

## Leveraging Out-of-School Learning to Boost High School Success: A Proposed Federal Investment

**Goal:** To increase high school success and graduation rates for struggling students by keeping middle school and high school youth in school and improving their skills and motivation to achieve while simultaneously keeping youth positively engaged during the after school hours.

**Strategy:** To identify and grow effective school, community, business, and faith-based partnerships that extend time engaged in learning and enrichment for middle school and high school students and support rigorous high school reform efforts. We propose an investment in local and national afterschool “centers of excellence” that provide low-income middle and high school students with marketable skills, academic assistance, civic engagement/service learning opportunities, and connections to the community, thereby increasing their preparation for and success in high-quality, college-track high schools.

**Background:** As the nation struggles with approaches for improving high school achievement and preparation for entering college and the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce, we are finding that the important transition years – the middle grades – are critical. Many American youth enter high school so far behind and so disengaged that they never catch up. This alienation is at the root of the nation’s 50 percent drop-out crisis among low-income youth. Furthermore, with all the pressures on the school day, more time is needed to ensure that students are prepared during these transition years for long-term success.

An important but often overlooked strategy to ensure the success of students is to use the after school hours productively. Youth spend just 20 percent of their waking hours in school. While many well-off families routinely expand their children’s learning and development through private tutors, classes, clubs and other enrichment activities, many families in low-income neighborhoods find these options to be unavailable, unaffordable, or of low-quality. This disparity contributes to the achievement gaps among demographic groups.

**Federal investment:** To complement the current federal investment in afterschool, the bulk of which supports afterschool programs for elementary students, it is time for policymakers to consider a new federal investment to expand the learning day for students in the middle grades and high school years. A federal investment could advance this goal by supporting:

- *National demonstration programs* -- A significant investment in competitively selected national models -- high quality multi-site programs, including those that operate in more than one state – will enable these proven programs to serve additional low-income children, expand to new sites, and participate in activities that will help expand the knowledge base for programs and spread effective

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practices. Funding will support proven models with strong links to high school reform and college access.

- *State and local programs for middle and high school-aged youth* -- Competitive funding will support states that have developed a plan for (1) local “centers of excellence” that will serve children and spread effective practices, and (2) program expansion into targeted high-need, low-income areas.
- *Development and dissemination of effective practices* - Funding will support activities that spread effective practices to enhance programs’ ability to increase high school success for low-income students. Such activities include conducting research and evaluation, developing and disseminating best practices, preparing educators to work in the afterschool field, and providing training and technical assistance based on effective practices. Funded activities should focus specifically on strengthening the link between effective out-of-school learning and development for older children and high school success.

We suggest that eligible programs have the following characteristics:

- Intensity - increase learning opportunities by at least 30 percent (or a minimum of 300 hours per year)
- Time - operate outside of regular school hours during the afterschool period, with the option of before school, weekends, vacation periods, and summer breaks
- Eligibility - public or private non-profit organizations, including local education agencies, with priority to partnerships
- Population to be served - programs serve primarily low-income students in some or all of the middle and high school grades
- Outcomes - programs must articulate measurable academic, social, behavioral and community outcomes. These may include student attendance, retention, school discipline referrals, grade promotion, high school completion, grades, standardized test scores, application and admission to competitive high schools, post-high school job placements, application and admission to post-secondary education institutions, and civic engagement/service learning, among others
- Youth Engagement - youth should be actively engaged in the development and implementation of the program through mechanisms such as youth advisory boards
- Community Engagement - deeply engage parents and/or community volunteers (including business, faith-based, and grass-roots community volunteers)

Programs would qualify for funding if they:

- Have a compelling design with intended outcomes, such as those mentioned above
- Demonstrate evidence of effectiveness in achieving these outcomes
- Employ systems for tracking progress toward measurable outcomes
- Use evaluation for continuous improvement
- Engage the community, including involving business and community volunteers in program delivery
- Involve families

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- Link to comprehensive high school or middle school reform efforts
- Employ strategies to attract and engage youth in programming and program development

**Proposed Funding:** We propose that an initial federal investment make available \$500 million divided as follows:

- \$225 million National demonstration models (to support 10 large grants of \$5 - \$15 million per year that will be matched with private funding on a one to one basis) (45%)
- \$225 million State and local programs (Provide grants on a competitive basis to state education agencies that meet defined quality criteria; state education agencies then make competitive grants to local programs and partnerships that are designated as Centers of Excellence or that agree to serve targeted low-income areas.) (45%)
- \$50 million Development and dissemination of effective practices, research, and evaluation (10%)

Grants should be made on a five year cycle with clear quality criteria and opportunities for renewal for high-performing grantees.