Extending, Accelerating, & Connecting Learning:
A CASE STUDY OF AKRON’S PIONEERING SCHOOL-COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
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Executive Summary

In response to the standards-based reform models accompanying the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, dedicated, hard-working educators and their school-based partners have worked diligently to implement mandated and recommended reforms. In Ohio as well as in other states, these reform models have helped educators focus on new priorities and develop new capacities. As a result, some of their outcomes have improved.

Unfortunately, not all of the desired outcomes have improved. Schools and districts with funding shortfalls, high staff turnover, and those with high poverty populations have had difficulty reaching performance expectations as manifested in adequate yearly progress. At the same time, school dropouts have reached epidemic numbers, especially in America’s largest urban districts where the chances of graduation amount to a coin toss (Swanson, 2008).

Clearly, standards-based reforms, while essential, are not enough. Something has been missing. Powerful school improvement resources from families and communities comprise this special something. These resources have not been tapped because school and district improvement planning has been “walled-in” and “building-centered” and focused almost exclusively on the regular school day.

Walled-in, building centered improvement models are not without merit. However, they do not enable educators and almost exclusively on the regular school day.

In brief, OST initiatives, programs and services effectively expand existing school and district improvement models. These expanded models address the missing components in standards-driven improvement models. More than this, the best expanded models reinforce and advance standards-based reform models, as OST learning and healthy development are firmly connected to school-based learning and academic-behavioral interventions. In the best case scenario, educators, other human service providers, families, governmental officials, postsecondary education representatives, and private sector leaders develop common purposes in support of young people, schools, and whole systems education reform sometimes called “PK-16” or more simply, birth to career education reform.

As recognition of the enormous potential for expanded improvement models encompassing OST grows, the search for effective, innovative exemplars has accelerated. National foundations such as the C.S. Matt Foundation and the Wallace Foundation have provided leadership. With state governmental and educational policy leaders, foundation leaders have looked for states ready to advance this new century improvement agenda and provide exemplars others can adopt and amend.

Ohio is a prime candidate, owing to the work of its governments, The Ohio Department of Education, the state’s foundation community, and visionary local leaders. To learn more about Ohio’s innovative OST and expanded school/district improvement models, two related evaluations were commissioned. The first focused on a resource map for OST funding (Wade-Mdvanian, et al., 2009).

The second is reported here. This study provided an in-depth exploration of a innovations undertaken by a representative urban school district, together with the city and the county. Thanks to pioneering leaders and multiple innovations, Akron Ohio’s school-community configuration was selected.

A team of researchers from the Ohio State University (OSU) College of Social Work designed the study with guidance from Akron’s leadership and also from experts state-wide. This report provides relevant details about this study’s methods and findings.

This study pays special attention to OST-related learning, especially learning that is organized and mobilized as a potent school and district improvement resource. It focuses on three inseparable kinds of learning. Extended learning occurs outside the regular school day. Accelerated learning, both in school and during OST, speeds up learning and content mastery. Connected learning brings both accelerated and extended learning back to classrooms, supporting students and teachers alike. In short, Akron’s OST initiatives showcase the power of a three-component trilogy: Expanded, accelerated, and connected learning. This report describes relevant examples, as well as describes how some programs and services combine two or more kinds of learning. Several findings results, including:

- Akron’s leaders have developed innovative programs and services that exemplify the potential and power of extended, accelerated, and connected learning as integral, essential components of expanded school improvement.
- Akron’s universal programs and services reach an impressive number of young people and show promising outcomes for students who attend regularly.
- Teachers, especially teachers involved in OST programs and services, report the benefits of expanded school improvement initiatives.
- There is some evidence that Akron’s ELOs benefit parents, and they enhance parent-school relationships via improvements in parent involvement programs.
- Leaders attribute increases in student achievement and improved behavioral outcomes to expanded, accelerated, and connected learning.
- Akron leaders have discovered and developed innovative ways to fund extended, accelerated, and connected learning opportunities and have prioritized funding for the future.
Nothing as bold and creative as Akron’s pioneering school-community initiatives can succeed without infrastructure supports. For example, leadership, funding alternatives, operational quality control mechanisms, and professional development are practical necessities. These several supports are described in the body of this report.

Notwithstanding these notable achievements and promising innovations, Akron’s leaders report that they still have plenty of work to do. Progress can still be made in relation to enhancing academic achievement and school success across the community. Some of this work entails addressing enduring challenges, especially funding and infrastructure-related challenges. Some such work entails anticipating future challenges.

Early evaluations, including this one, attest to the innovative nature of Akron’s work and provide promising indicators of progress and success. Although more evaluations are needed, already it is apparent that Akron’s leaders have provided an exemplar for others in Ohio and elsewhere. Important for educational leaders and community leaders alike, Akron’s exemplary work has profound implications for state policy and the leaders responsible for it.

This report and the study that made it possible have been completed with these several purposes and audiences in mind. Ideally it also will serve Akron’s leaders, especially those who participated in this study.

Above all, the work reported here will have achieved its most important aim if it enables educators and their OST partners to improve outcomes for young people, in turn improving the overall performance profiles of schools and districts. As Governor Ted Strickland recently has proclaimed, Ohio’s immediate economic needs, social development, and civic engagement depend in fundamental respects on a new, expanded approach to education. The pioneering work reported herewith surely represents the kind of creative, innovative school and educational work that Ohio’s Governor had in mind.

“We are only tapping about 20% of the potential. Afterschool still can be improved.”

The National Context

Eight years after the enactment of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, schools and districts continue to leave children behind. For example, school dropout rates have reached epidemic proportions. Evident in diverse schools and districts across the nation, the dropout problem is especially apparent in America’s 50 largest cities where the chances of high school graduation amount to a coin toss (Swanson, 2008).

No one planned for performance problems like these, least of all dedicated educators and their community and state department of education partners. Educators and their partners have strived to address and prevent these problems as they have enhanced both school and district improvement plans. For example, educators have raised standards, aligned standards with curriculum and instruction, provided better mentoring and coaching for teachers, intensified assessments, monitored intervention effectiveness, and fortified accountability mechanisms. All such improvement strategies have yielded, or promise to yield, better outcomes.

The fact remains, however, that these improvements have not solved every problem (e.g., school dropouts), nor have the met every need (e.g., improve the recruitment and retention of qualified principals and teachers). In other words, these improvements, while essential, have not been sufficient. Important as these solutions are, they have not enabled educators and their partners to solve pressing problems, meet urgent needs, capitalize on important opportunities, and thereby improve outcomes for all students.

Something has been missing. The implication is that additional innovations are needed to realize the noble aim of leaving no child behind. Significantly, innovations are needed that transcend the regular school day and extend beyond the long-standing boundaries of schools and districts. In a nutshell, walled-in and building-centered improvement planning focused almost exclusively on the school day are vital, but not enough, to improve outcomes.

Something more is needed. The answer is not another specialized program or service added on to existing improvement plans and causing more incoherence. Nor does the answer lie in new reinforcements for so-called “fortress schools” (Henderson, et al., 2007). Fortress schools barricade educators from family and community resources, assistance, and supports.

Expanded, integrated school and district improvement models are needed. These best models encompass the best parts of walled-in, building-centered models, at the same time that they prioritize new strategies that bridge gaps, meet needs, and solve enduring problems.

One such missing strategy is students’ out of school time (OST). A focus on OST enables educators to develop expanded improvement models. These expanded models capitalize on family and community resources for learning, healthy development, and success in school. At the same time, educators both connect and integrate these resources with learning and instruction during the regular school day.
Expanded School Improvement: A New Day for Learning and a New Learning Day

It is timely to expand improvement priorities to capitalize on resources and opportunities during OST. To reiterate, such expanded improvement planning does not mark an end to twin priorities in walled-in, building-centered improvement models. These priorities are: (1) Increases in academically-engaged learning time as structured by standards and implemented with sound pedagogy; and (2) Assessment-driven, academic interventions tailored to each student’s needs and monitored, via response-to-invention protocols, for continuous quality improvement. Both priorities are mainstays in expanded improvement models. Both can be augmented by programs, services, and opportunities during OST.

Thanks to expanded school improvement models, educators are able to effect dual changes. They are able to strengthen existing academic programs, services, and interventions structured by the regular school day. At the same time, they are able to develop new programs, services and interventions during OST.

The success of this new OST work hinges on new working relationships among educators, human services professionals in community agencies, private sector leaders invested in work-based and career-oriented learning, and families. Success especially hinges on sustainable partnerships with the most important community and neighborhood agencies serving students; and also with private sector organizations and governments committed to positive youth development and student academic achievement.

All such resources typically are under-utilized. Here, then, is a timely important opportunity: OST resources can be tapped strategically to obtain benefits for educators, families, students, and other human service professionals alike. In the process, schools lose their fortress-like character, and both school and district improvement models become more expansive.

Where educators are concerned, it is noteworthy that OST resources comprise a firm pathway toward dramatic improvements in student, school, and district performance. But there is a caveat for this claim: Desirable student, school and district performance outcomes hinge on firm connections between OST learning and interventions and in-school learning and interventions (e.g., Anderson-Butcher et al., 2006; Lawson, in review).

A growing number of national and state reports and emergent evaluative research point in the same direction. Together they indicate that, without this “connective power”, the multiple benefits of expanded school and district improvement models become difficult to obtain. The Mott Foundation’s report provides a case in point.

THE MOTT FOUNDATION REPORT

The C.S. Matt Foundation has long promulgated the core idea that a new approach to schooling is needed. The Foundation has been insistent that schools must capitalize on OST and genuinely engage communities. Toward this end, in 2007 the C.S. Matt Foundation published A New Day for Learning. This visionary report continued this Foundation’s tradition of describing and promoting innovative approaches to education.

Several of the recommendations provided in A New Day for Learning are noteworthy. The report called for the redesign of each student’s day—as indicated by the report’s title. More specifically, the report emphasized that in-school time and out-of-school time needed to be connected and viewed holistically. Such a holistic approach enables educators and their partners to create a seamless learning system, one that connects in-school learning with OST learning opportunities and experiences.

The generic descriptor extended learning opportunities (ELOs) was employed by this report’s authors to describe new OST priorities. In this new approach, students gain access to multiple ways to learn, enjoy the services of community and family teachers and mentors, and are provided with learning experiences schools cannot provide to everyone. Everyone benefits.

Three Important Ohio Initiatives and a Recent, Important Development

States such as Ohio are beginning to follow the C.S. Matt Foundation’s lead. State leaders have begun to examine fresh opportunities for school and district improvement and overall educational performance. Three of Ohio’s initiatives are especially noteworthy.

COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEMS OF LEARNING SUPPORTS

In 2007, the Ohio State Board of Education adopted the Comprehensive System of Learning Supports (CSLS) Guidelines. These guidelines provide a policy structure that guides the design of new systems that enhance learning. CSLS emphasizes new models and strategies for addressing barriers to children’s learning, healthy development, and success in school, while simultaneously emphasizing the import of academic learning and healthy development during OST.

CSLS is “a collection of resources, strategies, and practices, as well as environmental and cultural factors extending beyond the classroom, that together provide the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional support that every student needs to succeed in school and in life (CSLS Guidelines, 2007, p. 4).” These guidelines provide a framework for Ohio’s schools and districts as they begin to develop new and innovative ways to engage children, their families, and communities, in “anytime, anywhere, self-directed learning.”

THE P2C2 REPORT

The second initiative resulted from a charge issued by Governor Ted Strickland and the Ohio Assembly. Ohio’s Private/Public Commission (P2C2) was charged with identifying, describing, and justifying the structures and mechanisms needed for schools and districts to enable more students to succeed; and, more specifically, to enable more students to attain mastery over Ohio’s new, more rigorous high school core curriculum.

Significantly, the P2C2 report incorporated the main ideas from A New Day for Learning, starting with its title. A New Learning Day in Ohio: Supporting Student Success (P2C2, 2008) prioritized learning during out-of-school time as one of its four “game changing priorities.” Emphasizing both the import of anytime, anywhere, self-directed learning and new imperatives for competence with 21st Century Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities, the P2C2 report provided another important descriptor for OST learning.

The three component descriptor was expanded, accelerated, and connected learning. Learning is expanded because it occurs outside the regular school day. Learning is accelerated because students can proceed quickly without regard to the status of an entire class. Accelerated, personalized learning of this kind is a special need and benefit for all students, but especially gifted and talented students. Extended, accelerated learning achieves its full potential when it is connected to classrooms, school curricula, and teachers’ strategies and practices. Firm, effective connections provide the key to a seamless system of education, schooling, and learning, one that links extended learning opportunities with in-school learning and academic achievement. More reflection on these three components identified within the P2C2 work will be provided throughout the report.
Introducing Akron’s Pioneering OST Work

Akron, Ohio was selected for study because its school district and surrounding community partners have made substantial progress in achieving an important aim. Together the district and its partners are striving to ensure ALL children receive an enhanced educational experience, as evident by improved outcomes. This report provides examples of Akron’s progress indicators and early achievements.

As Akron’s innovations and achievements are showcased, it may be tempting to assume that the work was easy to design and implement. Not so! Leaders in Akron and elsewhere quickly encounter both barriers and constraints (i.e., factors and forces that recommend some alternatives and rule out others). These leaders gain valuable experience and expert knowledge as they identify and use relevant facilitators; and, at the same time, as they figure out how best to address the constraints and barriers. They also learn valuable lessons along the way, especially ones that, with hindsight, would have made their work easier, better, and more effective than it was. Leaders, in short, have gained valuable expertise. Their journeys merit further study and inquiry.

The Structure for This Report and the Design of the Study

Other leaders want and need to learn from Akron’s leaders. This report and the study that enabled it have been structured accordingly. The report presents accounts of Akron’s innovations, progress markers, and achievements. With the needs of other leaders in mind, this report also presents action-oriented descriptions (i.e., how Akron’s leaders proceeded and some of the lessons they have learned).

To capture the most important chapters in the Akron story, the OSU evaluation team implemented multiple methods. More specifically, the team completed nine key informant interviews. Interviewees included two community representatives, four school district representatives, two city administration representatives, and one state-level politician. Time spent with key leaders in Akron’s Office of Community Partnerships and Customer Service was especially valuable. In addition to these interviews, the OSU team organized a focus group, which involved 7 staff members within the Akron Out-of-School Time. Finally, the team reviewed various historical documents, including past evaluation reports from Kent State University, funded grant applications, school planning documents, and relevant websites.

To ensure the validity of its findings, the OSU team implemented acceptable follow-up measures. For example, team members completed validity checks with leaders from Akron Public School (APS) and the Akron community. To further validate the study, key Akron leaders also reviewed and amended final versions of this report.

Ideally, the knowledge derived from this study and presented in this report will be valuable to three main stakeholder groups. Akron’s pioneers are the first group. Pioneering leaders of other OST and ELO initiatives are the second. State policy leaders are the third. Of course, all three groups need to understand Akron’s facilitators, constraints, and barriers.

It is also important to note, however, that Akron has many special characteristics, and this report begins with some of them. To begin with, place, local context, timing, and leadership always influence the development of innovations. Once these characteristics are identified and described, readers of this report are in a better position to understand the ways in which Akron’s unique characteristics have both facilitated and constrained their work. For example, outsiders can make informed decisions about which of Akron’s innovations they can replicate, which ones they can borrow and adapt, and which ones are specific to Akron and not amenable to transfer. The audience should keep this in mind as lessons learned from Akron are derived.
THE CITY OF AKRON

Located in Northeastern Ohio, the city of Akron was founded in 1825. Today, this city is home to approximately 209,000 citizens. It is the fifth largest city in Ohio. Of those people currently living in Akron, 72.2% are under the age of 5; 25.3% under the age of 18, and 13.5% are over the age of 65. Akron's population is 67.2% White, 28.5% African-American, 1.5% Asian, 2.1% multi-racial, and 1.2% Hispanic or Latin origin. The median household income for Akron residents is $31,835, which is below the Ohio average. In fact, 17.5% of Akron citizens are living below the poverty line. Given current economic conditions, the number of persons challenged by poverty is projected to increase.

Akron's location is special. For example, 50 percent of the U.S. population lives within a 500-mile radius of Akron. Additionally, Akron's network of superhighways makes this city a day's drive for over 111 million people.1

Akron was once known as the “Rubber Capital of the World” because it was home to the rubber industry. Companies operating in Akron included Goodrich Tire, Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, Firestone Tire, and General Tire. Unfortunately, these days are gone. Like many former industrial cities, much traditional industry has left Akron.

Unlike some other cities, Akron has maintained important industrial assets. For example, Akron remains a world-renowned center of polymer research and development, including the Polymer Science Institute of the University of Akron. In addition to the Polymer Science Institute, Akron also is home to 400 polymer related companies, which together employ approximately 35,000 people.

AKRON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Akron is located in Summit County. Akron Public Schools (APS) is this county’s largest school district. APS boasts an average daily enrollment of 24,968 students. 48% of the students are African-American, 42.4% are White, 6% are multi-racial, 2% are Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1.4% are Hispanic. The majority of these students are economically disadvantaged (79.7%). 17.5% have a diagnosed disability.

Based on student performance in 2007-2008, APS was judged to be in need of Continuous Improvement. Improvement was signaled because the district met just 5 of the 30 state performance standards: (1) 4th grade writing, (2) 10th grade reading, (3) 10th grade writing, (4) 11th grade reading, and (5) 11th grade writing.2

Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) is another important performance marker in Ohio. APS overall met the AYP standards for attendance rates and graduation rates (76.4%). Unfortunately, some of the APS schools have not meet AYP standards for two consecutive years, which places these schools in a special status called School Improvement. Schools with this categorization are not permitted to exit this status until that have achieved AYP for two consecutive years.

Significantly, 19 of APS’ schools are in this school improvement status. 8 have maintained this status for 3 years or more. Moreover, 776 of APS graduates participated in the American College Test (ACT) during the 2006-2007 academic year. For students, the ACT, like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), is the test completed in conjunction with an application to a college or university. In the vein, 254 of APS’ graduates participated in Advanced Placement tests, which allow high school students to earn college credit.

AKRON’S SCHOOL/COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

The above descriptions of APS and the city of Akron indicate needs, problems, assets, and opportunities. They provide grounds for both optimism and concern. And they certainly reveal the importance of timely, effective improvements. Improvements related to, and solid innovations for, extended, accelerated, and connected learning comprise top priorities. A school-community partnership provided an ideal mechanism to frame and address these priorities.

The city of Akron and APS enjoyed a previous history of partnership-related work. In 2001, Akron’s mayor decided to enhance this partnership. The mayor invested some of the city’s tax revenue in the schools in support of afterschool programs. This investment was designed to increase the city’s relationship with school district and, at the same time, help young people. In brief, it was a wise, strategic investment because it was dovetailed with other urban development initiatives.

Chief among these other initiatives was a revisiting and recharging of Imagine Akron 2025. Originally launched in 1998, Imagine Akron 2025 was a citizen-driven planning initiative involving the work of over 400 volunteers. Together these dedicated volunteers and leaders from the Akron mayor’s office developed a plan that would make Akron a center for transportation, business, the visual and performing arts, entertainment, and a residential neighborhood. This plan contained 26 goals. All were structured to ensure that Akron will be successful when it turns 200 years old in 2025. Many of these goals were focused on the enhancement of education in the Akron area.

Significantly, one of these goals was to make school buildings centers of learning and technology, at the same time opening them to the community. With the establishment of Community Learning Centers (CLCs) in some of the schools, this important goal of the city-school district partnership had been achieved. CLCs, in short, represent a new design. They serve children and youth during the day and community members during evenings, weekends, and the summer months when young people are not there. Toward this end, each CLC has a tailored administrative arrangement: APS staff members are there for regular school, and staff members from a community agency such as the Urban League are there for OST programs and services for community members.

Leaders of the Akron partnership demonstrated solid political savvy for such a community agency-school merger or configuration. They offered evidence to residents with voting rights that schools benefited them. This benefit system was important because just 20% of residents in Akron have children enrolled in the APS system. Under these circumstances, school levies perceived to benefit only schools and children are difficult to pass.

In short, Akron’s partnership leaders, and especially its school and district leaders, arrived at an important conclusion. They concluded that, if the schools were open to the entire community, more adult resident-voters would value the schools and support future levies. To fund this innovative idea, city officials placed a municipal income tax of one-quarter percent on the ballot. Voters responded favorably; 64% of voters supported the tax. This new tax generated the funds needed to match state funds provided by Ohio School Facilities Commission.

1 These statistics were derived from the U.S. Census and the Akron City website. Complete references are provided at the end of this report.
2 These statistics were derived from the Akron City School’s District Report Card developed by the Ohio Department of Education.
The current CLC plan includes 37 rebuilds, 5 renovations and the construction of 2 new buildings that were not part of the Akron Public Schools at the beginning of the program [Helen Arnold and the National Inventors Hall of Fame CLC]. 15 buildings are slated for decommission. 11 buildings are now complete & occupied by APS staff & students, with 10 more buildings currently under construction and the remainder of the buildings either in design, or slated for a future segment of the project. All are jointly owned by the city and the school district. These buildings are also available to the public as described above. Construction is expected to end in approximately 2018. Currently the established CLCs are bridging the school and community.

For example, the Boys and Girls Club and the local YMCA collocate programs in these community schools. One CLC school, the Helen E. Arnold Community Learning Center, shares its site with the Akron Urban League. The school and Urban League share a large gymnasium, an art and music room, media center, and a cafeteria (a unique combination of a cafeteria and an auditorium). The Urban League offers day care services along with special classes like afterschool enrichment.

Several infrastructure supports for these centers and expanded learning are noteworthy. First, APS has the Office of Community Partnerships and Customer Service. Its three staff members are committed to the ongoing leadership and administration of this initiative. Additionally, the Mayor’s Office has appointed an administrator who has lead responsibility for education and CLC-related priorities.

The Business Advisory Council is another key infrastructure support. It consists of line staff in private sector organizations. These staff members provide technical assistance and consultation supports. For example, the council examined APS’ insurance policy and recommended an alternative, thereby saving more than a million dollars. The Council examined the existing computer technology system and recommended a better one. The Council’s members also improved purchasing and budgeting procedures across the system.

These co-owned CLCs have what is known locally as a “condo clause.” This clause, freely interpreted, has a special meaning to school and city leaders. It is a kind of “escape clause.” Basically, if insurmountable problems develop between the school and the city, the front entrance of the building, four classrooms, the art room, gymnasium, and cafeteria could be closed off from the traditional school. The City would have exclusive rights to use them. Fortunately, the condo clause has not been evoked.

The CLCs uniquely have provided facilities for the kinds of programs and services needed to achieve the overall goal of enhancing education city-wide. Leaders have used the federal 21st Century Community Learning Center model as a guide. Together they ensured that both APS and community resources have been utilized. Some programs and initiatives have been housed in the Akron Public Schools, while others have been located in organizations throughout the city. This important school-community configuration has enabled Akron’s young people to experience extended, accelerated, and connected learning.

Moreover, each kind of learning is defined and described in greater detail as Akron’s innovations are described. It shall become apparent that some innovations fit under two or more categories. For example, some combine accelerated and connected learning, while others combine all three. In short, where Akron’s innovations are concerned, these categories tell just part of the story.

In the same vein, this exploratory study focuses selectively, not exhaustively, on the multiple initiatives underway in Akron. In no way can one report showcase all that is underway in Akron. This case study serves as a snapshot of some relevant innovations. Additional studies are needed, which build from this one and its focus on extended, accelerated, and connected learning.

Extended Learning

Extended learning is an important school improvement resource. Unfortunately, it also is a largely untapped, resource for students’ learning, academic achievement, and overall success in school. Extended learning earns its name because it occurs outside the school walls and beyond the regular school day (Wade-M libertine, et al., 2009). Although some such learning is informal and unplanned, ideally extended learning opportunities and experiences are planned with improved outcomes in mind. Ideally formal extended learning opportunities (ELO) are connected to school-based teaching and learning experiences in classrooms. In other words, ELO’s are most potent when they include provisions for connected learning (described later).

EXPLORING THE RATIONALE FOR EXTENDED LEARNING

The rationale for extended learning justifies future investments in it. To begin with, studies of how young people spend their time dovetail with everyday observations. In a nutshell, children and youth spend only a fraction of their waking hours in schools. Estimates range from 9.15% (Irby & Tolman, 2002; Larson & Verma, 1999). In the same vein, studies indicate that, typically, slightly more than half of this time in school is academically engaged learning time. Limited hours in schools coupled with restricted academically-engaged learning time is not a formula for success for all students. Extended learning opportunities and experiences respond to this serious limitation.

A second part of the rationale derives from the roles and responsibilities of teachers, especially how these roles and responsibilities impact the daily classroom realities for students. Each day, even the best teachers confront formidable challenges and constraints. For example, typically teachers are responsible for large classes with diverse learners. Because teachers work alone, this ever-present reality often recommends direct instruction or at least a limited range of pedagogical strategies.

At the same time, teachers typically have heavy workloads, consisting of five or more such classes. These workload realities also constrain teachers’ instructional and pedagogical alternatives. Some alternatives with rich potential are ruled out at the same time that others, which offer selective benefits, are implemented.

ELOs have the potential to respond to these constraints, also meeting students’ needs for alternative strategies for teaching and learning. More concretely, multiple kinds of learning and teaching can be pursued during out-of-school time in both community and family settings. Examples of different kinds of learning include computer technology-assisted learning,
service learning, and embedded learning in which a student’s favorite activity such as basketball is structured to enable academic learning in reading, writing, and mathematics (Lawson, in review). Examples of different kinds of settings include boys and girls clubs, the YM(W)CA, neighborhood agencies, faith-based organizations, community technology centers, and homes.

**Akron’s Extended Learning Innovations**

Akron’s leaders have made important strides in reaping the enormous potential of extended learning. An initiative called Akron Out-Of-School Time arguably is the most important example. It includes Akron After School (AAS) elementary programs and middle school programs such as, Perkins Activities Central (PAC), Riedinger, and Jennings Middle School. More than 2,500 students representing 14 schools (11 elementary and 3 middle schools) were served during 2007–2008! Both AAS and PAC are described next.

**AAS**

The vision of AAS is “to provide Hope for the Future” through diverse, after school experiences for our Akron Public School children.” AAS, like the CLCs, involves a city/school partnership. This partnership provides academic intervention in the areas of reading and math. Classroom teachers are employed to do the teaching, and extracurricular enrichment also is provided.

AAS operates during OST—from 2:30 – 5:30 P.M. It offers parents/guardians a viable, important alternative to traditional child care through its added focus on academic learning. In essence, standards for quality in OST programming are ensured (i.e., safety, supervision, healthy snacks, etc); while specific attention is also paid toward promoting healthy development and supporting academic success.

Currently the program is offered in 11 of the district’s highest poverty, lowest performing elementary schools. The participating schools are Barrett, Glover, Harris, Lawndale, Leggett, Lincoln, Margaret Park, Mason, Rankin, Robinson, and Schumacher. Significantly, AAS serves in excess of 1800 elementary children each week representing over 60% of students across all elementary schools! These numbers indicate an important achievement.

AAS is unique in several respects, but not because it is housed in school buildings. Its uniqueness stems from the bridges it has developed between school and community programming. Salient details about these bridges are instructive to others interested in extended [and connected] learning.

To reiterate, classroom teachers provide academic intervention at AAS, while community agency representatives provide the enrichment component. Enrichment activities include cartooning, ballet, cheerleading, dance, crafts, homework study club, mad science, martial arts, sewing, theater, and golf. These exemplary activities only begin to tell AAS’ story.

In fact, AAS provides 475 enrichment programs every week! This enrichment component is another significant achievement. A variety of community partners pitch in to make this happen—at least 55 organizations overall. Partners include entities such as the University of Akron, the Community Health Center, Girl Scouts, The City Recreation Department, Weathervane Community Playhouse, Mad Science of Ohio, the Akron Zoo, and Say Yes to Tennis.

In addition to community organizations, many community members provide enrichment to AAS children. Some are paid and others volunteer. Either way, these community members make important contributions. They offer activities such as drumming, African American History, drum lines, gospel choir, and hip hop dance.

The AAS approach mirrors emergent best practices with young people during OST. This approach strikes an important balance between enrichment activities that are fun and academic priorities that are vital to improvements in academic achievement and school success. The enrichment activities effectively attract and “hook” young people, enabling academic learning to be extended beyond the school day. In this fundamental way, AAS effectively integrates relevant knowledge about positive youth development with knowledge about powerful learning outside of school.

**FORMAL EVALUATIONS OF AAS**

Beginning in 2003, evaluators from Kent State University have conducted evaluations of AAS. They discovered a powerful benefit. Students who attended AAS regularly demonstrated increases in their academic achievement!

More specifically, elementary students attending the program had higher reading and math achievement test scores than non attending peers (ShamaDavis, 2007; ShamaDavis & Keuchel, 2006). Among students attending AAS, the ones who attended the most had the highest academic scores.

“The enrichment activities are opening students’ eyes to something different. We don’t have basketball and football, as they get this all the time whenever they want. We have golf, tennis, crafts, theater, and dance. The kids are excited to go. Overall that is going to make a difference. It builds up their self-esteem as they can do something new. An example is helpful. We first started teaching the fourth grade. One of the items on the fourth grade proficiency practice test was about golf. One of the participants raised his hand and asked “What is golf? What is the hole?” We were able to teach this and he learned it in enrichment. We made the connections for him and now that he understands things better.”

Additionally, evaluators found that students comprising the “Attended Regularly” group benefited in comparison to two groups of students: (1) those with sporadic attendance; and (2) those who did not attend. For example, students who regularly attended demonstrated high rates of oral fluency on the DIBELS Oral Fluency test (This test measures reading growth over the course of the year).

Of course, these academic benefits do not tell the entire story. The mere fact that the students attending AAS enjoy safe, health-enhancing environments during OST—and especially immediately after school—offers multiple benefits. As everyone knows, many problem behaviors (delinquency, early sexual activity, substance abuse) occur in the hours immediately following school, especially when young people are not supervised and provided with constructive activities. AAS’ benefits include the prevention of problem behaviors and, on the flip side, the promotion of healthy development.

Together academic benefits and positive youth development benefits represent significant economic returns on monetary investments in AAS. AAS’ average cost per student is just $12.00 per day! The importance of these investment returns are illuminated when the costs of failure for the same students are "I don’t like it that things like afterschool programming and tutoring are supplemental. If they are important we must mainstream them. They need to be an integral part of the educational system of the state.”
assessed. For example, when students drop out of school, become parents too early, engage in crime and must be placed in residential centers, and require treatment for substance abuse, the economic costs are enormous.

AAS thus provides young people and their adult sponsors with the best of both worlds. Desirable outcomes are achieved at the same time that costly problem behaviors and negative outcomes are prevented and reduced.

PERKINS ACTIVITIES CENTRAL (PAC)

PAC extends learning for Perkins Middle School students. PAC originated in 2003 with a $6.3 million investment over five years by John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. This investment focused on positive youth development.

PAC provides a place for children and their families to take advantage of enrichment opportunities after school, on Saturdays, and during the summer months. Today 20 community-based providers offer enrichment and positive youth development experiences for young people and their families. PAC has served more than half of the Perkins’ school population.

Today the Knight Foundation continues to fund a coordinator’s salary and some limited enrichment programming. But the Foundation’s goal was not to provide never-ending funding. The Foundation’s leaders wanted to “seed” an important innovation that would last. So, APS quickly has assumed responsibility for sustaining the program.

When PAC was launched, it was designed originally to improve academic achievement, reduce negative behavior, increase parental involvement, and enhance school engagement. These several goals were strengthened and augmented in the ensuing years, especially as more funders offered commitments. In addition to the Knight Foundation’s support, funding was provided by the City of Akron, Summit County Job and Family Services, the Akron Community Foundation, and the GAR Foundation.

Thanks to this funding and PAC’s leadership, it became known as the “Cadillac” model for afterschool programming. More than this, PAC was a significant social and policy experiment. PAC provided the opportunity to find out how a program without the usual funding barriers could impact young people’s academic and social outcomes for children.

Ultimately, these investments in PAC have contributed to broader school and community outcomes. Specifically, Perkins Middle School Students enrolled in and attending PAC reaped important benefits. Evaluative data suggest that students who regularly attended the program over a sufficient period of time scored higher than other Perkins students on standardized tests, attended school more often, were less tardy, and received suspensions less often (Shama-Davis, 2007; shama-Davis & Bullock, 2008a; Shama-Davis & Bullock, 2008b).

In fact, Perkins met the Ohio State Department of Education’s performance indicator for attendance. Many educators attribute this success to extended learning opportunities offered through PAC. These opportunities facilitate school engagement, and they provide invaluable opportunities for tutoring and mentoring.

Recently, funding for PAC has been reduced. Even so, PAC and its 20 community-based organizations continue to provide students with a number of enrichment activities. Popular activities include after school robotic, digital photography, visual and performing arts, Girl Scouts, a wellness group for girls, and a boys’ support group focused on African traditions, study skills, and leadership known as Alchemy.

Other Notable Examples of Extended Learning Programs and Services

Akron Out-of-School Time, with its PAC and AAS components, remains the most visible example of an extended learning initiative. Even so, other programs are noteworthy, and they are important because they respond to the needs of other target populations of young people. The following examples are indicative of the broad reach of Akron’s extended learning opportunities. A special innovation involves early childhood initiatives.

Kindergarten Readiness Advantage for Summit County: This is a workgroup of the Summit County P-16 Alliance. This program has three main goals: (1) to increase the number of kids ready for kindergarten, (2) to monitor KRAL data [early childhood learning readiness], and (3) to increase the number of licensed early care and educational programs, while also connecting them to Step Up To Quality. This group responsible for this program strives to extend (and enrich) learning for children before they reach the school age.

School Readiness Enrichment Program: This program is another component of AAS. It provides children with experiences designed to enhance their language, literacy, math, social competence, and self-help skills. It also aims to increase family participation in the young child’s learning. The program is offered during the school year for kindergarten students during the after school hours. APS’ kindergarten and first grade teachers provide direct academic services with due recognition that children enter kindergarten with subpar literacy and language skills face a never-ending catch up game that often provides too difficult for them and their families. Approximately 250 students attend.

University Park Alliance: This is an initiative that targets a specific area of the city. This is the area that surrounds the University and the Medical Corridor. Several key initiatives are embedded within the Alliance. Of particular interest is SPARK, a preschool program, connected to Help Me Grow.

In addition to these early childhood initiatives and programs, there are several other ELOs that exist within the community. A few are highlighted here because they may be exemplars for other school communities.
**ODJFS Refugee Children School Impact Program:** This program, operated by Asia, Inc., provides supplemental education services (SES) to refugee students. These SES services are provided in intensive summer programs. Programs focus on reading comprehension and writing with the aim of increasing language acquisition among this targeted population.

**Akron Alternative Academy:** The Akron Alternative Academy is designed for students aged 16-21. These students are seeking an APS diploma via alternative pathways because they have not been successful in a traditional high school. One indicator of their need is that all are at least one grade level behind. Another is that some have dropped out (temporarily). Participating students are identified and referred from home and school. The Academy provides students with small group instruction, individual tutoring, independent study, computer-assisted instruction, and on-site mental health services. Intensive interventions are also used to assist students in passing the Ohio Graduation Test.

The **Akron Opportunity School:** This is an alternative education school for middle school students. It provides social supports for needy students. It targets those students who have repeatedly been suspended for their behavior and/or have had academic problems. When these students are removed from their home school, they are given the option of attending the Opportunity School.

**Miller South School of the Visual and Performing Arts:** This is a middle school in the feeder pattern for Firestone High School. Miller provides an expansive approach to embedded learning; it utilizes the visual and performing arts to facilitate and enhance traditional academic learning. Miller South offers in-depth study in five arts areas – visual art, vocal and instrumental music, dance, and drama – with a talented and creative staff. Additionally, Miller South offers outstanding field trips both in and out of the state and county, including trips to France, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The school received the prestigious “Star Award” from the International Network of Visual and Performing Arts Schools and a “Creative Ticket” award from the Ohio Arts Alliance. The school also received a “Best Practices” award.

**Accelerated Learning**

Accelerated learning is focused on knowledge and skills that are accrued at more advanced levels than what might traditionally be expected given a student’s age and grade level. Moreover, learning is accelerated when any or all of the following three conditions are evident:

First, formal instruction exceeds a given norm or standard, and it may include alternative and more sophisticated strategies not typically available to all students. Second, the pace of learning is more rapid than the norm; and it is determined by the student(s) and assessments of their progress and proficiency. Third, the academic content presented to, and then mastered by, the student exceeds conventional norms and standards. Here too, the age-graded structures of conventional schooling provide a basis for comparison. Quite simply, academic content once taught (and restricted) to students in higher grades and also in higher levels of education (e.g., university) is presented to, and learned by, students earlier in their educational careers (i.e., at earlier grades and levels of the educational hierarchy).

**MORE DETAILS ABOUT ACCELERATED LEARNING**

As industrial age schools become restructured, and as new demands escalate for 21st Century Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities, accelerated learning has become a practical necessity. Because the process of restructuring schools is understandably slow, many opportunities for accelerated learning are offered during OST. Ultimately, both in-school and OST opportunities for accelerated learning are essential, and the two kinds need to be connected. As with extended learning, accelerated learning during OST achieves its full potential when it is connected to classrooms, supporting both teachers and students.

Gifted and talented students are immediate candidates for accelerated learning. Notable examples of Ohio’s accelerated learning programs follow suit. They include Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO), early College High Schools, and the state’s Seniors-to-Sophomores initiative, in which students spend more of their time prior to high school graduation in upper-level schools, colleges, and universities.

But it would be a mistake to equate accelerated learning with gifted and talented education programs. Students who are not engaged and who have fallen behind also are candidates for accelerated learning. For example, accelerated learning often is the antidote for students who are uninspired by textbook-driven learning often described as “drill, skill and no thrill.” In the same vein, the Accelerated Schools national improvement model is founded on an important mantra for students who have fallen behind: Don’t remediate, accelerate!

**ACCELERATED LEARNING INITIATIVES IN AKRON**

Akron Public Schools (APS) is a pioneer in the development of opportunities and formal initiatives for accelerated learning. Thanks to Akron’s leaders, students, families, and community members are provided with accelerated and advanced learning opportunities. Notable examples follow:
STEM Schools

In Ohio and across the nation, a premium is being placed on the mastery of the so-called STEM disciplines—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The rationale is straightforward. Ohio and America need innovative, inventive, and entrepreneurial scientists, mathematicians, and engineers in order to succeed in the new global economy. Akron is also moving in this direction, and already provides students with opportunities to participate regularly in STEM programs using hands-on, problem-solving, project-based learning experiences.

One special innovation is the National Inventors Hall of Fame Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Learning School (NIHF STEM School). This is a special middle school in APS. Planning for this school was originally supported by a 2008 Ohio STEM School planning grant. Partners involved include: APS, the City of Akron, the University of Akron, the National Inventors Hall of Fame Foundation (NIHF), the Greater Akron Chamber, and Akron Tomorrow. This school also is part of the Ohio STEM Learning Network (OSLN) funded by the Gates Foundation and the Battelle Foundation.

The NIHF STEM School is located downtown Akron in the NIHF. It is slated to open in a temporary location in the Fall of 2009. It will serve approximately 100 5th and 6th grade students. It will eventually serve through open enrollment students of all ability levels in grades 5-8, aiming for a total enrollment of over 400 students.

Curricula will emphasize inquiry, especially project-based and problem-based learning strategies whereby students acquire content knowledge in technology, engineering, and mathematics. As with other STEM schools in the USA, 21st Century knowledge and skills will be threaded across the curriculum (Lawson, 2009).

The NIHF STEM School has another important function. It will serve as a Professional Development School for the University of Akron’s College of Education. University students preparing to be teachers and school leaders will be provided internships, observational opportunities, and research experiences. This professional development school partnership configuration is a significant innovation. It represents the realization of plans to enhance the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the education workforce—with due recognition that 21st Century schools depend fundamentally on partnership configuration.

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Destination College is yielding important results for its students. It now has a four year track record of boosting ACT scores and getting first generation students to attend college. For example, in 2008, 34 first generation students participated in Destination College. Of these 34 students, 28 will be attending postsecondary institutions, while two will be enlisting in the military, and four will enter the workforce without pursuing any additional education.

In addition to Destination College, APS has developed firm connections with the University of Akron and other local universities. The aim is to provide students with a smooth transition from high school into College. Four APS programs merit special mention.

**Seniors to Sophomores.** This is a dual enrollment program. Supported by funds awarded from the Chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents and operated in partnership with University of Akron, Seniors to Sophomores aims to expand college access opportunities for identified students. This program relies on an extensive recruitment process. Twenty four students were involved in this program during the 2007-2008 academic year.

Students and their school counselors develop a course schedule that meets both their high school graduation requirements and their future university academic needs. Moreover, the Greater Akron Chamber of Commerce works closely with APS in an effort to target priority coursework and program areas. The aim is to dovetail students’ educational and career plans with Akron’s (and Summit County’s) economic development needs.

**Akron Early College High School at The University of Akron.** Akron Early College High School is a special kind of high school. It was created via a partnership among APS, the GAR Foundation, the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, and the University of Akron. This high school enables students to graduate with a high school diploma, PLUS at least 12 hours of advanced credit toward an associate degree from a community college or a baccalaureate degree from a four-year college or university.

**Summit Can! Go to College.** This new program began in 2008. It combines mentoring and financial support. It targets students who aspire to postsecondary education, but who lack the necessary financial resources. Today it funds 30 students. Each student is provided with a $1,500 annual scholarship. These students, along with another 30 students, will receive $2,500 annually beginning in 2009.

**Work/Career-Relevant Learning for Adults.** Akron’s pioneering leaders are providing work/career-relevant educational experiences for both adults and students. For example, Akron has programs that provide adult education, adult basic & literacy education, and adult vocation services. These programs are sponsored by the Evening High School and the School of Practical Nursing.

**“We are trying to teach community representatives and providers how to align what they are doing with the academic core. We want to make sure they are adding value.”**

“**Work/Career-relevant experiences for students.** This program provides access to work- and career-based learning experiences. Via these experiences, students develop 21st century skills and are able to see their relevance and application.

For example, APS Career Education offers a diverse menu of high school, middle school, and adult programs. Two-year programs for careers such as Automotive technology, construction technology, heating, ventilating and air conditional technology, Administrative Office Technology, Marketing Education, E-Commerce, Computer-Aided Design (CAD) and Computer-Aided Manufacturing are offered for students during their 11th and 12th grades. Similarly, four year programs are offered in the areas of information technology and pre-engineering. Additionally, apprenticeships are available for students who intend to enter the workforce in “the machine trades”, carpentry, welding, and plumbing.

Because young people’s career aspirations and development begin before high school, it is noteworthy that APS has a middle school career education program. This program has several dimensions. Students are provided content in areas such as design and modeling, automation, electronics, robotics, and flight and space.

Middle school students apply all new technologies and instructions to their projects and research while completing hands-on projects independently and in teams. For example, the mathematics, science, and technology integrated “Gateway to Technology” program helps students develop and hone skills in middle school, especially skills that enable them to enter high school with foundational knowledge in engineering.

The goals for the students are relevant and important because they mirror the priority for 21st Century Knowledge and Skills. Program organizers want students to gain proficiency in solving real world problems, use their imaginations in developing creative and innovative solutions, use technology-related tools to do assignments and complete projects, develop the skills they need to create and use products and services, and develop communication and collaboration skills through a team approach to learning. Together, these several competencies mirror those needed for 21st Century Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities. In this fundamental respect, APS is pioneering important priorities for teaching and learning.

Last, but not least, APS and the city are working together to “bridge the digital divide.” Akron will be home to The Knight Center of Digital Excellence, established by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Akron will be the first community to house a demonstration project that showcases how cities can take advantage of universal wireless access. This project will allow Akron to offer wireless internet access throughout the center of Akron, which has the largest concentration of employees [roughly 31,000].

“**Akron OST is not a separate program. Everything is one. It’s all one program...what we do in the school day and what happens out of school. They are the same.”**
Connected Learning

Whether the focus is preschools, K-12 schools, or postsecondary education, the same priority exists for learning during OST. Extended learning and accelerated learning need to be connected to formal teaching and learning in classrooms. Without firm connections, the new formula for school, district, and overall education system improvement is incomplete. The three-component descriptor for this report follows suit: Extended, Accelerated, and Connected Learning.

EXPLORING BENEFITS AND PRIORITIES

When the extended, accelerated, and connected trilogy is evident, students obviously benefit. Important as student benefits are, teachers also benefit. When learning is connected, teachers no longer have to work alone, constrained by the limited hours of the school day and also by the demands of entire classes of students. Homework is not the only proviso for learning during OST, and supports for homework are available and provided. Perhaps above all, at a time when teacher turnover has reached epidemic proportions because of the lonely, isolated work of teaching, connected learning provides an immediate, potent remedy.

Ohio’s new, more rigorous high school core curriculum recommends this three-component approach to learning. Although OST learning is not restricted to the core, the demands of the new core are such that, for many students, success will be difficult to achieve during the regular school day. In brief, the core courses provide a focal point for extended and accelerated learning during OST and relevant connections to school day learning and instruction.

In other words, all educational opportunities should be linked to classroom and focused in part on the “core curriculum.” By ensuring solid, sustainable connections, in-school and community-based program leaders can ensure that they are all working toward the same aim. Examples of Akron’s work in this area follow.

Examples of Akron’s Progress and Achievements with Connected Learning

AAS

To reiterate, AAS provides most of the OST learning opportunities for Akron’s elementary school students. AAS leaders have worked tirelessly to ensure that ALL parts of the program, especially tutoring and enrichment, are directly connected to the academic learning of the school day.

It is commendable that APS leaders strive to be inclusive. An inclusive orientation means that leaders do all they can to avoid inappropriate student labels and categories. For example, leaders assume that every student in the district can be served by expanded, integrated improvement planning that encompasses OST resources. So, while leaders deliberately target some kinds of students with special needs, overall their approach is universal.

“We need to create supports outside the school day that will make learning authentic to kids and will reinforce what the schools are doing in classrooms. This is the only way to raise academic expectations and the achievement of all kids.”

A universal approach means that, in principle, opportunities are open to every student. On the other hand, and mirroring one aspect of comparable initiatives in other school districts, this universal approach presents special challenges. The most obvious challenge is the most important one. Because opportunities are open to all students, and AAS has limited capacity and resources, some students cannot be served. APS simply cannot maintain quality and get desirable outcomes without limiting participation and offering programs and services on a “first come, first served basis.”

Targeting strategies provide one way to address the problem of which students to prioritize and serve. Akron employs targeting strategies. Students falling behind academically are targeted for in-school and OST interventions.

For example, AAS provides targeted academic intervention and expanded enrichment program for students in grades 1st-5th who are reading below basic levels. AAS also serves students who have higher test scores, but benefit from enrichment classes. Both kinds of students are referred by teachers and principals who sometimes rely on students’ test scores to determine needs.

Program leaders have prioritized the development of linkages between the school day and the afterschool tutoring. These connections have been facilitated by an important staffing arrangement. Most of the afterschool tutors and site coordinators are teachers during the school day. In fact, over 180 teachers from AAS are involved and supported through Title 1 dollars. This cross-staffing arrangement is a key mechanism for connected learning.

School improvement planning teams formulate academic intervention plans for each grade level. And then an intervention specialist and the principal identify what AAS staff should focus. TetraData provides a database program that enables planners to “drill down” to identify priority needs and emergent problems indexed against key benchmarks for youth.

Students obviously benefit from this deliberate alignment and coordination strategy, and so do their teachers. In brief, this structural arrangement, facilitated by the innovative role of the teacher liaison, is an exemplar for connected learning.

Furthermore, AAS leaders have worked diligently with OST community enrichment providers to ensure that their enrichment activities directly relate to tangible academic goals. For example, community providers emphasize an important learning/teaching strategy called embedded learning. As the label indicates, academic learning is embedded in activities that young people like and engage in during OST. More specifically, activities such as arts, sport, and music are harnessed for their pedagogical power. Sports, for example, enable students to learn math and science. The arts are harnessed for literacy and language development.

With embedded learning, children learn and use academic content in fun and engaging ways. In some cases, they are experiencing academic learning without knowing it. The adults providing this embedded learning during OST do so by means of formal plans. All enrichment providers are required to submit a curriculum based on grade level standards. Providers also are required to demonstrate that their enrichment program aligns with the state standards/core curriculum. These requirements have improved the success of students. More than this, they have elevated OST providers’ professionalism and commitments to their work.

The “I Can” Series

Parents and caregivers simply must become priorities (and targets) in every framework for extended, accelerated and connected learning. Akron’s pioneering leaders have recognized this priority. One of their innovations is the “I Can” series. It is noteworthy that representatives from other Ohio school districts already are inquiring about how they can adopt and adapt the “I Can” series.
The “I Can” Series is a guide for parents and caregivers. It describes what students should know and be able to do at each grade level, beginning at preschool and continuing to grade 10. The overall guide is made accessible to diverse people through the use of grade level brochures. Each grade level brochure describes the way a student should be able to think, work, communicate, reason, and investigate in each core curricular subject. For example, math, science, social studies, and language arts standards are provided that meet ODE standards.

Additionally, community providers are provided with training about “I Can”. This training is structured to align and connect community providers’ efforts with the school curriculum.

Recently, special education students and their parents-caregivers have been prioritized and targeted accordingly. Brochures are available that identify work skills and employable behaviors for 6-8 and 9-12+ have also been added to these brochures. These guides are providing parents and caregivers with the understanding of the academic goals and expectations for their children and are hopefully improving parents’ expectations for their children.

**Akron Digital Academy**

Akron Digital Academy (ADA), which is district-supported, targets and supports two populations. One is families providing home schooling. The other is high school students not attending traditional classes. Both kinds of students are served by offering courses delivered via the internet. All courses are tuition-free. 673 students are currently enrolled in ADA.

The mission of ADA is “to provide high quality, accessible bridges to the wide world of learning to students who are challenged to complete requirements, who are searching for additional curriculum opportunities, and who many not be able to attend a traditional school environment” (Akron Public Schools, 2008). The tuition-free courses offered are built around the skills and objectives outlined in state and national performance standards, ones that also lead to a high school diploma.

This digital academy offers some important advantages. For example, it is able to provide individualized and flexible teaching and learning for students in grades K-12 through regular assignments and project-based work. Families engaged in home schooling are able to obtain additional, rich learning and teaching resources. Participating families gain access to a K-12 customized curriculum, a computer/fax/scanner, and internet access. Parents also have the opportunity to enhance their child’s learning opportunities by attending field trips and meeting with other students.

“We do a lot of assessments. Kids are identified 100 different ways; mainly using academic data. The EMIS workbooks are given to principals; they work with their school improvement teams to analyze their data. Everything is data-driven; we align interventions based on the pyramid of learning. Everyone has to define how they support high quality teaching and learning and the instructional core.”

**Career Clusters**

Career Clusters are available at the high school level. As the name suggests, these clusters help students with career choices and planning.

Six career pathways are identified in the Ohio School-to-Work Initiatives and in the proposed Standards for Ohio Schools. These pathways are arts and communications (graphic arts, commercial art, business and management finance, marketing, information technology, etc); environment and agricultural systems (animal management technology); health services (dental assisting, pre-engineering, medical technology); Human Resources/Services (cosmetology, early childhood education, fire safety/EMT Tech Prep; Hospitality and Tourism; Restaurant Management; Teacher Academy); and Industrial and Engineering Systems. Akron’s open enrollment process enables many students to take advantage of these vocational opportunities, by allowing individual students to self-select schools and careers tracks based on their interests and strengths.

**Summit County Coalition of Access Programs**

The Summit County Coalition of Access Programs is supported through the P-16 Council of Summit County. It served 245 students in 2006-2007. It focuses on helping students make successful transitions from high school to postsecondary education experiences.

A specific outreach agenda involves the KnowHow2GOOhio Campaign. This initiative is embedded in all local access programs. In 2007, over 2300 8th graders received letters from local businesses describing the importance of taking rigorous courses in high school and the importance of a postsecondary education.

**The Summer Bridge Program**

The Summer Bridge programs provide a special example of connected learning. These programs, focused on the P-16 pipeline, help students transition from 6th grade into 7th and 8th grade into 9th. All 8th graders from Perkins participate in the Summer Bridge program.

**Closing the Achievement Gap**

The goal for this initiative is to provide academic interventions, social supports, mentors, and enrichment experiences for an extremely high risk population of 9th grade males. It focuses on a critical grade level and transition supports for it.

Specifically, this initiative targets young men in the ninth and tenth grades. The aim is to ensure that they have successful first year of high school as they enter the tenth grade. This grade 9 to grade 10 intersection is both vital to student success and a key intervention point for dropout prevention and early intervention.
“We design evaluations at the very beginning. We stop doing what isn’t working. We look at the results. Test scores, attendance, and grades are better for kids who attend than those who don’t. KSU has done evaluations from the very beginning in an effort to document success and help with improvements.”

Akron’s Closing the Achievement Gap operates in three targeted schools. It serves 127 students. Students are identified and targeted via relevant data. The risk factors used are: The student has failed 2 or more core subjects in 8th grade; over age for grade level; frequent absences (10 or more days); and suspended for 5 or more days.

Educators and service providers develop individual service plans for each student. Plans prioritize academic connections to classrooms, family supports, and risk factor reduction and prevention. Specially deployed persons called linkage coordinators facilitate case management services. (Each school has one such coordinator.) The estimated per student cost is $3,000.

To recapitulate: Akron’s innovations for extended, accelerated, and connected learning are exemplary. They enhance student achievement and contribute to school improvement overall. The preceding descriptions serve as “snapshots” in time. The same metaphor is relevant for emergent evaluations.

This innovative work is not done because all such services, programs, and strategies continue to evolve. One implication is that the descriptions provided above are like “snapshots” in time. The same metaphor is relevant for emergent evaluations.

A Snapshot of Evaluation Findings

Another indicator of Akron’s pioneering work is predictable because it is evident in other, pioneering school-family-community initiatives in Ohio and also in other states. Evaluations have not kept pace with program and service innovations and initial implementation. This observation is not a criterion, nor should it be seen as a serious limitation. It is simply another “snapshot in time” (i.e., it is an observation about the current, predictable, and understandable status of Akron’s work).

This report stands as another evaluation. It is a timely response to the need for evaluations, especially ones structured to support continuous quality improvement initiatives. Benefits are maximized when OST learning is connected to, and integrated with, classroom learning and in-school academic/behavioral interventions.

For example, 73.6% of teachers surveyed for one evaluation reported that the students they teach have benefited from enrichment classes. Moreover, 86.6% of the teachers surveyed reported a connection between what students did in the enrichment classes and what these same students needed for reading and math proficiency.

During an era in which teacher turnover has reached epidemic proportions—an estimated 3 out of 5 new teachers leave within 5 years—Akron’s programs promise retention supports. Experienced teachers working in Akron’s OST programs appear to be staying in their under-performing schools because of the promise of OST programs and the supports for teaching these programs provide.

Teachers’ personal benefits are connected with professional ones. To quote one teacher: “We get to play tennis with the kids; we are the teachers having fun. We can be people outside of our administration or our teacher role at the school. It is a relaxed atmosphere. We are able to see the kids in a different light and this benefits us as teachers in the long run.”

There is some evidence that Akron’s ELOs also benefit parents, and they enhance parent-school relationships via improvements in parent involvement programs.

Beyond the benefits accruing to students and their teachers, parents benefit. Parents surveyed as part of a 2005 study at Perkins Middle School reported important program benefits. For example, parents reported that, thanks to the school’s program, they miss work less often, and also that the program makes it easier for them to keep their jobs.

Insofar as increased parent involvement benefits involved parents and schools, the AAS accomplishes both. Thanks to this program, parents are becoming more involved in the school. For example, parents come into the school and ask questions about the after-school program. This initial entry paves the way for other communications and interactions that facilitate home-school relations. In the best cases, genuine parent involvement increases in school-wide activities.

Leaders attribute increases in student achievement and improved behavioral outcomes to expanded, accelerated, and connected learning.
Several studies conducted by Kent State University researchers have documented key outcomes associated with expanded learning opportunities, particularly in relation to AAS and PAC. As mentioned previously, evaluations have found that students attending these programs are performing better academically than their non-participating counterparts. Behavioral outcomes, such as higher levels of attendance and lower incidences of suspensions, also have been noted. Critical design priorities and exemplar practices also have been showcased nationally (Knight Foundation, 2006).

To reiterate, the evaluations conducted thus far provide priorities and lessons learned for the future. For example, these evaluations indicate the benefits to teachers, parents and entire schools in addition to those for students. Past evaluations also illuminate needs for data on the effectiveness of targeting systems, the effectiveness of the linkage mechanisms for connected learning, and how best to add accelerated learning opportunities during OST for students receiving academic intervention services.

Akron’s important innovations make these timely evaluations possible. Together they help get the conditions right for better evaluations. The right conditions include an evaluation infrastructure, one configured to enable continuous quality improvement.

Infrastructure development encompasses more than evaluation and the continuous quality improvement it enables. Additional infrastructure priorities are identified and described briefly next.

Getting the Right Conditions in Place: Funding, Leadership, Operational Structures, Professional Development, and Local P-16 Planning

APS and the Akron community at large obviously have made considerable progress in ensuring that students and community members are provided with multiple opportunities; and that students’ learning is connected to classrooms and school improvement overall. As the OSU evaluation team documented these efforts and achievements, a number of “facilitators” or “key factors” that contribute to Akron’s success became evident. These facilitators are important to mention because leaders from other school communities can rely on them as they advance their respective agendas.

Four such facilitators are presented below. They are funding innovations, leadership, partnership, and operational oversight and quality control mechanisms.

- Akron leaders have discovered and developed innovative ways to fund extended, accelerated, and connected learning opportunities and have prioritized funding for the future.

Innovative funding, including clever ways to blend and braid funds to achieve important purposes, is a key feature of Akron’s infrastructure. Funding also provides an enduring challenge. Blending and braidng funds to support comprehensive efforts and expanded learning opportunities has been necessary. Akron has led the way in the development of these innovations, particularly in relation to its afterschool programming priorities.

For instance, the city-school district joint funding of community learning centers is an exemplar. The buildings constructed using creative funding partnerships. Ongoing support for the program is provided through diversified funding from the City, APS Title 1, Ohio Department of Education 21st Century Community Learning Center grant dollars, a county Department of Job and Family Services grant for afterschool programming, a Neighborhood Partnership Grant, and local Foundations.

Many community agencies have their own external funding. They use this funding for OST programs and services in both direct and indirect ways. So-called “in-kind” contributions provide a key indirect mechanism. Here a partner organization shares and lends people, facilities, equipment, and technologies. It is noteworthy that considerable in-kind contributions from community partners are mainstreams in APS. For example, the University of Akron places master’s level counselors in the schools to serve as volunteers in the wellness programs. Keep Akron Beautiful provides “Junk Yard Crafts” to teach recycling to youth involved in AAS. Additionally, volunteers such as Keep Akron Beautiful and Child Evangelism of Ohio contribute hours of support for programming.

Scholarship funding for students is another innovative exemplar. The community’s leadership is committed to securing more scholarships for students. During the 2007-2008 academic year, nearly 11 million dollars were obtained for students across the district. Leaders raise money via private donations from local foundations such as the GAR Foundation, the Knight Foundation and the Akron Community Foundation.

Other creative thinking is evident, and it is indicative of a new kind of financial literacy among Akron’s leaders. For example, the Mayor recently showcased his support for scholarships by proposing to contract out the city’s sewer system maintenance services to an outside provider. Sub-contracting would save money. The dollars saved then could be re-programmed to support local scholarships. Although the proposition was not approved, the innovative thinking behind it is noteworthy. It signals changes in public policy in support of new configurations and systems for schooling, education, and workforce development.

Two other innovations are noteworthy. First, APS often serves as the fiscal agent for some of the community grants and often does not charge indirect costs to local agencies. This is a different kind of “in-kind arrangement.” It has enabled more dollars to flow directly into programming, as opposed to being spent on administrative infrastructure and oversight. Second, the County’s Department of Job & Family Services (JFS) has worked closely with APS in securing and overseeing county TANF dollars. Together, APS and JFS leaders have figured out how to streamline TANF regulations and paperwork processes, also enabling more flexible funding that flows easily to programming and services; this is especially evident in providing afterschool programming for underserved youth through AAS.

- Leadership provided by key individuals and their partner organizations has paved the way for innovations that provide benefits and improve outcomes.

There is a sense locally that we are all pulling together in the same direction and working towards the same end.”

“This is about all children. This is the key; we need to help all children, how maximize their potential; helps all of us; our humanity; our society at large.”
Akron’s success is attributable in part to talented, strategic, cross-boundary, and collaborative leadership. From the outset, these pioneering innovations have depended on special leaders, dedicated funding, and a supportive administrative and quality control infrastructure. Although it is impossible to provide all of the relevant details about start-up, leadership, funding, and infrastructure, a few notable examples illustrate the special, innovative nature of Akron’s initiatives and the importance of strategic, competent, and dedicated leaders.

Several of the initial strategizing related to expanded learning opportunities in Akron initiated through conversations among several key leaders in Akron, including the Mayor, the Superintendent, representatives from local and national foundations, and members of City Council. Additionally, the elected Representative from the Akron area has paved the way for expanded learning opportunities in Akron. “Professional development is a key; and no program works without well-trained people. Every program has to be aligned with the goals of the district. AAS aligns everything to the district plan.”

Designated leaders representing APS, the City, and the broader community are charged with leading efforts related to extended, accelerated, and connected learning innovations. For instance, three administrators within APS’ Office of Community Partnerships and Customer Service oversee external relationships and OST priorities. These leaders provide oversight and accountability for programs and services, while also making sure they also align with key curricular needs within the district.

An educational policy director in City Government also provides leadership. This person is a member of the Mayor’s Cabinet who leads the development, planning, and implementation of the CLC agenda. Additionally, a key person provides county-wide leadership for college access priorities via the P-16 Alliance of Summit County.

Local leadership at each of the CLC buildings is essential and noteworthy. Principals are innovative leaders who work in partnership with their full-time OST coordinator. Together, they align the in-school priorities with OST programs and activities. Strong teams operating in each CLC building, comprised of principals, teacher leaders, full-time coordinators, students, and community-based providers also provide leadership.

- Partnerships among organizations and collaborative relationships among people have paved the way for expanded learning opportunities in Akron.

The aforementioned partnerships among key organizations and the collaborative relationships among key leaders have proven to be incubators for innovation and creativity. They demonstrate the power of partnerships. And they attest to the old slogan, “two heads are better than one.”

Beyond formal partnerships, local networks have been very important. To name a few: The Afterschool Council for Greater Akron Area convenes APS and the multiple community-based organizations providing OST services in Akron (i.e., the Boys & Girls Clubs of Akron, Catholic Social Services, YMCA, etc).

The P-16 Alliance of Summit County consists of stakeholders from APS, postsecondary institutions, business, local foundations, and others. The Alliance focuses on county-wide collaborative efforts related to supporting fluid transitions among students across the educational pipeline. It’s “80 percent solution” sets an important aim. It reminds and rallies stakeholders to achieve their performance target of 80% enrollment in postsecondary education.

The subcommittee of Imagine Akron 2025, mentioned earlier, is connected to other networks. It has been instrumental in paving the way for education-related priorities for the future.

These several networks, formal partnerships, the P-16 Alliance, and collaborative working relationships among key leaders and advocates succeed in part because of shared commitments and common purposes. All are united in their support for today’s children and youth—tomorrow’s leaders. And all are united in their commitment to civic and professional activities that make Akron’s schools and communities better.

- Operational oversight and quality-control mechanisms to facilitate quality programming and efficiency are in place to support Akron’s multiple OST programs and services.

Akron’s administrative-organizational infrastructure for planning, oversight, and quality control is another reason for its success. The organizational arrangement for the AAS initiative is original and noteworthy.
To reiterate: District leaders initially organized the AAS initiative under Strategic Planning and Grants. Later, it was housed under the Office of Community Partnerships and Community Service. District leaders made this change because the leaders in this initiative had expert knowledge of their local organizational culture and operations. Leaders perceived that the Office of Community Partnerships offered more freedom to innovate and more autonomy to operate. They worried that, had they organized the afterschool program under existing academic governance structures, there would be too many constraints. Constraints, for example, included the likely perception that the afterschool initiative was just another program added on to others. Had this “add-on effect” occurred, school improvement would have expanded on paper, but would not have been integrated in practice.

Additionally, the Director of this Office sits on the Superintendent’s Cabinet. This arrangement enables APS to have ultimate authority over the integrity and design of the programming.

Other structural components are facilitators for programmatic innovation. Notably, 11 elementary schools have common schedules for programming. Schedules encompass snack and homework start (1 hour), structured homework and tutoring (1 hour), and then move to enrichment for last hour of the day. In this way, programming is consistent across the district. Consistency, in turn, facilitates alignment and integration of the OST programs and services with the school day.

The Akron After School Handbook is another key example. It presents and describes the common procedures and protocols used in the school-based afterschool programming. These tools and resources help to align administrative priorities, provide consistent expectations across all schools and programs, and support a minimal level of standard within each of the sites.

In the same vein, common training and professional development are provided in conjunction with all programs. Professional development targets the staff hired by district as well as those staff members hired by community-based organizations to provide enrichment. Such a comprehensive professional development plan builds new capacities that bridge and unify school and community providers. These new capacities include the ability to find and implement research-supported models and strategies. This is a notable achievement.

Enduring Challenges

Notwithstanding the notable achievements and promising innovations, Akron’s leaders report that they still have plenty of work to do. Some of this work entails addressing enduring challenges, especially funding-related challenges. Some such work entails anticipating future challenges.

Community indicator data, particularly school-related data, point to ongoing needs and priorities. For example:

- Notwithstanding Akron’s significant achievements and progress indicators, the district has met just 5 of the 30 indicators on the ODE State Report Card.
- Many youth are still falling behind academically, and many schools are not meeting adequate yearly progress.
- At the same time, many students are leaving APS to attend local charter schools. In fact, enrollment across the district has declined by over 4000 students in the past 5 years. (Today APS has some 24,986 students, which is down from 29,019 in 2002-2003.)
- Many of the students currently enrolled in APS are not benefiting from the innovative extended, accelerated, and connected learning opportunities available. Part of the problem is program and service capacity. Long waiting lists for many of the afterschool programs serve as indicators of additional resources and new capacities.
- Other students with identifiable needs are not systematically targeted for involvement in appropriate programs. Data-driven targeting needs to improve.

- Some of the OST programs are not connected to classrooms. Linkage protocols and connective people are needed.
- Unfortunately, some OST programs and services continue to be viewed by some education professionals as “add-on” activities, ones that are not central to the “real work” of schools. Expanded, integrated school improvement remains a work in progress.
- Funding is always a priority. And cost-benefit analyses are always important as leaders make important decisions about how to maintain quality, as indicated in good outcomes, while wrestling with issues of program duration and intervention intensity.
- Notwithstanding the exemplary work of the P-16 Alliance, the connection between its work and APS’ bold innovations is not yet firm. Integrative, community-wide planning is an important next phase.

Although some of these challenges are unique, others are not. All such challenges are instructive for other OST leaders in Ohio and in other states. This study’s conclusions also are instructive to other leaders as well as to Akron’s.

Conclusions

Extended, accelerated, and connected learning initiatives, programs and services comprise a big idea whose time has come. The name does not matter. Call it a new day for learning. Call it a new learning day. Call it Out-of-school time programs or Extended Learning Opportunities. Or call it Akron Out-of-School Time. The essence of the big idea lies in the expanded opportunities and resources gained when school and district improvement expand to encompass family and community resources for learning, healthy development, and success in school.

Easy to write and talk about, this work is enormously difficult to do. Ohioans and leaders in the field overall need examples. More than this, they need evaluation-driven models that serve as exemplars.

Akron provides one such exemplar. Everyone stands to benefit from the innovative work of Akron’s expert, courageous pioneers. This study has demonstrated that Akron’s leaders have developed powerful innovations, especially a school-city partnership that stands as an exemplar.

Akron’s achievements, developing progress indicators, and enduring challenges are instructive to leaders in other communities. Some of these leaders may be interested in replication. Replication is, in essence, an attempt to transfer an exemplar or a specific program innovation from one site to another. The underlying assumption is that wholesale transfer is desirable and feasible.

The other approach is more modest, but no less important. This approach is known as scale-up. It entails deriving some or most of the core elements of an exemplar or innovation, along with plans to tailor them to the local context. In contrast to replication—in essence, a cookie-cutter approach to transfer—scale-up is predicated on the assumption that wholesale transfer either cannot be done or should not be done (because of contextual uniqueness, timing, different goals and objectives, etc.)

Akron’s pioneering work is amenable to either or both. Although this evaluative report has not provided all of the salient details, it has laid a suitable foundation for future decision-making about replication and scale-up. Moreover, in showcasing Akron’s achievements and progress, this evaluative report has indicated the need to learn more about what Akron’s leaders have done, what they have learned in the process, and, most of all, HOW they have succeeded (when they have), and especially how they have adjusted when they have encountered barriers.
Akron’s pioneers have done remarkable, important work in a relatively short period of time. The city-school partnership with jointly owned and operated community learning centers is an international exemplar, i.e., a model for others to replicate and scale-up. The significant number of young people, parents, other adults, and entire families served by Akron’s innovative programs and services is inspiring. And it helps to set a standard for others.

As important, Akron’s leaders have strived for, and have begun to achieve, an important combination of quality control, institutionalization, and sustainability. Specific examples are easy to identify. They are innovative funding, including blended and braided funds; professional development for all staff; structures and processes for data-informed decision-making; and evaluation-driven, continuous quality improvement.

Together, these and other measures comprise the infrastructure for expanded school improvement models that encompasses family and community resources during OST. The importance of this infrastructure cannot be over-estimated. In too many school communities, this infrastructure is missing. Lacking infrastructure, expanded school improvement planning stalls or is derailed altogether.

Finally, several of Akron’s challenges double as policy lessons learned for other leaders, especially state policy leaders. To wit: Akron’s leaders have had to address funding challenges, the challenges of getting good data in a timely fashion, the challenges of developing firm, strategic bridging mechanisms between schools and their family and community partners, the under-supply of school-family-community coordinators who are prepared and supported for expanded school improvement initiatives, and gaps in the professional education of educators, social workers, psychologists, and other human service professionals. All such challenges comprise important policy priorities.

State, district, school, community, and governmental leaders owe Akron’s pioneers a debt of gratitude for such important policy learning. Of course, Akron’s leaders and participants stand to benefit from their contributions to policy learning. As policy changes are effected, Akron’s leaders and the people they serve will reap the benefits. If this evaluative report facilitates policy learning, stimulates policy change, and results in enriched, more strategic resources and supports for expanded school improvement initiatives like Akron’s, it has achieved its aim.

References


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