

Make Student-Centered Learning Come Alive!

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The purpose and potential of Expanded Learning Programs has changed radically over the years. The process began with the passage of California's first comprehensive afterschool legislation, which Carla Sanger of LA's BEST and I initiated in 1997. This paved the way for hundreds of millions of dollars in funding for elementary and middle school programs and resulted in a growing body of knowledge about what it takes to make a real difference in students' lives.

As part of this process, many of us have begun to redefine education and re-examine how students learn. We know that whether children and young people succeed in school and later in life isn't just about the knowledge they acquire, it's about their values, attitudes and behavior – and their ability to navigate through an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world.

To achieve their potential, the students you'll be working with this year will have to learn how to collaborate effectively, communicate clearly, think critically, solve problems creatively, make decisions responsibly, deal with new information appropriately and adapt to new technologies proficiently. This is a tall order. And you have a unique opportunity to make a huge difference in how far and how fast they'll go!

Learning isn't what happens to a child, it's what takes place within a child.

Learning doesn't happen overnight. It takes place over time. It comes from your students' experiences, their openness to embracing new ideas and concepts and their eagerness and ability to apply these in ways that are real, relevant and meaningful to them.

It's up to you to move this process forward, and you can! It begins with understanding that learning isn't what happens *to* a child, it's what takes place *within* a child. No matter what it says in your job description, your real role is to be your students' guide-by-the-side.



Step #1: Make a commitment to help your students build *their* capacity to become active, engaged learners. Walk hand-in-hand with them, not head-and-shoulders above them. Create a safe space and let them experience the

thrill of discovery and the excitement of creating new knowledge on their own. Don't worry if they struggle. It will give them real ownership over both the process and the outcome, help them unleash their creativity and build their self-confidence. Don't be afraid of losing control. The more *they* take control of the process, the more engaged they'll be and the fewer problems will arise.



Step #2: Move from independent activities to hands-on, minds-on project-based learning experiences. If you really want to make a difference, help your students learn *how* to think, not *what* to think. Give them time and opportunities to identify real problems, come up with possible solutions, test their ideas, reflect on what worked and what didn't and demonstrate what they've accomplished in culminating events. Their self-confidence will soar and their excitement about learning will be a gift that keeps on giving.

Step #3: Create an environment that helps your students develop their social and emotional skills. Give your students lots of chances to work together in small groups. It will give them a sense of belonging and purpose. It will provide a strong motivation for them to manage their emotions in constructive, pro-social ways. And it will increase their willingness to take responsibility for their attitudes and actions, become better problem-solvers, be more self-disciplined and make better choices – all of which are essential to their ability to excel in school and in life.

Step 4: Remind yourself every day that nothing you do will matter as much as the relationships you build. Be the kind of person your students want to be when they grow up! Set high expectations for them, and for yourself. Don't just tell them that it's important to be thoughtful, caring, respectful, honest, fair and empathic. Show them! To paraphrase Maya Angelou, *your students will forget what you said, they will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.* Model the attitudes and behavior you want them to emulate – and they will follow your lead.

As the new school year begins, you have a unique opportunity not just to be part of your students' lives, but to make a real difference in their lives. Make a commitment to yourself and to your students to co-create the future you want and they deserve! You can learn more about how to make this happen in *What Works? A Guide to Integrating Quality Standards, Learning in Afterschool and Summer Principles and Exemplary Practices in Expanded Learning Programs.*