Successful programs also intentionally aim to enhance the learning that occurs in the classroom and provide youth with the developmental supports, opportunities, and skills that research shows are central to success in school, career, and life. Successful programs

“expand” what youth learn and experience, and build competencies they need to succeed with clear, intentional programming that targets specific outcomes. They address the needs of the Whole Child—academic, social, emotional, and physical (see, for example, CDE/California Afterschool Network [CAN] 2014; Little, Wimer, & Weiss 2008; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan 2010; Vandell 2013; Vandell et al. 2015; McCombs et al. 2017; Washington Department of Education 2017).

The goal of the CDE Expanded Learning Division is to ensure that all youth in need have access to such high-quality programs, rich in both academic and developmental supports. This is the vision captured in the CDE’s definition of expanded learning in the California *Education Code* Section 8482.1(a):

“Expanded Learning means before school, after school, summer or intersession learning programs that focus on developing the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs and interests of pupils through hands-on, engaging learning experiences.”

Programs are charged with engaging in a process of data-driven Continuous Quality Improvement and implementing The 12 Quality Standards—including safe and supportive environments, engaging learning, and active participation (CDE/CAN 2014). Particular attention is directed to fostering arguably the most important of all protective factors: caring adult relationships. The CDE further provides its programs with technical assistance in meeting these goals through a statewide and comprehensive System of Support for Expanded Learning.

A recent national survey documented a high need and demand for quality after school programs in communities of concentrated poverty. Parents in these communities reported that they provide essential services and opportunities their communities otherwise lacked: a safe, supportive, and enriching environment where youth can receive enhanced opportunities for physical activity, extra learning, homework assistance, and healthy snacks and meals (Afterschool Alliance 2016). As this report shows, the CDE specifically targets, and successfully reaches, disadvantaged and marginalized youth in need of such program supports, helping California narrow its persistent achievement and opportunity gaps.

Fostering Program and School Attendance

Two other notable findings from this report are the high levels of both program attendance and participant school attendance. For either expanded learning or school classes to have a measurable benefit, youth have to attend regularly and be exposed sufficiently to the positive effects of programming. Maximizing attendance is essential (McCombs, et al. 2017). High program attendance further can be seen as indicative of the perceived value of the programs among youth and their parents.

Over one-third of students in grantee schools attended a CDE-funded program and almost three-quarters of elementary and middle school program participants attended them for 60 or more days—a standard in the field for the level of participation needed

for meaningful improvements to occur. Attendance days were much lower among high school students. This is not surprising given that ASSETs attendance is less sequential, and it warrants further study of strategies to better meet the needs of older adolescents. Overall, the high level CDE program attendance lays a solid foundation for positive outcomes to occur.

The most positive finding in the report is the higher level of school attendance among program participants. Although program participants differed very little from non-participants in the same schools, demographically, the three-quarters of participants who made the 60-day attendance threshold attended significantly and meaningfully more days of school than their non-participating peers in the same schools after controlling for other characteristics. This was especially true among ELs in high school. Not only did program participants thus receive more exposure to academic instruction, but this further financially benefited the schools by preserving the allocated ADA funding that grantee schools were eligible to receive, potentially by over \$180 million.

Previous research on the effect of after school programs on school attendance showed mixed results. One suggested reason is that few evaluated programs actually specified increasing school attendance as a primary goal (Kremer, et al. 2015). California's program may be positively improving school attendance because of the emphasis the CDE has placed on this outcome both directly and indirectly. Directly, by requiring grantees to report on school day attendance as an outcome measure. Indirectly, by requiring implementation of quality standards designed, in collaboration with the schools, to improve learning, foster school engagement, and build learning-related skills.

The Unmet Need

Although CDE's expanded learning programs are reaching high numbers of high-need students throughout the state, many others in need are not being served. The unmet need is high. The Afterschool Alliance (2014) estimates that 19 percent of California children are unsupervised after school and 49 percent of the children not currently attending an after school program would enroll if one was available. It is also estimated that over 2,900 low-income California schools and about one-fifth of the state's 1.3 million ELs do not have access to after school programs. Although a school, with 50 percent of enrollment eligible for FRPM, qualifies for ASES funding, the CDE was only able to award grants to schools with an FRPM rate of more than 79.59 percent in the 2015–16 academic year, due to excess demand (Hay & Davis 2017).

Even existing grantees struggle to meet the needs of their program participants with available funding. Grantees only have funding for an average of about one-third of students to attend the program. The 2016–17 cohorts of ASES and 21st CCLC applicants requested over \$143 million more in funding than was available.

Conclusion

The CDE's efforts to provide high-quality expanded learning to students are bearing fruit, although there is still a large unmet need due to funding limitations. The programs are reaching high-need youth across the state in need of the benefits the programs provide. Overall, CDE grantees have a high level of program participation and have had a positive impact on school attendance among participants—an important outcome indicator. Improvements under way in data collection will enable future reports to better examine how the CDE's programs are impacting academic and developmental outcomes.

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Appendix: The California Department of Education's Expanded Learning Division Programs

The CDE's Expanded Learning programs are partnerships between schools and local community resources to provide students with support for academic achievement, literacy, and educational enrichment in safe and constructive environments during non-school hours. The primary focus is on academic enrichment, but CDE emphasizes the importance of fostering positive youth development and well-being in achieving school and life success. The programs are focused on providing high-quality services to economically disadvantaged and low-performing students who are most in need of these enrichment opportunities. Program funding occurs through two sources: state After School Education and Safety and the federal 21st CCLC.

The state's **ASES Program** was approved by voters in 2002 with the passage by voters of state Proposition 49 and funded in 2006. The ASES Program funds local programs for grades kindergarten through 9 that provide economically disadvantaged students with a physically and emotionally safe and constructive environment and academic and developmental enrichment through partnerships between schools and communities. Funding priority is given to programs in schools where a minimum of 50 percent of pupils are eligible for the federal free or reduced-price meals program. Grantee programs must specifically provide two elements:

- An educational and literacy element that provides tutoring and/or homework assistance designed to help students meet state standards in one or more of core academic subjects (reading/language arts, mathematics, history and social studies, or science).
- An educational enrichment element of additional services, programs, and activities that reinforce and complement the school's academic program, such as positive youth development strategies (e.g., relationship building), visual or performing arts, prevention activities, career awareness and work preparation activities, or community service-learning. An emphasis is also placed on providing opportunities for physical activity and a healthy snack or meal.

The **21st CCLC Program**, federally funded but administered by the state since 2002, parallels the design and requirements of the state ASES, but targets k-12 students in high-poverty and low-performing schools and requires grantees to provide academic and enrichment supports. Funding in California is reserved for schools eligible for Title I schoolwide programs or those that serve a high percentage of students from economically disadvantaged families, with priority given to schools designated as "in need of academic improvement." Grantees are primarily charged with implementing research-based strategies to improve academic achievement in core content areas, with an aim to close the racial/ethnic achievement gap. They must implement research-based strategies to improve academic achievement in core content areas and provide enrichment services that reinforce and complement the academic program, as well as provide family literacy and related educational development services.

California was unique in 2003 in earmarking half of its 21st CCLC funds specifically for the design, development, and evaluation of high school programs through the **ASSETs Program**. ASSETs programs must include two components: (1) An *academic assistance* that shall minimally include exam preparation, tutoring, homework assistance, or college preparation; and (2) Enrichment activities such as community service, career and technical education, job readiness, opportunities for mentoring and tutoring younger pupils, service learning, arts, computer and technology training, physical fitness, and recreation activities.