

Eight Keys to a Successful Expanded-Day Program

Nothing can replace quality instruction during the school day. But when the day isn't long enough, here is a formula you can use to stretch it.

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by Dan Owens & Nancy Vallercamp

The Union House Elementary School's expanded-day program provides an after-school home to more than 300 students every day, year round. For many of them, the school day starts with breakfast at 7:30 a.m. and concludes at 6:00 p.m. Their after-school instruction is designed to support and expand their classroom curriculum and consists of the following components:

- Homework assistance;
- Literacy and math instruction based on state and district standards and benchmarks;
- Accelerated learning for targeted at-risk students;
- Healthy snacks; and
- Enrichment activities that include fine arts, music, drama, dance, foreign language, computers, and cooking.

There is no special secret to our program's success. Virtually any school can achieve and maintain a quality after-school program by following these eight essential keys:

1. Identify Real Needs

In considering an expanded-day program, we looked at a number of factors. We were a highly diversified Title I school, with students speaking 18 different languages. Many of our students were latchkey kids who had nowhere to go after school. We also had a number of students who did not or could not complete their homework, or were performing below grade level. Add to that the lack of community enrichment programs and you would think the need for extending the school day would be obvious. But one of the first lessons we learned early on was that some parents and staff did not take our proposal seriously. They felt there wasn't a real need for an expanded-day program and considered it an "add on."

Once we began discussions regarding what our school needed to help all children succeed, it was clear that closing the achievement gap at all grade levels was front and center. We had a hard-working staff who were already maximizing their classroom instructional time. What else could we do? We obviously had a real need for more instructional time than was available during the school day.

2. Share the Vision

With your real needs identified, the next step is to create a vision for how those needs will be met. Because this vision is important for garnering needed program support, it should be one that everybody—parents, instructional staff, support staff, and the community—can easily identify with. Above all, *keep it simple*. Our vision was to create an expanded-day program that would support daily classroom lessons, reinforce skills, expand the vocabulary of our limited-English-proficient students, offer enrichment opportunities, and involve the community.

3. Foster Staff Ownership

Staff involvement is critical to the success of any after-school program. But how does a principal find dedicated teachers and support staff to make a program work? Many good teachers are exhausted at the end of the school day. And Title I schools face the additional challenge of finding employees that resemble the community.

We began by involving our community in an attempt to hire instructional assistants from within our neighborhood. We also aggressively recruited former students who were high school seniors or enrolled in nearby colleges. What we looked for in all of those we hired was an understanding of our students and a desire to support our efforts to close the achievement gap.

4. Invest in Staff Development

Providing staff development is critical to the success of any after-school program. Our program leaders receive monthly, three-hour training sessions that provide opportunities for them to develop necessary skills ranging from classroom management to effective language arts lessons based on state standards. One of our goals was to establish a leadership path for our after-school staff. The training has been so successful that this year we hired one of our program leaders to work in our regular school program as a certificated teacher.

5. Create Community Partnerships

We were fortunate in that the city of Sacramento had already begun to organize a city-wide after-school program, Students Today Achieving Results for Tomorrow (START), for low-income neighborhoods. Since its goals of providing homework help and enrichment programs were congruent to ours, we opted to become part of this larger partnership.

Because START emphasizes the support of the community and local arts organizations, we were able to expand our neighborhood base and incorporate community events that showcased our after-school enrichment programs. On several occasions during the school year, our students perform for audiences of more than 500 parents, family, and community members.

We have received funding through a partnership with the state's After School Education and Safety Program that has enabled us to hire teachers for specific academic needs. With this partnership as a base, we also have found it easier to expand program funding through corporate and individual sponsors.

6. Link Learning to State Standards

Linking after-school instruction to the state's learning standards has been critical to our success. In fact, our day staff would not have supported an after-school program that did not focus on agreed-upon learning goals. At Union House, teachers at each grade level create monthly priorities for the after-school program that are consistent with their instructional priorities. We also provide an accelerated program for students who welcome more rigor in their studies. We believe that aligning our program to state standards has had a significant impact on the success of our students, as measured by statewide standardized testing.

7. Measure and Share Results

We track the impact of our expanded-day program by measuring attendance, behavior, academic grades, and standardized testing growth. By studying matched pairs of students, we have shown that students in the program have demonstrated a 4 percent increase in academic growth compared to students not attending the program. We are also working to improve the program by focusing on low-income, male, female, and ethnic subgroups.

8. Involve the Community

The addition of the expanded-day program has drawn our community closer together over the past three years and the success of our school has not gone unnoticed. In 2000, it was honored by the California School Boards Association with the Golden Bell Award for innovative and exemplary programs. Union House Elementary School also won recognition as a 2002 California Distinguished School for our regular and expanded-day program collaboration.

We believe that our expanded-day program has played an important role in its primary goal of helping to close the achievement gap. While nothing can take the place of outstanding instruction during the regular school day, we have met the needs of students who have limited support at the end of the day with a program that continues to have a significant, positive academic impact.

***Dan Owens** is principal of Union House Elementary School in Sacramento, California. His e-mail address is DOwens@edcenter.egusd.k12.ca.us.*

***Nancy Vallercamp** is vice-principal of Union House Elementary School. Her e-mail address is NVallercamp@edcenter.egusd.k12.ca.us.*