



Boston Learns Together

Four Strategies for Closing Boston's Opportunity Gap

Right now we have an opportunity to shape a new agenda for Boston's children and youth. Up to this point, local investments have focused heavily on improving our public schools, but emerging research points to a broad and growing "opportunity gap" that extends far beyond the school day and is a major contributor to gaps in achievement between low-income students and their more affluent peers.

Higher income families far outspend lower income families on enriching activities, exposure to novel environments, and other out-of-school supports

that help their children build the skills and background knowledge they need to succeed in school and beyond.

The good news is that Boston is rich in resources that, if well coordinated, could go a long way toward closing the opportunity gap and putting all students on a path to success. Our children's afternoons, weekends, and summers (80% of their waking hours) could be filled with quality programming matched to their interests and developmental needs. By working together across sectors, with common strategies, we can support all Boston youth to learn and thrive.

Strategy 1 SUMMER LEARNING FOR ALL

Differential access to summer learning opportunities in the elementary and middle school years explains a substantial part of today's achievement gap. Summer is a time when youth can engage in learning beyond the school walls and connect with Boston's unparalleled natural and cultural assets. From outdoor discovery and real-world science projects to college and career immersion programs, stimulating summer programs reinforce in-school learning and can stem, or even

reverse, the well-documented "summer learning slide" that affects low-income students most.

Quality summer programs help students:

- **activate** and apply academic content
- **engage** their passions and interests
- **strengthen** relationships with adults and peers
- **explore** new settings and future possibilities

Strategy 2 SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

Individuals need a range of skills to thrive as learners, workers, and citizens. A growing body of research identifies skills like creativity and persistence as predictors of success in almost any setting. We develop these transferable skills by engaging in complex projects, collaborating with others, surmounting challenges, and reflecting on our growth.

With experience building social-emotional and lifeskills, community nonprofits are well positioned to help students succeed in school and beyond.

Boston's Achieve, Connect, Thrive Framework synthesizes research-derived skills in a form that can be shared by schools and partners, as they work together to help students:

- **achieve** goals
- **connect** meaningfully with others
- **thrive** as individuals

Boston's Achieve, Connect, Thrive skills are identifiable, measurable, and teachable—and they have the potential to unify stakeholders around a common skills agenda.

Strategy 3 INNOVATIVE WAYS TO LEARN & EARN

Teens require a different engagement strategy in the out-of-school hours. Most are ready to earn income and prepare for the next steps in life. **Jobs and paid internships** can be a powerful motivator for teens and an important investment in building a future workforce and safer communities. These opportunities help students build crucial leadership, teamwork, and workplace skills, and, in some case, may merit a formal credential or academic credit.

There is room to innovate. New efforts in the arts and civics education have the potential to open new avenues for **earning credit outside the classroom** in Boston. By leveraging the expertise of community educators, and giving students credit for what they learn, wherever it may happen, we can provide rich learning experiences that accelerate students' progress toward graduation, keep them productively engaged, and strengthen their ties to the community.

Strategy 4 STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Community partners play an increasingly important role in extended-day and after-school programs, but schools and youth-serving organizations often operate in isolation, even when they serve the same young people, resulting in lost opportunities to reinforce learning and support students. Schools and community partners can **increase their impact** when they unite their work around **common goals, share responsibility** for outcomes, and **communicate** about progress.

At the core of effective partnerships is shared information. With common data about students, partners can align their instruction, identify practices that work and those that don't, and deploy staff and other resources to meet the needs of individuals. A **citywide commitment to common measures** and a **shared database** for tracking them will allow Boston's youth-serving organizations to monitor program participation, identify excellent practices, and address gaps in program access and quality.



Boston After School & Beyond connects school, afterschool, and summer learning strategies so that young people have the opportunity to learn and thrive.

In 2013, BASB strengthened partnerships among 100 organizations and 60 schools, reaching thousands of youth with innovative programming. BASB convenes the Partnership Council, a growing coalition of more than 70 organizations with a shared commitment to closing the opportunity gap for Boston children.

Select Resources

Duncan, G and Murnane, R (eds). From *Whither Opportunity: Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2011.

Farrington, C. et al (2012). *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance*. Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2012.

"Learn Anytime, Anywhere: Rethinking How Students Earn Credit Beyond School Hours." The After-School Corporation, 2012.

McCombs et al. *Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning*. Rand Corporation, 2011.