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Student-Centered Learning in Afterschool: Putting Students' Needs and Interests First

“Now more than ever, creativity and imagination are an important part of helping children learn to think critically, solve problems and express themselves—all necessary to compete in today’s global community. Wherever children are—in school or out—[student-centered learning opportunities] work to surround them with opportunities to develop skills and nurture talents that lead to success.” – Big Thought, Dallas, Texas

Today’s classrooms reflect a full spectrum of abilities, interests and cultures.ⁱ In part due to standardized testing’s influence on the school curriculum and the pace at which students must move through the coursework, meeting the needs of individual students during the school day is challenging.ⁱⁱ Many students are falling behind and, as a result, there is a growing necessity to provide more student-centered, personalized learning opportunities that accommodate different interests and approaches to learning. With the support and guidance of teachers and caring adults, students can become the center of their own learning and have the power to create innovative and experiential projects and activities. Increasingly, high quality afterschool programs focused on the whole child are helping youth gain access to more resources and providing an unparalleled space for them to have a hand in their own learning in ways that suit their most pressing needs and keenest interests.ⁱⁱⁱ Innovative afterschool programs with a student-centered approach have the potential to prepare youth as responsible citizens who are in control of their future.

Student-Centered, Individualized Learning

One popular characteristic of student-centered learning opportunities is that they require a significant degree of student control.^{iv} Broadly, this way of learning can be described as an approach in which students independently navigate their way to accomplish a goal.^v For example, in afterschool settings a teacher or staff member would remain responsible for facilitating activities, but it is expected that students will gradually take responsibility for their own learning. This approach to student-centered learning embodies a fundamental tenet of “constructivism” in which learning involves the active assembly of meaning by the learner.^{vi} In constructivist learning environments, students gain knowledge mainly from the experience of their own examination of topics and discovery of ideas.^{vii} These individualized learning opportunities offer youth the chance to design, direct and define their own learning.

Unlike a rigid curriculum that spans across classrooms, student-centered learning opportunities look very different from community to community; much like afterschool programs, which vary

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widely depending on the needs of the students and families served. Student choice and voice is widely recognized as an important characteristic of afterschool, which makes the afterschool setting a perfect fit for student-centered learning. According to the Council of Chief State School Officers, the opportunity to be the active agent in one's own learning is a strong characteristic of student-centered learning, but oftentimes, it is the also the intentional design of the learning environment that enables individualized learning opportunities.^{viii} This issue brief highlights a spectrum of afterschool programs that are intentionally designed to provide student-centered learning opportunities, each with its own unique approach.

Student-centered afterschool programs support student success by providing new experiences for youth who are yearning to explore their own interests in a safe, supportive learning environment. Afterschool plays an important role as a safe space for youth to stretch their imaginations and pursue individual interests and projects.^{ix} Through afterschool and summer programming, youth have access to a variety of opportunities where they can apply what they learn in the classroom in out-of-school settings.^x When youth are engaged in individualized, project-based, student-driven activities they have the opportunity to explore a wide range of topics such as the arts, digital media, STEM, college prep and more. The flexibility of student-centered afterschool programs accommodates different approaches to meeting student needs while providing learning experiences in which students master proficiency. Moreover, afterschool offers a less formal time and space for youth to learn about and take action on the issues and subjects that they care most about. This type of programming supports student success by:

- Promoting a collaborative environment where youth are learning with and from each other in safe and trusting spaces.^{xi}
- Allowing students to progress at their own pace to set and achieve their individual goals.
- Strengthening partnerships between youth and their surrounding communities including the school district, local businesses and community-based organizations.^{xii}
- Giving youth a voice to communicate with the world around them and make a difference.
- Offering project-based learning to engage students' critical thinking skills.

Learning Anything, Anywhere, Anytime

In student-driven environments, the children participating often take on the responsibility for organizing, analyzing and synthesizing their learning goals. Dedicated teachers support youth through this process and go on to provide access to necessary resources for students to accomplish their goals. Through student-centered learning opportunities, youth can work together to discover the world, address issues, find solutions and present outcomes.^{xiii}

Individualized learning opportunities outside of the school day also enhance community involvement and strengthen relationships between afterschool providers and schools, businesses, universities and community-based organizations. These partnerships serve to support student-centered, student-driven projects.

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- **The New Hampshire Extended Learning Opportunities Program (NH ELO)** is a statewide initiative that focuses on creating student-centered learning opportunities for high school youth. In this unique program students can earn academic credits for learning opportunities that take place outside the regular school day. With the support and guidance of a teacher and other caring adults from the community, students can personalize their extended learning opportunities by matching up credit requirements with their own personal interests and a community organization that oversees the learning opportunity. For instance, a student can fulfill an English/language arts credit and also discover a passion for performance art and poetry through a student-centered learning opportunity hosted by a local establishment such as the Bridge Cafe.^{xiv} Through involvement with the Bridge Café, NH ELO students researched slam poetry, composed reflective writing assignments and put on a public presentation for their classmates, teachers, staff and local café patrons. As a result of this experience, students not only gained a stronger understanding of vocabulary, rhyme and meter, but they also received academic credit by demonstrating what they learned based on proficiency standards.^{xv} In addition, they helped strengthen the partnership between the high school and a local business and gained interpersonal and business skills that will prepare them for future careers.

Student-centered learning opportunities like those offered at NH ELO offer youth some freedom to choose their own activities. Student-centered approaches can take place in a variety of formats including apprenticeships, community service, independent studies, science projects, online courses, internships and performing groups. By connecting their interests with academic topics, students are engaging in a range of real life experiences that can shape their future. For NH ELO, community partners are a significant element in the creation of supportive environments.^{xvi} Expanded learning opportunities offered before-school, afterschool and during summer enable schools and districts to capitalize on the expertise of community partners and maximize their capacity to support student success. This approach to student-centered, individualized learning promotes learning after school in a number of ways by providing:

- Deeper understandings of visual and graphic arts
- Critical thinking skills to independently synthesize new ideas
- Field research skills to nurture budding interests and passions
- Self-direction and a safe place to make intellectual detours
- Cultural competency to develop healthy relationships with other diverse students
- Fluency in technology to collect research and present projects in innovative ways^{xvii}

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Student-Centered Learning and Afterschool: Multiple Approaches to Putting Students Needs and Interests at the Heart of Learning

While New Hampshire is clearly ahead of many other states and communities in offering student-centered learning in afterschool, many other programs across the country are recognizing the importance of putting students' needs and interests at the heart of program design. There are a wide variety of afterschool approaches to providing enriching, student-centered learning experiences that inspire youth to develop new skills, build self-confidence and pursue budding passions.

- **Big Thought** in Dallas, Texas, organizes a citywide initiative called Thriving Minds that brings together committed organizations to change the way children learn and to support student success. Big Thought brings together a host of community resources to offer afterschool and summer programs in arts, science and technology—all based on student interest and demand. In Thriving Minds, students choose from and participate in a variety of activities that keep them engaged with fun, hands-on activities. As students learn new skills, they also enhance their creative thinking, problem solving and self-expression through a curriculum that is aligned with state education standards.^{xviii} By providing support for the whole child, Thriving Minds' student-centered programming promotes creative thinking, project-based learning and experimentation while simultaneously strengthening school and community partnerships.^{xix}

Afterschool settings can provide valuable access to technology resources and increase student engagement with the community. Afterschool programs are recognizing the important role that technology can play in allowing students to take command over their learning, appropriately pace their learning and provide access to learning resources that would be otherwise unavailable in the community.^{xx}

- **YouMedia** in Chicago, Illinois, is a freeform space for high school teens to participate in a variety of digital learning opportunities after the school day ends. Youth are immersed in digital media and technology resources such as computers, video cameras, science equipment and even an in-house recording studio.^{xxi} Through the collaboration and creativity of community partners, youth participants learn how to design, build and showcase their digital media skills. Equipped with access to a wide set of educators, including teachers, parents, librarians, music experts and mentors, YouMedia participants have the ability to create and become the masterminds of their own work. YouMedia projects are a culmination of student-driven interactions and require a high degree of student initiative and culpability.^{xxii} Whether they are producing their own music tracks, putting on a play or creating an art exhibit, youth are responsible for creating, accessing, analyzing and evaluating each of their projects from start to finish. Centered on cultural relevance, YouMedia participants are learning the importance of technology in their daily lives.^{xxiii}

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Student-centered afterschool programs also have the unique opportunity to offer programming in areas that meet specific needs. For example, hard-to-reach older youth can benefit from access to programming that challenges and supports them in new developmental stages.^{xxiv} High school students can benefit from additional support structures offered in afterschool that help them set goals and plan for the future, enhance their ability to cope with their new roles and responsibilities, and give them a greater understanding of their identity, strengths and weaknesses.^{xxv}

- **College Track** in the Bay Area, California, is a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to providing comprehensive support services after school to underserved high school aged youth. The College Track support structure is comprised of three core areas: Academic Affairs, Student Life and College Affairs.^{xxvi} Within these program tracks, afterschool participants attend directed and intentional study sessions such as academic advising, tutoring, enrichment workshops, ACT and SAT preparation, leadership development, and college support; each students' track is personalized based on his/her needs and interests. While focused on providing these personalized learning plans for youth, the College Track curriculum simultaneously fosters leadership and opportunities for youth to demonstrate mastery.^{xxvii} As a result, College Track increases high school graduation, college eligibility and enrollment, and college graduation rates in under-resourced communities.

Through student-centered afterschool programs, youth can gain a wealth of skills that help lead to successful futures and often simultaneously enable youth to give back to the community. Afterschool programs that provide opportunities for youth to be active members of their community can foster a strong sense of purpose in students, leading to increased community engagement and self-worth.^{xxviii} In student-centered afterschool programs across the country, youth are gaining knowledge and key skills in a variety of different fields including business, arts, and science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). These programs reap rewards for both the student participants and the greater community.

- **After School Conservation Club** in New York City -focuses on service learning and environmental education for urban youth. In collaboration with United Neighborhood Houses, The After-School Corporation and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, elementary-aged students participate in individualized environmental science projects after school. Participants engage in hands-on experiential learning opportunities to learn about nature in their neighborhoods and address community needs.^{xxix} These student-centered activities include testing water quality, creating flower beds and butterfly gardens, dissecting owl pellets, recycling, and composting. Additionally, participants go on field trips to nearby rivers and watersheds to enhance learning about environmental concepts. The After School Conservation Club promotes environmental literacy and provides student-centered learning opportunities that challenge youth to experience, and help support, their surroundings in new ways.

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By and large, youth participants are the ones benefitting from student-centered, student-driven learning by broadening their horizons, deepening their understanding of topics that are of interest to them and earning course credits. However, programs stand to gain as well. Afterschool and summer learning programs that may be struggling to attract or retain participants should give serious consideration to adopting a student-centered learning approach in order to increase participation rates and successfully meet the needs of youth in the community.

- **Temecula Valley Foundation for Excellence in Education** in Temecula, California, works with the Temecula Valley Unified School District to offer fee-based summer courses to help students get a head start and make room in their academic schedule for the regular school year. Credit-bearing classes throughout the summer include health, geography, Spanish II, ceramics and pre-chemistry. By student request, many of the courses offered during the summer are electives that allow students to free up space in their regular school year schedule to focus on higher-level courses. As a result of putting students' needs and interests first and thereby adopting a student-centered learning approach, enrollment increased from 200 students in the first year of offering credit bearing courses to 330 students in the following summer.

Student-Centered Tools & Resources

As evidenced by the diverse examples presented here, any afterschool program can offer a student-centered approach that puts the needs of students first. The following tools and resources provide additional ideas and tips for offering student-centered learning opportunities in afterschool settings.

- [Buck Institute for Education](#) (BIE) is dedicated to improving 21st Century teaching and learning throughout the world by creating and disseminating products, practices and knowledge for effective Project Based Learning. This website has videos, example projects, online tutorials and a forum where educators can learn more about how to integrate project-based learning opportunities to your curriculum.
- [Digital Media: New Learners of the 21st Century](#) offers a video report on the importance of digital literacy for today's youth. The video highlights many examples of student-centered, student-driven learning opportunities for youth that are taking place after traditional school hours.
- [Nellie Mae Education Foundation](#) issued a report which provides a comprehensive overview on the benefits of utilizing technology beyond traditional boundaries. The report also highlights the flexibility of what extended learning opportunities have the potential to look like through several examples.
- [New Hampshire Department of Education – Extended Learning Opportunities](#) supplies access to the program's presentations where you can learn more about how and why student-centered extended learning opportunities have proven to be an effective tool for New Hampshire high school youth. The website also elaborates on the history and implementation strategies used in promoting a student-centered approach.

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Conclusion

Education and youth development leaders across the country have made great strides to create access to individualized learning opportunities outside of the traditional school day.^{xxx} Student-centered approaches to learning acknowledge and respect the wide range of interests, aptitudes and needs of the students while supporting learning. In afterschool settings, student-centered programs empower and enable youth to pursue their own unique interests while also earning course credit and/or strengthening ties to the community. Through the student-centered learning opportunities offered in afterschool, youth can achieve a greater mastery of a broad array of skills needed for success in the 21st century and discover interests that will spur creativity and motivate them to succeed. Through participation in afterschool programs that shift the focus to learning and put them more in control, students can be better prepared to compete and thrive in a global, connected world.

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