

A Year of Lessons From Expanded Learning Time

By Lucy Friedman

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What a difference a year makes. In parts of the country and New York City, expanded learning days in local schools are beginning to look like the new normal.

Take neighborhoods such as Harlem, where parents see charters and schools like Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School – one of 10 pioneering Expanded Learning Time/New York City pilot schools – educating kids from 8 AM until 5:30 or 6. More parents in these neighborhoods are asking educators: why not here?

We now have a president who, in his first major education speech, called for the nation “not only to expand effective after-school programs, but to rethink the school day to incorporate more time – whether during the summer or through expanded-day programs for children who need it.” His Education Secretary, Arne Duncan is encouraging states to use federal stimulus money to reach more kids through ELT (as the movement is called in short-hand).

At The After-School Corporation, we’ve seen more clearly during this school year what ELT really looks like on the ground when schools and community-based organizations (CBOs) are true partners – sharing the funding 50/50, forming one school culture under the leadership of the principal, and collaborating on everything from curriculum to parent outreach across the 3 PM dividing line.

At its best, ELT looks like something that backers of school-based after-school programs have worked toward for years: places where school day and CBO staff members integrate as fully as the brass and string sounds in a great orchestra. They create seamlessly aligned learning days that increase academic time and bring rigor and structure to enrichments such as arts and robotics.

At Thurgood Marshall Academy, teachers and CBO staff from Abyssinian Development Corporation teamed up to offer an inquiry-based science curriculum, After-School Science Plus. The day school teachers found it so lively and exciting for kids, they brought it into the school day.

At the UFT Charter School in Brooklyn, a liaison from the day school reviews ELT lesson plans and observes activities, coaches CBO staff, and collaborates with the CBO to carve out joint planning and professional development time.

Having determined that social studies were getting squeezed out of the school day, teachers and Educational Alliance staff at PS 188 in the Lower East Side collaborated to use ELT time for studies of international cultures, exploring arts, food, geography and language.

ELT transforms a school's culture. The principal of PS 636 in Bedford-Stuyvesant and her CBO partner, University Settlement Society, had the advantage of starting a new school from scratch on the site of a closed school. CBO staff joined the principal for prospective teacher interviews and consulted on hiring. With the knowledge that most students were working below grade level, the principal simply told parents that the school day for everyone now lasted until 6. The school erased any stigma from the Department of Education's mandated 37 ½ minutes of remediation by working with all kids. At one end of the classroom, teachers work in small groups with struggling students, while CBO staff members lead math and literacy enrichments with kids in another part of the room. The school uses assessment data to shift students between groups.

Last summer I suggested in this space that it wasn't enough for the after-school community and CBOs to climb aboard the ELT Express and go for the ride. We had to help draw the map and drive this train, or else live with models that short-change kids and families. Some states and districts are testing or considering approaches that narrowly target academics and remediation. Others expand learning time only until 4 or 4:30, ignoring the most basic survival needs of parents who work long hours, often at multiple jobs. They can't stay afloat with programs that dismiss kids at 4.

A year ago, TASC became partners with the New York City Department of Education and the Department of Youth and Community Development to manage and evaluate a 3-year ELT/NYC project in 10 middle and elementary schools.

These ELT/NYC programs adopt academic success and student engagement as primary goals. They incorporate four core elements:

- School and CBO staff operate from the belief that blending enrichments with academics leads to better outcomes for kids
- Day-school and expanded-day curriculum and activities are fully integrated
- Learning time is expanded by at least 30%
- The cost model is sustainable at \$1,600 to \$1,850 per child

ELT/NYC is thriving with a diverse group of schools and CBOs. Four schools have recently opened, two are charter schools and two are middle schools. Nine receive Title I funds and three are designated as in need of improvement. Community partners range from national organizations such as Citizen Schools to locally-focused groups such as Groundwork. Schools range in size from 90 to 1,052 students.

Across the country, we're seeing more models for school-CBO partnerships through what the C.S. Mott Foundation, a longtime supporter of after-school, calls "A New Day For Learning." Mott recently launched an initiative to help school-community teams expand learning time for kids in 10 cities, including Peekskill. The National Center for Time and Learning is developing a variety of models with support from the Broad Foundation.

We also see school-CBO teams make creative use of public funds to support ELT, among them federal Title 1 and 21st Century Community Learning Centers. But in too many schools, we have only enough ELT funding to cover a portion of the students; we think it's fairest and most beneficial for the whole school to benefit from the full range of activities.

CBOs and the after-school field need to work smarter and more energetically to persuade principals to support partnership models for ELT, and to dedicate school funds that principals control. The more community partners work to synchronize after-school activities with the school day, the more likely they are to get buy-in from resistant principals.

With new private grant funding elusive, we've also got to re-think how we spread this innovation. TASC has recently begun working with middle school principals in New York City to help them reorganize the resources that they and their CBO partners control to establish ELT programs in their schools without new infusion of ELT funds. We're also advocating for schools to be able to add late buses or change their bus schedules so no kids miss out on 30 percent more learning time.

It would be easy to hold back an ELT expansion at this moment when schools are struggling with budget cuts and freezes. But the needs of families haven't diminished. More parents face impossible choices about child care and enrichments, as families trim even essential spending.

And once they try it, many principals won't let ELT go. Having incorporated that extra learning time for a full school year, many now say they can't imagine how they'll meet their goals without it.

Lucy Friedman is President of The After School Corporation (TASC).