



# From Schooling to Learning: Leveraging Community Resources to Earn Academic Credit

## Introduction

In 2012, Boston After School & Beyond (Boston Beyond) and EdVestors launched efforts to facilitate more strategic connections between community organizations and the Boston Public Schools. These pilot projects were designed to expand students’ access to community resources as part of earning elective academic credit. Such community-based learning experiences have been recognized nationally as promising strategies for improving students’ engagement in school. “Real world” learning opportunities—about which students express choice—offer richness to learning and help foster engagement in important civic and cultural institutions. However, community partnerships often remain limited in scope and rarely extend beyond a small network of schools. In contrast, the approaches piloted by Boston Beyond and EdVestors represent attempts to develop and sustain broader community-based learning approaches, testing the viability of expanded educational programming for credit across a large, urban district. In this brief, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy provides a review of the literature and documents critical knowledge gained from the effort in Boston.

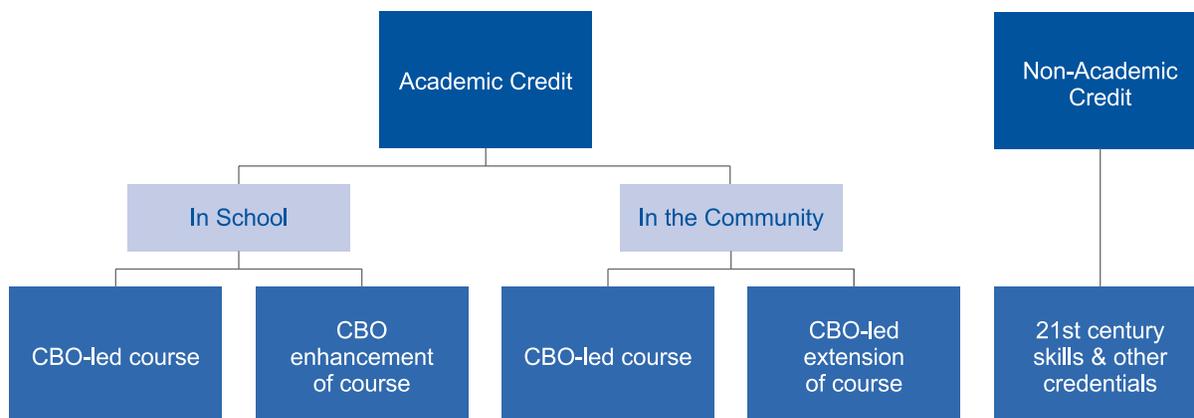
## Overview

**What is community-based learning?** Community-based learning provides opportunities for students to build content knowledge and develop skills with external organizations working in collaboration with public schools. Properly implemented, community-based learning supports and advances local education options and offers applied learning in students’ areas of interest. Some districts view community-based learning as an effective strategy for exposing students to new experiences and diversifying skill-building opportunities, while others are developing more rigorous programming as a way for students to earn credit and/or fulfill academic requirements. Working to establish community-based learning as a core component of students’ academic programming, Boston Beyond<sup>A</sup> has identified several possible credit-bearing options that may occur both within and outside of school:

**Community-based learning: Design & purpose**

- Expose students to meaningful content;
- Provide students with choice and voice;
- Connect learning to personal knowledge and experiences;
- Involve ongoing assessment of skills and feedback to students; and
- Build school–community partnerships around a common learning purpose.

**Figure 1. Potential Community-based Credit-bearing Options in Boston Public Schools**



A Boston After School & Beyond (Boston Beyond) is a public-private partnership that seeks to ensure that every child in Boston has the opportunity to develop to his or her full potential. Boston Beyond mobilizes partnerships among program providers, philanthropy, business and higher education, and the City of Boston, especially the Boston Public Schools. In 2012, Boston Beyond and EdVestors partnered to launch efforts to facilitate more strategic connections between community organizations and the Boston Public Schools. These pilot projects were designed to expand students’ access to community resources as part of earning elective academic credit.

**What are the benefits of community-based learning?** Community-based learning can be a powerful education and youth development tool. Many community learning options engage students in hands-on learning that extends beyond the traditional school day. These experiences demonstrate relevance to students' lives, especially when students are given choice over options, and represent a promising approach to improving student outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Emerging research indicates students who participate in community-based learning increase acquisition and application of real-world problem-solving skills and knowledge<sup>2</sup> and are more likely to actively engage in their learning with increased self-confidence.<sup>3</sup> Other potential student outcomes include:<sup>4</sup>

- higher rates of school attendance and lower dropout rates;
- improved student attendance and academic achievement;
- decreased involvement in risky behaviors;
- stronger connections to adults and peers;
- enhanced awareness of cultural differences and attitudes towards others; and
- gains in career/communication/life skills and a positive increase in career exploration knowledge.

Community-based learning can expand the vision for schooling: new learning opportunities can be a powerful asset in making a curriculum more relevant and activating diverse learning styles among students not as engaged in traditional classroom environments.<sup>5</sup> If students, schools, and community partners all co-exist in the same neighborhood, community-based learning can build social capital and give students the chance to ground their education in their daily, non-school experiences.<sup>6</sup> Finally, and perhaps most important to the needs of at-risk students, community-based learning can expand students' circle of caring adults, often an important factor in decisions on (educational) persistence and advancement and career selection.<sup>7</sup>

**What are barriers to community-based learning?** Extending learning beyond the schoolhouse door does not come without challenges. Research notes that successful implementation and sustainability of community-based learning depends on drawing upon all the resources available in the community.<sup>8</sup> Common challenges highlighted in research, and at play in this pilot effort with Boston Public Schools, include operational issues concerning staffing and communication between partners, as well as concerns about sustainability. Neither schools nor community-based organizations typically have these partnerships as a main focus of their work and securing funding to support staff time to manage opportunities can be difficult to sustain for multiple years.<sup>9</sup> Further, although community-based learning is defined by integration between learning at school and learning in the community, school leaders may remain wary; the rigor associated with community options and alignment with local content standards may be called into question.

## **Challenges & solutions in developing credit-bearing, community-based options in New York City**

The After School Corporation (TASC), an intermediary organization working with the New York City Department of Education, community-based organizations (CBOs), and local funders in New York, has developed several approaches to offering students learning experiences that extend beyond the traditional school day. While advantageous to many schools, especially small high schools without a wide range of electives, developing community-based options presents challenges. To make new learning opportunities sustainable, TASC:

- Recruited interested community partners (e.g., museums, arts organizations, and youth development corporations);
- Convened principals willing to consider credit-bearing community options;
- Developed online tools to catalog community-based options so that schools and CBOs could "find" each other;
- Identified certified, licensed teachers interested in community options and co-developed a curriculum; and
- Established protocols for teachers and community partners to monitor student progress and develop student assessments that demonstrated skill acquisition.

In the spring of 2012, TASC worked with a studio arts organization to offer a 60-hour, hands-on tutorial to high school students as a one-credit arts elective. In expanding these opportunities, TASC worked with principals to highlight the work between teachers and community partners so that school leadership would have a nuanced perspective on how community-based offerings meet curricular requirements and are aligned to local content standards.

**What structures help community-based learning flourish?** Nationwide, many districts and schools partner with community-based organizations to extend academic learning opportunities (e.g., summer programs) and non-academic services (e.g., mental/physical health referrals). However, credit-based community-based learning options are distinct from more typical school-community offerings. Credit-based community-based learning is intentionally integrated into the district and/or school curriculum and intended to help students achieve specific learning goals. In working with Boston Beyond and EdVestors on documenting their work, the Rennie Center surfaced evidence-based, effective practices supporting this integration:

- Credit-bearing projects need sustained support from community partners, school staff, and district administrators;
- Clear and defined course standards allow diverse programs flexibility in helping students achieve core competencies;
- A nimble intermediary organization—acting as a central “hub”—can ensure regular communication among project partners;
- Clearly-established protocols and processes define how schools and community organizations work together; and
- Partners routinely engage in meaningful conversations about the common curricular foci that characterize the connection between classroom and community-based learning.

## The Way Forward

There is no one-size-fits-all model of how schools and community partners provide for credit-bearing community-based learning options. Irrespective of approach, the work of Boston Beyond and EdVestors serves as a proof point that community-based learning approaches can be successful in a large, urban district, and reinforces the notion that community-based learning calls for the support of multiple partners with a sustained commitment to collaboration.

**For more information on the Boston High School Credit-Bearing Pilot:**



BPS Arts Expansion Initiative  
[edvestors.org](http://edvestors.org)



Expanded Learning Opportunities for Teens  
[bostonbeyond.org](http://bostonbeyond.org)

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The After School Corporation. (2012). *Learn Anytime, Anywhere: Rethinking How Students Earn Credit Beyond School Hours*. TASC Policy Brief Series. New York, NY: TASC. Retrieved from: [http://www.expandedschools.org/sites/default/files/rethinking\\_high\\_school\\_credits.pdf](http://www.expandedschools.org/sites/default/files/rethinking_high_school_credits.pdf).  
Peter, N. (2002). *Outcomes and Research in Out-of-School Time Program Design*. Philadelphia, PA: Best Practices Institute, Out-of-School Resource Center, University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved from: <http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/ostrc/doclibrary/documents/OutcomesandResearchinOut-of-SchoolTimeProgramDesign.pdf>.  
Education Commission of the States. (2011). Linking Service Learning to the Curriculum. *Network News*, 1(1). Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. Retrieved from: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/99/46/9946.pdf>.  
Ozer, E. J. and Wright, D.. (2012). Beyond School Spirit: The Effects of Youth-Led Participatory Action Research in Two Urban High Schools. *Journal of Research in Adolescence*, 22(2), 267-83. Retrieved from: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00780.x/abstract>.
- 2 The After School Corporation. (2012). *Learn Anytime, Anywhere: Rethinking How Students Earn Credit Beyond School Hours*. TASC Policy Brief Series. New York, NY: TASC. Retrieved from: [http://www.expandedschools.org/sites/default/files/rethinking\\_high\\_school\\_credits.pdf](http://www.expandedschools.org/sites/default/files/rethinking_high_school_credits.pdf).
- 3 Education Commission of the States. (2011). Linking Service Learning to the Curriculum. *Network News*, 1(1). Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. Retrieved from: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/99/46/9946.pdf>.
- 4 National Conference of State Legislatures. (2011). *Helping Older Youth Succeed Through Expanded Learning Opportunities*. Brief Number 1, August 2011. Washington, DC: National Conference of State Legislatures. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncsl.org/documents/educ/HelpingOlderYouthSucceedThroughELOs.pdf>.  
The After School Corporation. (2012). *Learn Anytime, Anywhere: Rethinking How Students Earn Credit Beyond School Hours*. TASC Policy Brief Series. New York, NY: TASC. Retrieved from: [http://www.expandedschools.org/sites/default/files/rethinking\\_high\\_school\\_credits.pdf](http://www.expandedschools.org/sites/default/files/rethinking_high_school_credits.pdf).  
Peter, N. (2002). *Outcomes and Research in Out-of-School Time Program Design*. Philadelphia, PA: Best Practices Institute, Out-of-School Resource Center, University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved from: <http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/ostrc/doclibrary/documents/OutcomesandResearchinOut-of-SchoolTimeProgramDesign.pdf>.  
Education Commission of the States. (2011). Linking Service Learning to the Curriculum. *Network News*, 1(1). Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. Retrieved from: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/99/46/9946.pdf>.
- 5 Melaville, A., Berg, A.C., and Blank, M.J. (2006). *Community Based Learning: Engaging Students for Success and Citizenship*. Washington, DC: The Coalition for Community Schools, Institute for Educational Leadership. Retrieved from: [http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/CBL\\_Book\\_1\\_27\\_06.pdf](http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/CBL_Book_1_27_06.pdf).
- 6 Gratz-Lazarus, R. (2012). *Addressing Disparities in Educational Attainment: Can Youth Participatory Action Research Close the Gaps?* University of San Francisco, Student Masters Thesis. Retrieved from: <http://rachelgratz.myefolio.com/Uploads/Culminating%20MPH%20Project.pdf>.
- 7 National Conference of State Legislatures. (2011). *Helping Older Youth Succeed Through Expanded Learning Opportunities*. Brief Number 1, August 2011. Washington, DC: National Conference of State Legislatures. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncsl.org/documents/educ/HelpingOlderYouthSucceedThroughELOs.pdf>.
- 8 Bowles, A. and Brand, B. (2009). *Learning Around the Clock: Benefits of Expanded Learning Opportunities for Older Youth*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved from: <http://www.aypf.org/resources/learning-around-the-clock-benefits-of-expanded-learning-opportunities-for-older-youth-2009/>.
- 9 Geiger, E. and Britsch, B. (n.d.) *Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation: Tools for Action*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, Education, Care and Community Program. Retrieved from: [http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm\\_send/148](http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm_send/148).