

The Federal Role in Out-of-School Learning: After-School, Summer Learning, and Family Involvement as Critical Learning Supports

Heather B. Weiss, Priscilla M. D. Little, Suzanne M. Bouffard, Sarah N. Deschenes, and Helen Janc Malone

By providing support for the learning students do outside of school, the federal government can help build a comprehensive, complementary learning system.

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The dominant assumption behind much current educational policy and practice is that school is the only place where and when children learn. This assumption is wrong. Forty years of steadily accumulating research shows that out-of-school, or “complementary learning” opportunities are major predictors of children’s development, learning, and educational achievement.

The research also indicates that economically and otherwise disadvantaged children are less likely than their more-advantaged peers to have access to these opportunities. This inequity substantially undermines their learning and chances for school success. To solve this problem, we must imagine what the solution would look like.

The Vision: A Continuous, Comprehensive, Complementary Learning System

Imagine the following scenario, with the hypothetical student Marcus and his mother Maria.

Marcus is seventeen years old. He lives in a public housing development with his younger sister and his mother, Maria, who makes minimum wage

cleaning houses. When she was pregnant with Marcus, Maria went to her community health clinic and told her doctor, “I want to be a better parent than my mother. I want my kids to go to college, but I don’t know anybody who went to college. How do I help my kids get there?”

Maria’s doctor referred her to the local community center, which had strong partnerships with the health clinic and the local school district. At the community center, Maria enrolled in a parenting class. Although initially nervous, she liked the instructor and the strategies she learned for helping Marcus learn. She began reading to him and taking him to the children’s museum. She also received home visits from educators at the center, who showed her effective discipline strategies. The biggest benefit of the center, she thought, was meeting other parents to share information, stories, and ambitions for their children.

When Marcus was almost three, a family liaison from the local school district came to the community center to talk to parents about the importance of pre-kindergarten classes and tell parents about the school where their children would attend kindergarten. “We have the same goal you do – to

help your kids succeed all the way to college,” she said. After the family liaison’s visit, Maria enrolled Marcus in the center’s Head Start program and began volunteering once a month. The school district’s family liaison became a regular presence, stopping by the center to provide information, answer questions, and refer parents to the school district’s own parenting seminars.

The summer before kindergarten, the family liaison and the school principal led a tour of the local public school and set up a meeting with Maria, Marcus, a staff member from the school’s after-school program, and Marcus’s advisor – another teacher who would advise Marcus throughout his elementary school years. Together, they developed a plan for getting Marcus all the way to college. The plan – they called it a learning compact – explained what each person would do to help Marcus succeed. Every semester for the rest of elementary school, the group would meet to review Marcus’s grades, discuss his progress, and assess whether each person was fulfilling his or her responsibilities.

Maria, who had never had good relationships with her own teachers, quickly warmed to the teachers and other staff. When the principal saw her at the school one morning, he personally invited her to volunteer and she gladly accepted. The principal also told her about the school-based health clinic and Maria began scheduling immunizations and regular visits for Marcus.

After Marcus’s (and Maria’s!) successful transition to kindergarten, Marcus thrived in elementary school. During one of the learning compact meetings, the after-school director, who had noticed Marcus’s talent for singing, encouraged him to sing in the



church choir and helped him apply for and win a scholarship to a summer arts program. She and Marcus’s reading teacher at school also worked together to help him write songs based on the books he was reading in class.

Before Marcus moved on to middle school, the learning compact team introduced Marcus and Maria to his new middle school team, a process that was repeated before he entered high school. In eighth grade, the team began discussing Marcus’s goal of becoming a music professor, including how to apply to and succeed in college. They discussed what Marcus could do after school and during the summers to help achieve his goals. Maria also attended



a “financial aid” night cosponsored by the school, local universities, and the after-school recreation program.

Now in the spring of twelfth grade, Marcus is ready to graduate and has been accepted – with scholarships – at four different colleges. With a lifelong network of learning supports in place, his path to college and career is wide open.¹

Core Features of a Complementary Learning System

To access the learning opportunities and a pathway to educational success as described in our story of Marcus and Maria, children like Marcus need a continuous, comprehensive, and complementary learning system, the

¹ The vision of an effective complementary learning system described in this story is inspired by the work of Edmund Gordon on supplementary education, Dennie Palmer Wolf at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and Paul Tough of the *New York Times*; The School Transition Study; The Home Visit Forum; schools and teachers nationwide; and local and national programs that provide the kinds of services mentioned here.

components of which have a shared vision for learning and educational success. The individual services and programs described above already exist, but parents like Maria may find their high expectations for their children frustrated by their lack of experience in navigating the educational system. A piecemeal approach increases the chances that they will fall through the cracks and will not have access to all of the learning supports necessary to maximize success (for example, after-school and summer programs). In our story, Maria and Marcus found and followed a pathway to college because their community had intentionally created a complementary learning system to connect the existing stepping-stones.

Complementary learning refers to the idea that a systemic approach, which intentionally integrates both school and out-of-school learning supports, can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed in school and in life. As in our story of Maria and Marcus’s community, complementary learning systems require that stakeholders come together to create a system with a set of core features.

1. A commitment to ensuring access to complementary learning for disadvantaged children and their families

Currently, disadvantaged children and their families have less opportunity to experience complementary learning than their more-affluent peers. Thus, they don’t experience the rich set of learning opportunities that the research suggests is essential to positive learning and developmental outcomes, thus fur-

ther widening achievement gaps. This is true both for family involvement, where we see differential patterns in involvement based on socio-economic factors as well as educator outreach, and for access and participation in after-school and summer learning programs, where we see differences in participation based on socio-economic status.

2. A systemic approach to supporting the role of families in learning.

Parents who are involved early and throughout the school years have children who are more likely to enter school ready to succeed and to graduate and go to college. Further, families play a critical role in accessing and sustaining participation in a network of quality learning supports. Many families lack the social and political capital necessary even to know about learning opportunities for their children, let alone make to good choices among these opportunities. Thus, a systemic approach to family involvement is one that helps families understand the value of continuous learning of all kinds and offers the network of supports necessary for that learning.

3. Access to an array of quality comprehensive and complementary supports from birth through adolescence.

Complementary learning starts at birth and continues through adolescence. Home visiting and early childhood programs set children on a path to school readiness; participation in after-school and summer learning programs affords children and youth access to crucial developmental supports and opportunities that prepare them for later success in life. Health and economic supports are also necessary precursors to children's being prepared to learn. Throughout the child's development,

families remain a core out-of-school learning support that should interface with all others.

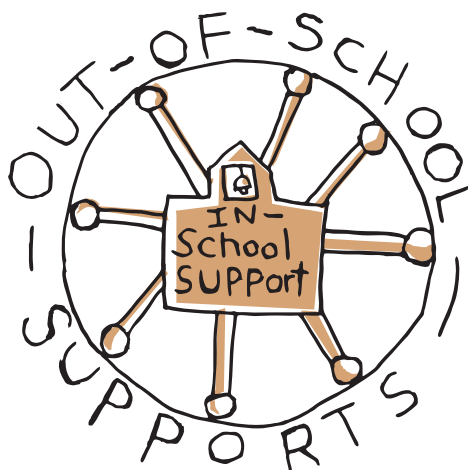
4. Focus on a range of academic, social, and behavior skills.

From birth through adolescence, access to an array of out-of-school learning supports promotes learning both directly and indirectly, building skills and knowledge as well as the conditions for learning (for example, motivation and engagement, social skills, and health). They help to address achievement gaps and the challenges that living in poverty pose for children's educational and life outcomes and build the skills they need to become successful citizens, parents, and workers.

5. Alignment and connection of out-of-school supports to schools and to each other to maximize learning and developmental outcomes.

Across a child's development, aligned and connected supports aid important educational transitions and ensure that children and youth get on and stay on pathways to learning and life success.

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Key features of alignment include:

- common learning and development goals among all partners
- information systems to ensure that information about students is shared across supports
- shared best practices and professional development opportunities
- shared accountability
- multilevel relationships that cross local and district school leadership
- formalized mechanisms for communication
- shared governance structures

6. *Recognition that there are multiple ways by which localized complementary learning approaches can be implemented.*

Approaches to implementing complementary learning can and should vary depending on the needs and resources of any given community. Leadership for complementary learning can be housed within a school, in a community-based organization, or across a community in the form of education councils, but efforts to develop complementary learning need to be co-constructed among all educators and providers in a community.

The Federal Role in Out-of-School Learning

At the federal level, policies and legislation play an important role in enabling such complementary learning efforts. Yet historically, and moving forward, the work of implementing out-of-school learning has been and will continue to be the responsibility of local schools, districts, and communities, with money from disparate funding streams passing through the states to them.

Thus, the role of the federal government in complementary learning is not to implement programs, but rather to enable local innovation, show leadership, support accountability and quality, and use other legislative and regulatory tools to ensure that complementary learning occurs locally. Some recent federal legislation, such as the Full-Service Community Schools Act and the proposed Education Begins at Home (EBAH) Act, enables states and communities to implement complementary learning efforts that best suit their local needs.

The Need for a New Era of Federal Leadership

With the passage of the historic Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, the President and Congress declared that it was in the national interest for the federal government to take on national educational leadership and funding roles to ensure equal educational opportunity for disadvantaged children (Jennings 2001). As the name of the act indicates, the assumption was that elementary and secondary schools, unassisted, would manage to level the playing field for disadvantaged children. But more than forty years of research since ESEA confirms that America will not achieve its national goals of equal educational opportunity, leaving no child behind, or preparing its workforce and citizenry for twenty-first-century challenges without addressing the inequities in out-of-school learning opportunities as a major component of education reform.

As in 1965, national leaders should use the bully pulpit, as well as federal leverage and funding, to enable states, counties, and communities to make the shift toward more complementary learning. This leadership can capitalize on growing national, state, and local momentum and readiness to shift to a broader education reform strategy that redefines what learning is, who enables it, and when and where it takes place. Whether they describe it as a “broader, bolder approach,” “a new day for learning,” or comprehensive, extended, or complementary learning, numerous educational organizations, nonprofit and professional groups, elected officials, and business and citizen groups are calling for inclusion of these broader educational opportunities and supports.

Investing in a Systemic and Aligned Approach to Learning

The recommendations that follow are intended to move the current federal role in out-of-school learning from investments in individual out-of-school supports to investments in supports that are networked and aligned with schools and then to a full vision of complementary learning, which calls for seamless delivery of comprehensive learning and developmental supports across the day, across the year, and across a child’s development from birth through adolescence.

Collectively, these five recommendations comprise the federal role in developing, implementing, and testing a national strategy for complementary learning. They lead to a final recommendation: drafting and passage of the

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Pathways to Educational Success Act of 2009, confirming federal leadership and support for a new era of educational innovation and reform.

1. *Use federal leadership, the bully pulpit, funding, and leverage to promote equitable out-of-school learning opportunities and integrate them into the center of the education reform discussion; enact and fully fund legislation that will enable states and communities to implement more continuous, aligned, and systemic efforts to educate all children.*

Using its leadership role, the federal government can shift the national mindset about where and how children learn toward an understanding that schools are a core, but not sole, contributor to educational success. Federal leadership that puts the national spotlight on the importance of out-of-school learning and its alignment with schools, that supports innovation in the areas of learning and accountability, and that builds a long-term strategy to achieve complementary learning will, in turn, leverage sustainable state and local change.

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Immediate action such as the creation of a high-level position in the U.S. Department of Education with responsibility for all out-of-school learning and its alignment with schools would signal the importance of this change. New legislation and modifications of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) allowing flexibility in the use of Title I, Supplemental Educational Services (SES), and other funding streams for complementary learning services and linkages is also necessary. In addition, new and existing higher-education legislation should take into account both immediate and longer-term needs for professional development for all those involved in complementary learning, including teachers, administrators, and after-school and summer-learning providers.

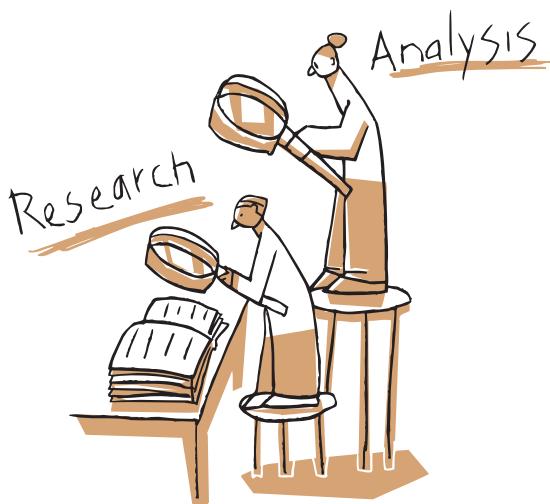
2. *Promote innovation to implement continuous, comprehensive, complementary learning systems at the local level.*

The types of changes envisioned here will require the federal government not just to serve as regulator and agent of accountability, but also to stimulate and fund innovation. Marginal change is insufficient to enable states and communities to make the necessary fundamental transformations in how we define and organize learning. Arguing that the research and development infrastructure for school improvement is currently weak and that this constitutes a case of “market failure for educational innovation,” Anthony Bryk and Louis Gomez (2008) recommend that innovations be co-developed by interdisciplinary researchers, practitioners, and social entrepreneurs with a commitment to continuous improvement (p. 182). They suggest that innovations must be co-developed by

researchers and practitioners within a continuous-improvement approach.

Both researchers and policy-makers applaud the emphasis on research-based educational policy and programs. However, they are increasingly recognizing the limits of existing research alone to solve our most pressing educational problems and are calling on the government to fund innovative new approaches to ensuring that many more children reach proficiency (Joftus 2008). In order to promote innovation to implement continuous, comprehensive, complementary learning systems at the local level, we recommend that the federal government do the following.

- Develop a strategic national research, development, and innovation agenda and leverage private and philanthropic dollars, as well as public funding, to support it.
- Use federal leadership and leadership dollars to encourage and support state and local innovation to test new complementary learning approaches and evaluate existing ones within a framework of learning, continuous improvement, and accountability.
- Use research actively to support more effective policy and practice. Share lessons from ongoing innovations to support learning and continuous improvement across states and communities; continue to disseminate information about effective initiatives and programs through mechanisms such as the What Works Clearinghouse (www.whatworks.ed.gov) as part of the national commitment to learning, continuous improvement, and accountability.



3. *Support accountability across all components of a complementary learning system, including schools and out-of-school learning supports.*

Accountability is now part of American education. The passage of NCLB in 2001 brought a clear emphasis on outcomes, explicit requirements for standards and assessment systems, and more transparent accountability. In doing so, it significantly raised expectations for states, local education agencies, and schools: all schools are now expected to meet or exceed state standards in reading and math by 2014.

While there has been much debate about the merits of NCLB as an education reform strategy, there is some consensus that its emphasis on accountability – which, in the end, revealed that many schools were failing to meet adequate yearly progress

standards – has been instrumental in shaping the realization that “schools can’t do it alone.” In that sense, NCLB has contributed to current thinking about the importance of out-of-school learning as complementary to school-improvement strategies. Thus, any new efforts to reform education must be coupled with efforts to reform and strengthen – not shy away from – an accountability system that can target improvement strategies to specific schools and districts, as well as identify the localized network of out-of-school supports that can best complement those schools and districts. In order to reform our current accountability system, we recommend that the federal government take leadership through the following actions:

- *Broaden the frame of accountability to include twenty-first-century skills.* Unlike the current accountability system, with its narrow focus on math and reading, an accountability system for complementary learning needs to take into account the attainment of proficiency in a broader set of skills, beyond the “Three Rs,” to include assessments of critical thinking, civic engagement, and teamwork. This is largely uncharted territory for the federal government and will require different, and broader, thinking about desired outcomes for children.

- *Expand methods of assessment.* Expanding the frame of accountability requires changing the ways in which progress toward outcomes is assessed. Alternative assessments, such as portfolios and measures of school climate, can augment more traditional approaches to assessment to provide a more complete picture of what is possible in a complementary learning environment.
- *Integrate data systems across learning supports to ensure progress on a shared vision for learning.* Disadvantaged children and youth have inequitable access to out-of-school supports, and part of the federal role is to ensure greater access to them. If the federal government is to know if its investments in out-of-school supports are reaching the children who need them, local out-of-school learning supports that receive federal resources must have systems for tracking participation across the full array of available supports in the community. Only in this way can progress toward equity be monitored and assessed. In addition to monitoring for equity and access, data systems should be linked in order to better understand the whole range of services a child receives and how this affects that child in the long term.

Though the federal role in integrated local data systems is extremely limited, the federal government could show leadership in this area by supporting the development of integrated data systems as part of its investments in research, demonstration, and innovation sites. Mechanisms that bring multiple community stakeholders together for regular progress updates

and action planning already exist (see, for example, McLaughlin & O'Brien-Strain 2008). These should be examined and scaled to support better integration of data in places attempting to implement complementary learning.

4. *Use legislative and policy tools to enable complementary learning.*

Sustaining investment in after-school, summer learning, and family involvement is vital to the success of the federal role in supporting complementary learning. But there are several other ways to be more intentional about support. The federal government could make it easier to create linkages and leverage its investments to partner with others to support programs and innovation, thus facilitating the creation of complementary learning systems. We recommend a combination of some realignment of existing funding and the creation of new sources of funding, both of which would have an impact at the federal, state, and local levels. Specifically, we recommend that the federal role include the following aspects:

- *Provide incentives for communities to create linkages with existing resources.* Because complementary learning work is fundamentally local, communities themselves need access and encouragement to use funds to link and align supports. The federal government can provide financial incentives for communities to create linkages at the district or city level and waivers that will enable communities to use existing funding streams for them.
- *Allocate new resources and develop new incentives for communities to support connections among out-of-school supports and schools.* It

is critical to have not only seed money or innovation grants to get these initiatives off the ground, but also “glue money” to foster and maintain partnerships. Because program funding usually does not come with support for partnership work, the federal government could play a larger role in providing the financing and flexibility that will make these connections happen. Federal funding could also build in requirements for linkages at the local level, particularly for connections with families.

- *Enable communities and districts to pool big funding streams* such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC), SES/Title I, and Child Care Development Funds to provide a percentage of funds for stable local after-school and summer learning programs, as well as early childhood supports. Use these pooled resources to develop individual 365/24/7 learning plans that consider participation in a

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range of out-of-school learning opportunities from birth through high school graduation.

- *Encourage transparent state budgets and provide incentives.* The federal government could also encourage greater transparency in budgeting for children and youth by offering incentives to states to create children's budgets. These budgets would indicate to the public how money is being spent on education across agencies and what efforts are being made to advance complementary learning. There has been a recent proposal to do this in the federal budget by Senator Robert Menendez (www.menendez.senate.gov), but situating this practice at the state level would bring it closer to the point of service delivery and might also highlight differences in spending across states.
- *Use federal infrastructure to create leadership for out-of-school supports at the national level.* Infrastructure is another powerful way for the federal government to communicate the importance of reframing learning. For example, an assistant

secretary for out-of-school learning at the Department of Education would serve to coordinate efforts across agencies and leverage the work happening in different departments to create a more integrated approach to education. In addition, there has been renewed interest in funding the Federal Youth Coordination Act (FYCA), which was signed into law in 2006 but has yet to receive funding. In the summer of 2008, the inclusion of \$1 million for the FYCA in a House appropriations bill showed renewed momentum for FYCA.

5. *Explore and build public-private-nonprofit partnerships to scale and assure the quality of out-of-school supports.*

Over the past fifty years of federal investment in out-of-school learning supports, public-private partnerships have played a small but important role in augmenting and leveraging federal investments to support quality. For example, when the 21st CCLC grants

program was established, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation seized the opportunity to partner with the U.S. Department of Education. The partnership ensured that elements that the government could not support at the time – technical assistance, public will, seeding evaluation, promising practices, policy development, and communication – were supported as needed to ensure the sustainability and expansion of the grants program.

While Mott’s partnership efforts may be exceptional, this kind of private support of public investments will be needed to ensure equitable access to quality complementary learning opportunities. To develop such partnerships, we recommend that the federal government take the following actions:

- Reach out to foundations to partner with them to support out-of-school learning. Given the large philanthropic interest in and support of the better integration of school and out-of-school supports for learning, the time is ripe for the federal government to partner with foundations to build, test the value of, and, if appropriate, expand integrated reform efforts and ensure that they are of sufficient quality to achieve positive outcomes at scale.
- Provide incentives and requirements for state and local grant recipients to match federal dollars. Many funding streams currently have a local-match requirement. This approach to federal grant making stimulates public–private partnerships by requiring that out-of-school learning supports connect with other funders. Such an approach also contributes to sustainability by broadening the funding base.



Leading a New Era of Innovation and Education Reform: Proposing the Pathways to Educational Success Act

Research shows that out-of-school learning contributes to and, in fact, is necessary for positive learning and developmental outcomes. It is time, therefore, for the federal government to innovate and experiment with extended learning opportunities and time to ensure that all children are on a pathway to success, defined as high school completion and post-secondary training so that they have the skills necessary to succeed in the twenty-first century.

We acknowledge that some federal efforts to do so are already under way, such as the new Full Service Community Schools Act and the Time for Innovation Matters in Education (TIME) Act. But we conclude that these are not sufficient to push complemen-

tary learning from the shallows into the mainstream of education reform.

Thus, our final recommendation is to establish a new federal education policy – the Pathways to Educational Success Act of 2009 – which would enable districts and schools to work with communities to develop and test new local, complementary learning systems that offer the elements that research indicates are necessary for children to succeed, within a framework of shared accountability for better outcomes.

The new legislation should require an early, continuous, comprehensive, and complementary learning approach implemented by local districts in partnership with community-based and faith-based organizations and should include the following provisions:

- the creation of a place-based implementation plan for a comprehensive learning system that includes pre-K; schools; out-of-school learning supports; and health, mental health, and economic supports and that articulates how these supports will work with each other and with families to support learning;
- flexibility in the specifics of the approach to enable communities to target areas of need and build on existing resources and strengths;
- community-level governance and accountability with shared, integrated data systems;
- demonstration of public-private partnerships to support the complementary learning system.

This national strategy for complementary learning will require support from multiple stakeholders at the federal, state, and local levels, including educators, teachers, early-care providers, after-school and summer learning providers, and families. We offer our

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framework and recommendations to inform these stakeholders' efforts to redesign our current education system to include not only excellent schools but also the provision of high-quality complementary learning supports, particularly for disadvantaged children and youth. Four decades of consistent research evidence makes clear that failure to redefine learning and where and when it takes place – and to follow up with innovations that enable communities to move to a complementary learning approach – will prevent the country from reaching its national goal of educating all children.

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