

The Intersection of Afterschool and Competency-Based Learning: Emerging Trends, Policy Considerations, and Questions for the Future

A Synopsis of Key Points

Why This Topic?

To further the goal of ensuring all students are college and career ready, AYPF has been exploring the opportunities that exist at the intersection of afterschool and competency-based learning as a strategy to help students develop knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors needed for success. We believe that college and career readiness (CCR) is much more than academic preparation for postsecondary education or work:

Readiness means being prepared to successfully complete credit-bearing college coursework or industry certification without remediation, having the academic skills and self-motivation necessary to persist and progress in postsecondary education, and having identified career goals and the necessary steps to achieve them. Readiness also requires the developmental maturity to thrive in the increasingly independent worlds of postsecondary education and careers, the cultural knowledge to understand the expectations of the college environment and labor market, and the employer-desired skills to succeed in an innovation-based economy.¹

Given the range of knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions that young people need in order to be successful, schools cannot do this work alone. In other words, CCR requires support from a variety of providers and programs, many of which occur outside of the traditional classroom.

AYPF has often cited afterschool as a critical partner to help contribute to a young person's CCR.² AYPF uses the term 'afterschool' to refer to the full range of programs and activities that are available to students beyond regular school hours. These include traditional afterschool and summer programs, as well as expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) which incorporate internships, independent study, and wraparound support services. Research has demonstrated that high-quality afterschool providers help contribute to a student's CCR through college and career exploration, social and emotional learning, life skills development, including communication, professionalism, teamwork, etc., various enrichment activities, and more.³

¹ Hooker, S., Brand, B., & American Youth Policy Forum. (2009). *Success at every step: How 23 programs support youth on the path to college and beyond*. Washington, D.C: American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved from <http://www.aypf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/SuccessAtEveryStep.pdf>

² Brand, B. & Valent, A. (2013). The potential of career and college readiness and exploration in afterschool programs. *Expanding minds and opportunities: Leveraging the power of afterschool and summer learning for student success*. Washington, D.C: Collaborative Communications Group. Retrieved from <http://www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds/article/potential-career-and-college-readiness-and-exploration-afterschool-programs>

³ Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., & Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2007). The impact of after-school programs that promote personal and social skills. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Retrieved from <http://www.lions-quest.org/pdfs/AfterSchoolProgramsStudy2007.pdf>

In recent years, we have also seen the growth of competency-based learning (CBL),⁴ a student-centered strategy that helps students learn and progress towards graduation. As a strategy to help students learn, CBL focuses on the process of learning skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork, as well as academic and technical content. CBL is also less reliant on seat-time and allows students to advance at their own pace to the next level or grade when they can demonstrate mastery of defined skills or competencies. When aligned with postsecondary education standards or employer-desired skills, CBL contributes to a student's CCR by giving them engaging, learner-centered opportunities to develop and master important skills.

As students learn and develop valuable skills and competencies both in and out of school, it seems natural to explore strategies and policies to support the intersection, interaction, and interrelationship of these two learning venues and how they are using CBL. Afterschool programs have often embraced the principles of CBL, as they tend to engage students in personalized learning and encourage student ownership of their learning. Additionally, CBL allows students the flexibility to demonstrate mastery at their own pace and in a variety of learning environments, often during afterschool hours.

AYPF Identified Trends

By partnering with the K-12 education system, afterschool can help students develop and demonstrate mastery of certain skills and, in some cases, earn credit or credentials for some of those skills. While there are plenty of examples of partnerships between K-12 and afterschool, the idea of afterschool informing CBL and vice versa is still new and emerging. Based upon leading practices in the field, we have identified three trends at the intersection of afterschool and CBL related to CCR.

Understanding and Defining Competencies

Many afterschool programs help students develop personal skills such as communication, teamwork, and self-advocacy, and can provide guidance in how they understand and define competencies. For example, some afterschool programs have identified and articulated employer-desired skills and competencies and have started conversations with K-12 partners on how these types of skills and competencies that go beyond academic knowledge are critical for CCR. We believe this emerging trend could potentially lead to afterschool providers working more closely with K-12 educators on better articulating and developing measures for these life skills, either as independent competencies or within a range of course competencies.

Competencies as Currency for Course Credit

Competencies also serve as a language or currency for translating learning experiences to credit-bearing experiences for students. The most direct intersection of afterschool and CBL is when afterschool programs provide competency-based experiences that lead to academic credit. Building the infrastructure in school districts to support this type of partnership has been extremely challenging, and many efforts have not been sustainable. While this trend may offer the most promising interrelationship

⁴ For more information on CBL, see <http://www.competencyworks.org/about/competency-education/>

of competency-based learning and afterschool, it is difficult work, and many policy and instructional issues need greater attention.

Badges as Translators of Competencies

Afterschool can also help students develop and demonstrate mastery of skills by providing badges or other certifications for specific skills. These badges and certification may not yet be accepted by the K-12 education system, but they might have value to employers, higher education institutions, and other organizations. Digital badges, in particular, are a useful way to link formal and informal learning and may be viewed by youth as a valuable credential that reflects their individual interests, skills, and achievements.

Considerations Moving Forward

We recognize there are opportunities for the fields of afterschool and CBL to develop independently, but we believe bringing them together presents a unique opportunity for these two fields to learn from each other and better serve students, especially in preparing students for CCR. As the work in this area is still nascent and many questions remain, we have identified several challenges that afterschool providers and K-12 educators implementing CBL face.

Lack of Clarity with Field-Specific Language

As demonstrated by the sheer range of terms used to encompass both afterschool and CBL, it is evident that language presents a challenge as we work to build common understanding and seek opportunities for collaboration and coordination among these two fields. While each field independently presents its own nomenclature challenges on what certain terms mean and in what context, language can also be an entry point for practitioners and educators operating in both arenas to collaborate around a process of articulating and defining competencies, especially ones that focus on the development of personal skills. For example, afterschool is often cited as a strategy to help students develop personal and social skills for CCR, such as problem-solving, conflict resolution, self-control, leadership, responsible decision-making, and enhancement of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Given efforts to identify, define, and begin to measure this type of skill development in afterschool programs, there is a unique opportunity for afterschool practitioners to work with K-12 educators around the development of competencies that merge academic content knowledge, technical skills, and personal skills.

Policy Environments to Support CBL and Afterschool

In order to allow for learning to take place outside of a traditional classroom, there must be policy in place at both the state and district level. Currently, 43 states have policies in place to afford for some iteration of CBL.⁵ While this seems to be a necessary first step, it appears to be both underused and misunderstood. Often a policy related to CBL does not specify whether or not providers beyond the school can participate in the demonstration of mastery, which leads to confusion and challenges around

⁵ See, http://cdn.carnegiefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/CUP_Policy_MayUpdate1.pdf

transcription of credit and teacher of record policies. More clarity on how afterschool providers can participate in CBL would be useful.

Cross-Sector Coordination and Building Partnerships

Cross-sector coordination between afterschool programs and schools existed well before we began exploring the intersection of afterschool and CBL, as there is a long history of afterschool providers being viewed as critical partners to achieving academic goals. But we must also consider other cross-agency coordination that is necessary in promoting collaboration between afterschool and CBL specifically. For example, one trend that occurs during afterschool hours is the provision of work-based learning experiences through job shadowing or internships. Depending on the types of jobs and age of students, the State Department of Labor might need to be involved as a partner to ensure that children are safe and businesses are meeting occupation and employability standards. Additionally, as we look at afterschool and CBL as a strategy to better promote CCR, we must also consider postsecondary education as a potential partner and cross-agency collaborator. Given the lack of understanding of K-12 competency-based transcripts by institutions of higher education, there is the potential for afterschool to serve as an intermediary and translator. In other words, afterschool providers can help schools better articulate what skills and competencies students gain through competency-based experiences and help higher education institutions better understand their value, especially when recognizing credit is involved.

Policy to Practice v. Practice to Policy: Which Comes First?

Given that interrelationships between afterschool and CBL are still emerging and best practices still developing, there are questions of whether or not we can continue to move forward without significant policy changes. Similar to the classic chicken or egg debate of which came first, we must consider if policy is the right lever to use or if we should focus on developing and refining practice.

Conclusion

Moving forward, there is still much to learn and consider, but it is clear that afterschool CBL and have a great deal to offer each other by learning from and working with each other. As we continue to pursue practices and policies to ensure all students are ready for college and careers, it is clear that the intersection, interaction, and interrelationship of afterschool and CBL provides an opportunity to better support CCR of more students.