



## POLICY BRIEF

# Beyond School Walls: Earning Credit for Expanded Learning Opportunities

## Introduction

When Mayor Martin J. Walsh addressed Bostonians in his first State of the City address, he highlighted plans for “re-designing our high schools around pathways to college and career.”<sup>1</sup> As an example, he cited an initiative at Charlestown High School where new partnerships with Bunker Hill Community College and software company SAP were providing students with access to early college programming, internships, and job training.<sup>2</sup> A few months later, Mayor Walsh and his Chief of Education Turahn Dorsey announced High School Redesign Boston (HSReD) to craft the future of the city’s public secondary schools. The project embraced similar principles: create innovative structures that attend to students’ individualized needs and prepare them for a high-tech, global workforce. A focus was placed on options that extend “beyond the four walls of the classroom,” implicitly defining schooling as a community-wide endeavor that includes youth-serving nonprofits, corporations, higher education institutions, and museums.<sup>3</sup>

HSReD is just one of many efforts emerging in Massachusetts and across the nation focused on reimaging student learning. Along with a strong commitment to academic rigor, there is growing recognition that success in college and careers rests on developing important twenty-first century skills, such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and perseverance. Students have been shown to benefit from experiential learning in real world settings matched to their particular interests and needs. But, expanding learning beyond the classroom can prove challenging. New delivery models are needed that link public schools to community-wide resources, as well as programs able to facilitate learning that may occur anytime and anywhere.

In Boston, public schools and community-based organizations (CBOs) are experimenting with expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) as a way to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century learner. ELOs blend in school experiences with community-based activities, encouraging innovation that can engage and empower students. A key facet of the work in Boston has been to grant academic credit to students participating in out-of-school learning. Through piloting various ELO-for-credit models, the district has begun to articulate additional pathways to a high school diploma and success in college and careers. In this brief, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy examines ongoing work in Boston and efforts by Boston After School and Beyond (Boston Beyond), a prominent Boston ELO program intermediary, to advance the development of a formalized system for providing students with ELOs for academic credit.

# The context for ELOs in Massachusetts

Over the past ten years, Massachusetts has prioritized postsecondary and workforce readiness as a necessary goal of public education. In 2013, the Boards of Higher Education and Elementary and Secondary Education updated the definition of college- and career-readiness to be more aligned with 21st century needs, including an increased focus on personal and social growth and career skills.<sup>4</sup> Shifts in state guidance do not automatically lead to changes in local practice, however. Developing and implementing new and innovative programming to enhance college- and career-readiness requires time, resources, and expertise. ELOs provide a solution to these challenges by connecting public schools to community-based partners well positioned to help improve student learning, skill-building, and social-emotional outcomes through established programming.

There are several federal and state resources available to school districts that promote the use of ELOs and may be leveraged to support new partnerships and program development:

- The 21st Century Community Learning Centers and After School and Out of School Time (ASOST) grant programs are designed to provide students with academic enrichment opportunities and enhanced programming beyond the traditional school day. Further, these programs provide professional development opportunities and technical assistance that may support ELOs.<sup>5</sup>
- The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) coordinates the Connecting Activities Initiative, which brokered approximately 10,487 internships in 2015, along with job shadowing and work readiness training.<sup>6</sup>
- ESE maintains a portal hosting hundreds of projects submitted by Massachusetts educators that focus on contextual learning or learning that engages students in their academic work by applying it to their lives. The portal includes classroom-based projects, but also learning modules that take place after school, in the summer, or through work-based learning.<sup>7</sup>

Along with state-sponsored supports, Boston has advanced a number of learning activities to foster college- and career-readiness, including ELOs funded through Boston Beyond and many others. A few examples include:

- The Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) sponsors the “Classroom at the Workplace” program, which offers students test preparation supports and internships.<sup>8</sup>
- Boston Public Schools (BPS) is home to the Arts Expansion Initiative, a system of credit-bearing ELOs focused on ensuring all Boston students have access to high-quality arts education.<sup>9</sup> Multiple partnerships between schools and cultural or higher education institutions allow students to gain arts credit by participating in after-school, community-based arts courses that fulfill graduation requirements.

## Boston After School & Beyond

Since 2005, Boston Beyond has connected public and private partners in the Boston area to expand learning and skill development opportunities for students. Its four core strategic functions include convening and communication, policy development and coordination, research and analysis, and program demonstration and partnerships. Through its work, Boston Beyond has facilitated the creation and implementation of a variety of programs to better align students’ in school and out-of-school learning.

This report features 12 organizations that partnered with Boston Beyond in 2014-15 as part of the Expanded Learning Opportunities for Teens (ELO Teen) Initiative. Collectively, ELO Teen programs serve 1,644 students from 38 schools in Boston Public Schools (BPS). The initiative brings together organizations that offer teenagers opportunities to earn academic credit, particularly outside of the traditional school day and classroom setting, as well as provide non-academic credentials based on mastery of content or skills. ELO Teen partner organizations serve BPS teenagers through programs and activities that feature hands-on, experiential learning and skill building.

## Defining ELOs

For the purposes of this brief, ELOs are defined as learning opportunities that complement and/or expand upon traditional classroom instruction, and may occur during or after the school day. Though they take a variety of forms, ELOs often feature experiential learning, and involve adults other than the primary teachers of record, such as community partners.

Such programs—along with many other local examples—contribute to the overall prominence of ELOs in Boston. (See Appendix A for more information on the range of ELOs available in BPS).

The resources and expertise that exist in Massachusetts and the city of Boston to promote and support the use of ELOs are substantial. What is lacking is a coordinated system of high-quality, out-of-school learning experiences that fully leverages the benefits of experiential learning, including providing students with academic credit. Boston Beyond, as part of a multi-year effort, has piloted expansion strategies to increase access to credit-bearing ELOs for BPS students, while working to increase the quality and quantity of programs. In partnership with CBOs and BPS, Boston Beyond has begun to explore the requisite ingredients for building infrastructure to network and systemize ELOs. As part of this effort, Boston Beyond commissioned the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy to explore the use of credit-bearing ELOs as critical experiential learning opportunities for students, as well as existing policy options that can support expansion. In the sections below, the Rennie Center team reviews the current literature on ELOs, presents findings from research into Boston ELOs, and offers policy considerations to guide reform.

## The research base on ELOs

ELOs extend classroom learning by providing students a way to learn and apply skills in a real-world setting. New Hampshire—one of the first states to institute formal state policies related to expanded learning—defines ELOs as “the primary acquisition of knowledge and skills through instruction or study outside of the traditional classroom methodology, including, but not limited to: independent study, private instruction, performing groups, internships, community service, apprenticeships, and online coursework.”<sup>10</sup> Other states and agencies may define it slightly differently, and this definition is broad enough to encapsulate many different models of learning. This section of the report offers a brief overview of some of the ways ELOs are provided, as well as the mounting evidence describing potential benefits for student learning. It then presents recommendations from the research literature on how to implement ELOs, particularly in such a way that allows students to earn academic credits.

## Elements of ELOs

The term “ELO” serves as an umbrella phrase to accommodate the many different ways of enriching student experiences beyond traditional classroom instruction. However, most ELO programs share certain qualities.<sup>11</sup> First, rather than duplicating or continuing the regular school day (as may be the case in extended learning time), ELO activities are designed to offer students new experiences that complement or expand on their in-school work. Many programs offer hands-on or experiential learning that students may not have in their regular classroom. Whether it manifests in an after-school course, a laboratory or field experience, or mentoring and apprenticeship at a local business, ELOs offer students the chance to deepen their learning.

Because ELOs are not confined to school campuses, ELOs can also help schools build greater engagement with their surrounding community. They offer an

### Study approach

In response to the need for innovative credit-bearing opportunities in Boston that extend beyond the traditional structures of schools, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy engaged in a research study of expanded learning opportunities supported by Boston After School & Beyond. The Rennie Center investigated the following questions:

- What are the key elements of expanded learning opportunities in Boston?
- How have program structures and characteristics aligned with research on effective program practices?
- When have these learning opportunities been leveraged to provide students with academic credit?

At the core of this study is determining whether Boston Beyond’s 2014-15 ELO programming is aligned with both evidence of effective practices and district-wide learning goals that allow students to earn credit in non-traditional settings.

This research study was conducted in three distinct phases. First, the study team reviewed the research and policy literature to determine evidence-based practices for ELOs. Second, the team reviewed current practices of ELOs in Boston, conducting interviews with key personnel at local community-based organizations that received funding from Boston Beyond as part of the ELO Teen Initiative. Lastly, study team members analyzed these existing practices to create a framework for planning, developing, and sustaining credit-bearing learning opportunities (see page 11).

opportunity to involve families, local business and community partners, and social services providers in early learning, health, and other fields in the schooling process by providing unique learning experiences for students. If the ELO program involves service learning, the community may also reap tangible benefits from student involvement in development projects that address real local needs.<sup>12</sup> Schools can take on a critical, central role in the community by coordinating broader systems of student support and brokering relationships between local partners.

## Benefits of ELOs

ELO programs can provide many benefits for students as well as the greater community. Participation in ELO activities has been linked not only to stronger academic performance in subjects like reading and math, but also to an important set of comprehensive student outcomes such as improved attendance and greater social-emotional development. Experiences in ELOs can also help students develop social and emotional skills—including problem solving, critical thinking, positive attitudes, and strong work habits—that enhance their learning potential and well-being, and lead to greater life success.<sup>13</sup> ELOs that take place outside the school day can reduce rates of risky or unsafe behavior by providing youth with safe, engaging activities, while also saving time and money for working parents by reducing the need to arrange for after-school activities and care.<sup>14</sup>

ELOs can assist students with college- and career-readiness by fostering their aspirations and providing practical knowledge about future options. If students earn credit for ELOs, credit that can be applied toward high school graduation or even a college degree, they may move more efficiently through the schooling system without sacrificing opportunities for learning or enrichment.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, and importantly, ELOs offer students opportunities to exercise choice about their own education, often in smaller, safe environments where they can build meaningful relationships with adults and peers. Research has shown that cultivating agency—the ability to take purposeful initiative—is integral to supporting students’ in achieving their desired goals.<sup>16</sup> Teachers also benefit when ELOs provide more time to build relationships with students one-on-one or collaborate with other adults.<sup>17</sup>

## How can we move towards implementing credit-bearing ELOs?

The emerging research base on ELOs offers a number of recommendations and strategies for implementing credit-bearing ELOs successfully.

**Provide professional development and resources.**<sup>18</sup> Because ELOs may look different from learning done during the regular school day, it is essential that existing staff have appropriate curricula and training to implement approaches like project-based learning and service learning.<sup>19</sup> ELOs may require additional coordination and/or personnel to ensure that participating students and educators are receiving sufficient support.<sup>20</sup> In particular, if teachers are the ones providing the ELOs, they must receive more resources to ensure they do not become overburdened. Students do not benefit from more time engaged in learning opportunities if that time is not well planned and provided by qualified staff.

**Coordinate across partners.**<sup>21</sup> Community and family partners can be essential in providing resources for expanded programming, whether it is space for activities, materials and funds, or personnel who can support teachers during the extended period. In some cases, ELOs may be led by individuals or groups in partnership with the school, including business partners, community organizations, and health or after-school service providers. In this case, school and district leaders must ensure that classroom educators have systemic mechanisms for giving and receiving feedback about students that they share with ELO educators. Critically important is the development of linked data systems that communicate performance data across multiple organizations for the same students.<sup>22</sup> This way, all adults who share responsibility for student development can create holistic plans for their students and continue to refine their practice based on each student’s learning needs. When school-based and ELO educators work together, they can create aligned practices that build on and extend work that their colleagues are doing.

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### ELOs provide:

- Academic and social-emotional learning
- Engagement and enrichment
- College- and career-readiness
- Civic and community awareness
- Cost savings for families and communities

**Reward mastery and growth over standardized proficiency.**<sup>23</sup> Because ELOs offer students a more individualized way of learning, which may be interdisciplinary or project-based, it becomes difficult to measure their progress through measures such as “completion of X course” or “\_\_ # of credit hours of mathematics.” Thirty-six states currently have some sort of flexible policy option for awarding credit to students based on demonstrations of mastery, such as a portfolio.<sup>24</sup> This type of policy is essential for students to earn the credit they deserve for their learning in ELO settings.

To explore possible mastery-based systems, Boston Beyond is piloting a digital badging system that allows various programs throughout the city to award students with virtual badges for their out-of-school work when they have demonstrated certain defined competencies. Since badges are tied to a common set of criteria and central database, they can serve as virtual representations of student learning across a wide variety of settings. See text box below for more information on digital badging in Boston.

## Digital badging

As the programs highlighted in this report demonstrate, Boston offers many rich settings in which young people can hone the skills and knowledge necessary for success in college and careers. However, when learning occurs out of school, it can be difficult to produce evidence of students’ hard work and growth.

Since ELOs do not always fit easily into standard academic credit-bearing structures, Boston Beyond is exploring the use of digital badging as a new currency to demonstrate progress and mastery. Using this experience, Boston Beyond partnered with six local programs in Summer 2015 to examine 1) digital badge criteria, 2) technology for a centralized digital badge system, including a shared database, and 3) middle schoolers’ interest in earning digital badges.

The six programs collectively provided Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM)-focused summer learning experiences to 470 Boston-area youth. During this pilot, they awarded 1,422 badges in communication, critical thinking, engagement, perseverance, and teamwork to 297 students, using attendance and teacher observations as the basis for earning each badge. Students received a digital badge that served as a virtual representation of achievement, as well as a physical badge presented at their program’s closing ceremony. Digital badging may be one way to validate students’ mastery of important skills earned not just in school, but across diverse settings.

**Align pathways with higher education.** One common benefit of ELO models is that students can enter college ready to learn at a higher level; some ELOs even offer the chance to earn college credit. Districts can make ELO credit more beneficial for students as they transition to college by aligning with institutions of higher education (IHEs) in two ways. First, districts can work with IHEs to ensure that ELO credits on a high school transcript are recognized as rigorous course offerings that fulfill admissions requirements.<sup>25</sup> Second, and perhaps more ambitious, is the potential for select ELOs to serve as early college opportunities. In order for this to work, institutions of higher education (IHEs) must accept credits earned in ELO settings as valid transfers.<sup>26</sup> Awarding college credit for ELOs would help students save on tuition costs and expedite their progress towards a postsecondary degree.

**Continuous evaluation.** ELO offerings are most effective when they are individualized to meet the needs of current students and communities, which are always changing. In order to ensure that ELO programs are truly offering rigorous opportunities that produce desired academic, social, civic, and community outcomes, educators and leaders must incorporate evaluation practices into their ELO programs. By continuously monitoring progress, tracking learning outcomes, and helping programs refine their practices, school districts can ensure that ELO programs continue to meet student needs and produce work worthy of earning credit. District leadership can ensure ELOs quality by working directly with community-based providers to uphold high expectations for student learning. State agencies can assist schools and districts by offering support, training, data coordination, and/or tools to facilitate their evaluation.

## CASE STUDY

### Harvard Medical School's MEDscience program

In the MEDscience program at Harvard Medical School (HMS), the university partners with high schools and hospitals to create experiential, individualized, non-competitive learning opportunities. MEDscience strives to expose students to the possibilities of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) careers, creating health-literate students who can envision themselves functioning as “health and science thinkers and do-ers.” Although they emphasize outreach to student groups that are underserved and under-represented in STEM fields, MEDscience staff believe their hands-on program brings science to life, allowing students from all backgrounds and learning styles to thrive.

MEDscience began eight years ago as a summer school curriculum, then expanded to provide programming during the school year. Currently, MEDscience works with six schools in BPS, integrating their semester-long curriculum into existing high school courses such as biology, anatomy and physiology, general science, or Advanced Placement classes. MEDscience first works with principals to identify appropriate courses and teachers. After interviewing the chosen teacher(s), MEDscience provides initial professional development, a full curriculum, and resources; they continue to support teachers on a weekly or as-needed basis during the year.

Every week, students and their teacher(s) travel to the HMS campus for lab skills coursework, which program representatives say offers them a more authentic university experience. In the university setting, they are able to participate in dynamic, hands-on work with real medical equipment and training. HMS’s simulation lab provides students with access to a high-tech simulated patient with realistic and medically accurate features, where they work in teams to solve simulated medical emergencies. MEDscience also arranges visits to hospital settings and interaction with a variety of medical professionals for continued career exploration.

All students receive course credits from their high school for their regular high school science course. MEDscience staff do not assign grades, as teachers of record accompany students to HMS for labs, but HMS staff do work in partnership with classroom teachers to evaluate attendance and participation. Students also currently have the option to earn college credits from nearby Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC). In the future, MEDscience plans to award grades to students pursuing dual enrollment (in their high school and BHCC) as an after-school program, and is currently developing a process for doing so.

Over time, the MEDscience program has seen many participants graduate high school and go on to pursue STEM or health majors in college. On measures of program quality from Boston Beyond, HMS MEDscience outperformed program peers offering ELOs to Boston teenagers, with especially noteworthy practices for promoting student engagement and stimulating critical thinking.<sup>27</sup> Students reported feeling challenged by the program, and they perceived improvements in their own sense of competence as learners and the extent to which they are taking actions now to make sure they reach their future goals.

Funding is a critical issue for MEDscience’s sustainability. The organization does charge tuition for its summer program, which offers similar experiences over a condensed time period but does not award course credit. In close partnership with a BPS staff member, program leaders were able to secure financial support from the Boston Public Schools. By establishing this source of district funding, not only was MEDscience able to ensure some continuity of its work, but it also has been recognized by program peers for its more integrated relationship with the central office.

While it wants to keep MEDscience focused on the Boston area, the organization continues to think about how to improve and scale up the program within Boston Public Schools. Important issues for scaling and sustainability include:

- Maintaining sources of funding;
- Supporting the high school teachers partnering with MEDscience, who are responsible for planning the logistics of transporting students to HMS, and who have varying levels of administrator support for this work;
- Cultivating further supports and relationships within BPS;
- Streamlining and improving training for classroom teachers and simulator clinician/educators (such as nurses or other professionals), perhaps through a peer coaching model; and
- Conducting further research and evaluation to ensure continued improvements.

# ELOs in Boston: Key findings

Rennie Center researchers interviewed team members and reviewed documents from CBOs overseeing ELOs supported by Boston Beyond. Focus was placed on examining the key features of ELOs that drive current practice and improving understanding of how they may enhance student experiences. The interviews suggest several lessons about the work done by CBOs to expand the scope of their offerings, align their work with academic content, and deepen partnerships with schools and the central office, particularly to provide credit-bearing learning opportunities. (See Appendix B for a list of participating CBOs.)

CBOs working with Boston Beyond fall along a spectrum in terms of their progress towards offering credit-bearing ELOs. However, CBOs have found successes at every stage in their pursuit of bringing this work to scale, providing valuable takeaways about the conditions necessary to create ELOs for students. Based on our data collection with Boston-area CBOs who partner with Boston Beyond, local ELOs can be characterized by four key characteristics: 1) experiential learning and real-world skills; 2) community-school relationships; 3) school district buy-in, and 4) community organization capacity. After describing these four areas, the report concludes with policy considerations synthesized from the experiences of these Boston CBOs in conjunction with the research literature.

**Experiential learning and real-world skills.** Boston Public School students participating in the studied ELOs engaged in experiential learning, in which they learned new skills and applied them to the real-world. Many of these ELOs specifically targeted job skills training. For example, students at Sociedad Latina shadowed professionals and visited colleges while working on résumé building, networking, and interviewing skills. Students in the BUILD program experienced all aspects of business start-up, including designing a business plan, delivering pitches, marketing, and ordering products. BUILD students also earned money through their business' profits, as did those who performed a summer internship through Generation Citizen.

In addition, Boston Beyond's partner CBOs emphasized civic engagement and sought to develop students' agency and sense of empowerment. Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE), Youth on Board (YOB), and Dorchester Bay Youth Force are three community partners with missions to organize for community change in Boston's neighborhoods; several of these programs supported students in job skills training, organizing, and policy analysis to achieve these ends. In addition to its more traditional job skills curricula, Sociedad Latina also explicitly encouraged bilingual students to use their dual-language ability and other elements of personal identity as strengths in developing their own career paths. Others worked to bring civic engagement into the school day: Generation Citizen, YOB, and ACE all engaged with existing social science and civics classes to offer civic engagement lessons, and some also involved students in community projects that extended beyond the classroom walls.

**Strong community-school relationships.** Both school leaders and community partners must be invested in the program and work towards developing trusting relationships to implement successful ELOs. In some cases, CBOs only built a relationship with a single teacher, which meant that school-wide buy-in—and school-level infrastructure necessary to scale up the work—was minimal. Other organizations, like MathPower and BUILD, cultivated relationships with school principals to increase teacher and student buy-in as well as accountability. For example, BUILD requires the school principal to sign a Memorandum of Understanding that formally specifies the agreement between the two organizations, providing a common starting point for the work.

Having at least one staff member on-site at the school building was a key strategy that allowed CBOs to build stronger relationships with school leaders, staff, and students. For example, staff from HOME, Inc. responsible for teaching media technology courses worked with other teachers to align their lessons with what was being taught throughout the school and sometimes developed new lessons for use in other classes or grades. CBOs like BUILD, Generation Citizen, MathPower, and ACE engaged in joint professional development and worked together with school faculty through co-planning sessions, in some cases sharing materials or jointly reviewing student data. Harvard MEDscience prioritized supporting teachers with flexible professional development; they embrace their role as co-educators and capacity-builders within the schools that are most active with the model. Despite the fact that they built relationships with teachers, most studied CBOs still found it difficult to access comprehensive information about their shared students—such as their learning needs and performance data—that could improve the quality of learning during ELOs.

**Figure 2. Three ELO models, and the potential for academic credit**

No formal connection	Complementary to school-based learning	Highly aligned with school-based learning
<p><b>PENSOLE—Leaders Emerge After Direction (L.E.A.D.)</b></p> <p><b>ELO Model:</b> Two-week intensive program where high school students work in teams to develop comprehensive footwear design, production, sales, and marketing plans, then present them to industry professionals.</p> <p><b>Goals:</b> Students receive experiential, engaging, project-based job skills training and career exposure.</p> <p><b>Partnership:</b> No direct connection to school district.</p> <p><b>Funding:</b> External</p> <p><b>Credit option:</b> They do not currently plan to pursue a credit-bearing option, though they have considered pursuing alternative credit options, such as digital badging, in the future.</p>	<p><b>Youth on Board (YOB)</b></p> <p><b>ELO Model:</b> 9th-12th grade high school students meet twice a week as members of the Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC), working on policy issues and advising the Boston School Committee. 30-50 students total serve on their steering committee.</p> <p><b>Goals:</b> Students serve the local community, gaining skills in organizing, advocacy, teamwork, and civics.</p> <p><b>Partnership:</b> Began as informal partnership with individual civics teachers; now formal. YOB has co-administered BSAC with BPS since 2004. YOB also helps guide 12th grade capstone projects in community-based organizations, graded by BPS teachers. Joint staff professional development.</p> <p><b>Funding:</b> Grants managed by YOB. BPS provides space, staff time, and some funding.</p> <p><b>Credit option:</b> Piloting credit-bearing BSAC option (i.e., academic credit in civics), as well as an academic course for working group members. Working with BPS to develop a registered district course code so students can officially enroll.</p>	<p><b>BUILD Greater Boston</b></p> <p><b>ELO Model:</b> Four-year in-school and after-school program at five BPS high schools. 9th graders enroll in an entrepreneurship course in school, where they design and run a business. 10th-12th grade students meet after school to continue their entrepreneurship and participate in tutoring and college prep activities.</p> <p><b>Goals:</b> Through entrepreneurship, students develop 21st century skills that engage them in school and prepare them for both college and career.</p> <p><b>Partnership:</b> BUILD trains BPS teachers who teach the in-school 9th grade entrepreneurship course. BUILD staff meet teachers weekly, facilitate cross-school professional development, and run the after-school program.</p> <p><b>Funding:</b> BUILD is a national organization with full-time staff. BPS compensates teachers for the 9th grade course.</p> <p><b>Monitoring and Evaluation:</b> In addition to course grades for 9th graders, BUILD staff collect attendance and participation data and regularly discuss student progress with teachers and administrators. BUILD also holds a business pitch competition.</p> <p><b>Credit option:</b> Students receive regular BPS elective credit for the 9th grade class. Students also keep the profits their business earns, which they collect in their senior year.</p>

**School district buy-in.** Community-based organizations in Boston see school district buy-in as the best way to facilitate expansion of the work and ensure credit is earned. Most studied CBOs began building relationships at the school level first, either with whole schools or individual teachers. But in order to expand their work to a larger student population, and to access additional funding and infrastructure, CBOs desired more communication. They reported great difficulties in sharing and receiving information with the central office, regardless of whether they had a pre-existing relationship. Often, CBOs that did have some sort of relationship with the district were in contact only with a particular staff member and did not have a formalized partnership. Shifts in personnel at the central office, such as consolidation of departments or turnover, interrupted the connections these CBOs were building from the bottom up.

In particular, CBOs perceive that collaboration is necessary for establishing credit-bearing opportunities, as academic credit options must be arranged at the district level. Currently, in those ELOs able to provide credit, schools are responsible for awarding credit to students and teachers grade the coursework. Therefore, creating a credit opportunity is an ad hoc process in which schools attempt to fit in ELO work under available course codes. Most of the CBOs that were able to provide credit did so either as an elective, or, occasionally, as an unrelated subject area, which seemed to undersell the core skills required

to complete the ELO work.<sup>A</sup> Greater district-level buy-in would assist ELOs with creating a more standardized, district-wide course code that appropriately credits students for the academic work done throughout these experiences.

**Community organization capacity.** Offering ELO experiences, particularly those for credit, requires considerable capacity from community partners. In some cases, the overall number of students served by each CBO was fairly small, requiring large demands on adult time for comparatively few students. However, this was not the case for all studied CBOs. As one interviewee put it, “The more you want a program to be youth-led, the more structure you need in place. This seems counter-intuitive, but without any structure, teens will become discouraged and the program will become unproductive. We have structures in place that are made to support the teens.” Experiential learning requires staff members to manage and administer the program as well as work directly with students. MathPower, Generation Citizen, and BUILD, as well as others, use large volunteer corps to help bolster their capacity, while partner teachers also invest time and energy to support programming.

Some CBOs begin their work out of schools and transition gradually towards a bigger in-school presence, whereas others make credits earned in school their primary focus. Interviewed CBOs reported more success in securing credit when credit-bearing work was their main objective, rather than blending out-of-school objectives with credit-bearing goals. For instance, the East Boston Credit Recovery Program works with existing BPS software, aligning it with credit recovery options used within district schools; all eighth graders at Young Achievers Science and Math Pilot School are required to participate in HOME, Inc.’s portfolio project work during the school day. These organizations encountered fewer challenges in securing academic credit for their students than those organizations that add on credit-bearing options to an existing portfolio of activities. Many of the programs whose focus is on youth community organizing outside of the classroom, for example, have encountered barriers to securing course credit, because the work was not originally designed with this goal in mind.

A The process through which a new course code is created at the district level is under review. In the 2014-15 school year, some credit-bearing opportunities did not have an aligned course code, so an (often unrelated) available course code was used so that students could receive credit for their ELO efforts.

## The way forward: Lessons on formative assessment from the Summer Learning Project

The ELO Teen Initiative programs that have been featured in this report represent just a few of the local ELOs available. For example, Boston Beyond works with a group of 79 organizations that provide after-school, out-of-school and summer programming for BPS students. These sites serve approximately 5,600 students, primarily in elementary and middle schools. Summer learning sites offer valuable lessons on how to expand ELO programs and strengthen district partnerships by highlighting the critical importance of measuring student learning and documenting program outcomes to provide assurances of program quality.

Of the 79 organizations working with Boston Beyond, 15 are members of the Summer Learning Project (SLP). These 15 community organizations work especially closely with BPS and Boston Beyond to prevent summer learning loss through experiential learning in community settings. SLP partners benefit from Boston Beyond funding, and BPS recruits high-need students to participate in their programs. They collaborate with academic teachers within the school to provide both traditional academic and enrichment experiences. The SLP members provide an interesting counterpoint to the ELO Teen Initiative programs featured in this report, who serve mainly high schoolers and whose level of collaboration with BPS varies.

What makes the SLP especially relevant to the pursuit of scaling credit-bearing options is the work these organizations have done to monitor and measure program quality, solicit teacher perspectives on student skills, and collect self-reported student data—all key ingredients in offering out-of-school learning for credit. Boston Beyond, with support from philanthropic organizations, funds four primary measures for SLP members:

- Enrollment and attendance tracking in a common database;
- The Assessment of Program Practices Tool (APT), conducted by a third-party observer, to evaluate the social-emotional environment and the relationships built in each program;
- The Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (SAYO) to obtain students' perspectives on their experiences in the program; and
- The Holistic Student Assessment (HSA), which asks students to self-report on specific behaviors, beliefs, and relationships related to their social-emotional developmental needs.

In addition, Boston Beyond and BPS facilitate data sharing between the CBOs participating in the SLP and the teachers of record in their partner schools. Thus, both educators and out-of-school adults receive comprehensive information on students' demographics, school climate, academic test scores, and progress in the ELO setting.

Research literature on ELOs has highlighted the importance of monitoring programs in order to document the conditions of effective ELOs and to target areas for improvement. The assessment work being done by SLP mirrors the lessons from empirical research. By piloting the measures listed above, SLP helps document the value-add of ELOs and demonstrate the conditions needed to make credit-bearing options available for students, not only through traditional academic channels but also through alternative credentials such as digital badging (see text box on page 5).

The ELO Teen Initiative programs featured in this report follow in SLP's footsteps. They have recently begun to measure program quality from the perspective of third-party observers and youth themselves, basing many of their assessments on similar measures to what SLP uses. While the ELO Teen Initiatives cannot yet measure their program effects to the same extent as SLP, their surveys of youth participants, as well as program quality ratings by trained external observers, reveal strengths and room for growth. Like the SLP members, they have begun the work of documenting their successes and assessing their weaknesses to build an evidence base for future efforts. In the years ahead, programs may seek to strengthen these monitoring efforts by adopting a coherent approach that allows for comparison across different ELOs.

# Policy considerations for state and district leaders

Increasing available ELOs may pose capacity and resource challenges for CBOs and raise issues of instructional alignment for schools, districts, and state leaders. However, based on research about the benefits of ELOs, and the findings from the current study, it is clear that these challenges can be overcome; each of the organizations working with Boston Beyond to offer ELOs are contributing to a growing body of evidence regarding ELO development and implementation. This section presents a framework of policy considerations for stakeholders who seek to establish and/or expand credit-bearing ELOs.

Like many other types of programs, ELO planning and implementation occurs as a multi-stage process. Of course, the specific trajectory will be unique to each program and its core implementers. However, most can be broadly divided into four stages: 1) **Propose** an ELO, envisioning the type of work and the need it will fill; 2) **Plan** and specify the details of the work; 3) Formalize and create **structures** for implementation; and 4) Include mechanisms to **sustain** progress and outcomes. The table below offers considerations for state, district, and local staff at each stage.

	PROPOSE	PLAN	STRUCTURE	SUSTAIN
State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Offer incentives for districts and schools to engage in ELOs, such as grants</li><li>■ Provide criteria by which ELO programs and districts can measure student growth and program implementation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Seek to integrate federal and state funding streams, and leverage existing funds such as the ASOST grant programs (discussed earlier)</li><li>■ Set guidance and frameworks for measuring ELO programs' success</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Continue to disseminate curricula, offer training, and share example program models for district/school use</li><li>■ Provide guidelines for how districts might offer credit for ELOs</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Integrate ELO implementation with other state college- and career-readiness strategies (e.g., individualized learning plans, dual/concurrent enrolment, credit recovery)</li><li>■ Research and evaluate promising ELOs statewide</li></ul>
District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Coordinate with community partners and neighborhood organizations to identify local needs, as well as local strengths, that could result in promising ELO opportunities</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Seek funding from district budget and partner organizations</li><li>■ Codify skills and competencies and create clear expectations among district, school, and ELO leaders for student learning</li><li>■ Vertically integrate plan into district curriculum</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Determine course code or propose new credit-bearing option(s) to school committee for approval</li><li>■ Assist school with determining transportation, technology, and resource needs</li><li>■ Create rubrics for evaluating ELOs</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Coordinate with schools to share knowledge about students</li><li>■ Review ELO options systematically to identify strengths, gaps, and barriers for refinement and replication district-wide</li></ul>
School and/or CBO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Identify what is new, additive, or complementary about a proposed or potential ELO</li><li>■ Identify partner school or CBO with the need and/or expertise for this program</li><li>■ Access district-level information about existing partnerships to facilitate the development of ELOs</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Codify skills and competencies that students will learn in the ELO</li><li>■ Identify which existing or new courses the ELO can or will support</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Identify at least one teacher of record at each participating school</li><li>■ Engage teachers and CBO staff in joint professional development</li><li>■ Schedule courses/learning opportunities and/or secure space as needed</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Require students to demonstrate real-world skill gain, perhaps through a tangible product</li><li>■ Guide students through student-directed activities at the school site, with teacher facilitation</li><li>■ Monitor the ELO at the program level to guide improvement and expansion</li></ul>

This framework is not intended to be prescriptive. Some of these tasks, while listed under one stakeholder, may in fact transfer across agencies depending on individual programs. Particularly at the local level, there may be some tasks that can be done best by the school in one partnership and by the CBO in another. Successful ELOs draw on the unique strengths of their partner organizations, and no two are identical.

## **Considerations for state agency leads**

The framework on the previous page synthesizes many of the key takeaways from the literature base and the data from Boston-area programs on what is needed for successful implementation of a credit-bearing ELO. The first theme emerging from this research is the critical need to provide additional assistance for ELOs' unique requirements. ELOs often require different types of instruction, new or expanded staff participation, and/or alternative technologies and logistical support to accommodate issues with operations, scheduling, and transportation. Therefore, in order to make an ELO successful and sustainable, all parties, particularly state agencies, should focus on resources and incentives to expand the work. Therefore, we propose the following considerations for state agency leads.

**Develop and provide resources that can be shared between teachers and community partners.** Staff need appropriate curricula and training to implement differentiated approaches and replicate them school-wide. These can potentially be modeled after the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE)'s Connecting Activities initiative, which provides guidance to employers and educators about supporting and structuring work-based learning experiences and student work plans.

**Establish innovative funding sources.** District and school teams can benefit from even small amounts of funding intended to help them create plans and develop resources to accomplish more with ELOs, including piloting credit-bearing plans. In New Hampshire, small state grants allowed districts to establish local teacher teams charged with planning how to use ELOs and other expanded opportunities to improve social and emotional outcomes for students.

**Create incentives to expand credit-bearing ELOs (of all kinds).** ESE may consider what policies and resources can incentivize districts to expand existing options for learning outside of the classroom. For example, ESE may consider providing more specific guidance on how to use experiential learning options to fulfill MassCore recommendations;<sup>B</sup> it could also document and disseminate information on models that districts are currently using to help students meet local graduation requirements. While districts already have permission to expand existing options for learning outside of the classroom, emphasis at the state level could pave the way for districts to prioritize this work. Perhaps most importantly, ESE can create standards of practice for developing ELOs that clearly suggest programs collect and analyze data on student participation and outcomes, much like the Summer Learning Project has done. Building capacity to assess student development and program quality will help demonstrate the benefits of ELOs.

**Develop guidance on offering credit for ELOs.** Although Massachusetts districts have control over whether, and how, to award credit for ELOs, those working towards credit-bearing ELOs can benefit from state guidelines beyond content standards and curriculum frameworks. ESE could develop a set of guidelines for districts to consider how best to incorporate non-traditional opportunities into existing structures. Moreover, state-level agencies may explore possible avenues for facilitating the transfer of ELO credits from K-12 to higher education. Coherent policies on earning and applying credits will be critical to ensuring that students receive rigorous, rich experiences that can be leveraged towards college and career.

## **Considerations for districts, schools, and community-based organizations**

Another critical theme from our research is the need to create structures to ensure that students participating in ELOs can earn credit for their work. The experiences of Boston's CBOs demonstrate the importance of designing ELOs to offer credit from the beginning, as it can be difficult to add this element on later to non-credit-bearing work. Thus, districts, schools, and CBOs should attend to credit-bearing considerations early in the process. We offer the following specific suggestions for consideration.

**At the local level, codify skills and competencies that students can master by participating in an ELO program and how these are achieved across different experiences.** In order to know what students have learned, school leaders, teachers, and community partners need clear expectations for student competencies—whether contextualized content knowledge or universal applied skills—and benchmarks for assessing progress. Districts and schools can review existing projects in the

<sup>B</sup> MassCore, the Massachusetts High School Program of Studies, is intended to help the state's high school graduates arrive at college or the workplace well prepared. MassCore recommends a comprehensive set of subject area courses and units as well as other learning opportunities to complete before graduating from high school.

state's Contextual Learning Portal for ideas to improve or expand upon their ELO offerings. The next step is to ensure that these benchmarks for learning, which may include a crosswalk with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, are universally communicated among partners.

**Conduct broad-based monitoring to evaluate growth in student skills.** Educators need monitoring and evaluation routines that specifically pertain to skills gained from the ELO, not just standardized assessments. Such monitoring routines can also bridge ELOs and school-based content, providing comprehensive data about student development. Over time, these measurement techniques will demonstrate the skills students are gaining, fostering a greater integration of ELOs with traditional classroom experiences and fostering the expansion of credit-bearing ELOs for students. District leadership can provide the support needed to ensure high-quality ELOs: central office staff can clarify expectations for student learning, monitor evaluation results, and serve as strong connective tissue between all parties.

**Consider how to vertically integrate ELOs as part of a multiple pathways approach to a high school diploma and college- and career-readiness.** The use of ELOs provides an excellent opportunity for school districts to rethink college- and career-readiness by expanding their notions of how students are able to experience learning and demonstrate competency. ELOs are not just another strategy to support current requirements and expectations for high school completion; rather, they are a tool to achieve a new or expanded vision of what students should know and be able to do. Initially, districts can enhance alignment and vertical integration by cross-walking ELO skills and competencies with specific course options. But these actions should be part of larger conversations about a school district's goals for student learning.

## Conclusion

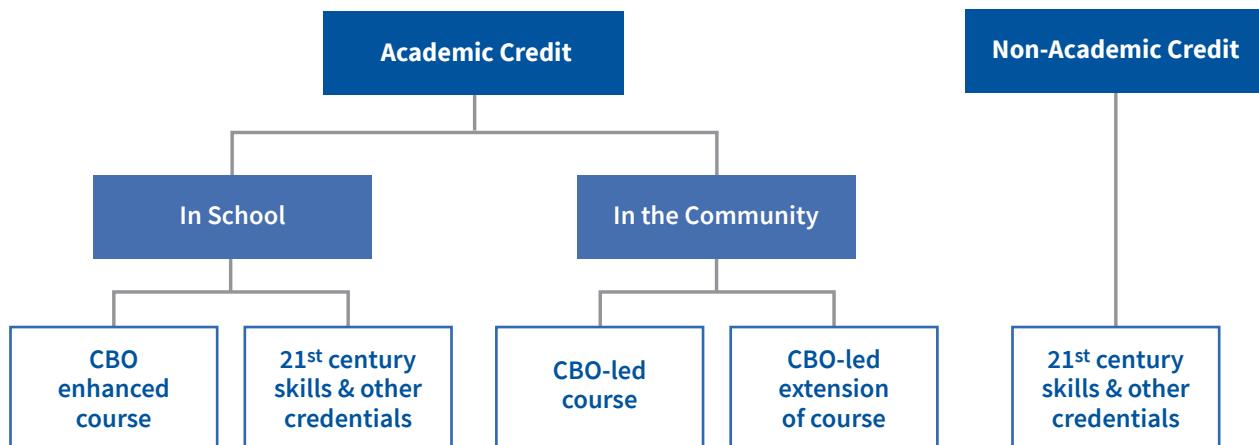
In Boston, schools and CBOs are already partnering to provide engaging, rigorous, innovative learning opportunities that complement students' traditional academic experiences. Many have begun to create options for students to earn formal academic credit for the skills and knowledge acquired in non-traditional settings. However, much work remains before all of Massachusetts' children have access to similarly individualized programs that prepare them for college and careers in a globalized, high-tech workforce. The findings in this study have implications for all schools, CBOs, districts, and state actors collaborating to provide expanded learning opportunities to students. By planning and implementing programs with attention to resources, clearly defined student competencies, structures for awarding formal credit, and alignment with existing college and career pathways, educators can ensure students receive transformative experiential learning opportunities that build new knowledge and skills while also making progress towards a high school degree.

## APPENDIX A

# Credit-bearing taxonomy of expanded learning opportunities in the Boston Public Schools

Students in the Boston Public Schools have several options for pursuing expanded learning opportunities. The diagram below categorizes the kinds of offerings made available by community-based organizations (CBOs) working in partnership with the Boston Public Schools (BPS). There are several different models for ELOs that award academic credit. The CBO may work directly inside of a school in one of two ways. First, a CBO may lead a particular course in schools, often as an elective, on material for which it has special expertise (such as civics). While the CBO in this case does primary instruction, a teacher of record at the BPS school collaborates to review and evaluate student work. The CBO may also work together with teachers to supplement existing coursework, such as by offering digital media modules for a range of subjects.

A CBO may also facilitate out-of-school credit-bearing work in the community. Some CBOs may provide students with the chance to complete remedial coursework using BPS curricula, with partnership of BPS teachers, during out-of-school time. Alternatively, CBOs may lead out of school experiences that complement students' in-school work, such as internships, laboratory activities, or community organizing opportunities. Lastly, students may take part in supplemental activities that do not offer academic credit, such as after-school or summer intensive programs that offer project-based and/or experiential learning. Despite not offering academic credit, these experiences can offer students career exposure, enrichment, mentoring, 21st century skills, and in some cases, certificates or other credentials of learning.



## APPENDIX B

# Participating organizations

Data collection for this project involved interviews with team members from community-based organizations overseeing ELOs for Boston Public School students. The organizations interviewed for this project are:

- Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE)—Roxbury Environmental Empowerment Project (REEP)
- Boston Debate League
- Businesses United in Investing Lending and Development (BUILD)
- Dorchester Bay Youth Force
- East Boston YMCA
- Generation Citizen
- Here-in Our Motives Evolve (HOME), Inc.
- MathPower
- Harvard Medical School MEDscience
- PENSOLE—Leaders Emerge After Direction (L.E.A.D.)
- Sociedad Latina
- Youth on Board

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## Support for this project provided by

Boston After School & Beyond

## Acknowledgements

The Rennie Center would like to express its gratitude to the grantee programs in the Boston After School & Beyond ELO Teen Initiative. We are grateful for their time, candor, and—most especially—for their commitment to sharing what they have learned so that others may better serve youth in expanded learning opportunities. We would also like to thank Jenny Curtin of the Barr Foundation for providing valuable feedback on the policy brief. We are grateful to our partners—our colleagues at Boston After School & Beyond—who helped in the conception of this project and provided valuable feedback throughout its development.

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## Suggested Citation

Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (May 2016). *Beyond School Walls: Earning Credit for Expanded Learning Opportunities*. Boston, MA: Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy.