NGA Center for BEST PRACTICES

Issue Brief

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Reducing Dropout Rates through Expanded Learning Opportunities

Executive Summary

Expanded learning opportunities (ELOs), which include afterschool, summer learning, and extended day and extended year programs, can help states reduce dropout rates and increase graduation rates. Effective elementary, middle, and high school ELOs support academic rigor, boost student engagement, and provide students with supportive relationships. High-quality ELOs can also help combat the effects of poverty on students' academic achievement by providing programs and services including tutoring, homework help, life skills and job training, and enrichment opportunities in music, sports, and the arts.

At least one in five students drops out of high school.[1] Individuals who drop out of school will earn less money during their lifetimes and are more likely to be unemployed, incarcerated, in need of public assistance, and in poor health.[2] Expanding access to high-quality ELOs can be a key state strategy to stem the tide of students leaving school before graduation.

Reducing dropout rates is particularly important during difficult economic times. Governors can use the following successful strategies to ensure ELOs are an effective part of their state's larger dropout prevention strategy:

- Identify likely dropouts early and provide targeted intervention through ELOs, as Governor Sonny Perdue has done in **Georgia** through the Graduation Coaches initiative. In middle and high schools across the state, graduation coaches identify at-risk students and connect them with ELOs and other services that keep them on track to graduate.
- Increase access to and the availability of ELOs for students at risk of dropping out. **Massachusetts** does this through a state-level investment in afterschool programs and by extending the school day and year in low-performing schools to ensure that at-risk students have access to learning opportunities beyond the regular school day.
- Establish statewide systems to ensure ELOs are effective and are tied to dropout reduction goals. For example, governors can tie state dollars to programs that are effective at dropout prevention, as **Illinois** has done through its investment in the After School Matters program.

Governors who pursue these strategies as part of an ambitious dropout prevention agenda can expect to see not only fewer high school dropouts, but also more engaged students who are better prepared for work and life beyond school.

Why Addressing High Dropout Rates Matters

No state is immune to the dropout crisis. At least one in five students drops out of school, with an estimated 800,000 students dropping out each year.[3] Although students of all backgrounds are at risk of dropping out, low-income children and certain minorities are disproportionately affected.[4] These students are more likely to attend one of the 2,000 "dropout factories" in the United States (i.e., schools where at least 40 percent of 9th graders fail to reach 12th grade in three years).[5] Twenty-six states have 20 or more of these schools; five states have more than 100.[6]

Students who drop out of high school face many challenges that inhibit their ability to become successful, productive members of society. In 2005, the average annual income for a high school dropout was $17,299, compared with $26,933 for a high school graduate.[7] Dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed, to be receiving public assistance, and to be incarcerated.[8] They are more likely to be single parents and to have children who also will drop out of high school.[9] Finally, these individuals are less healthy than high school graduates; on average, a high school graduate will live six to nine years longer than a dropout.[10]

These problems come with a high price tag for communities, states, and the nation. Each dropout costs the public sector $209,100 over a lifetime as a result of reduced tax payments, increased public health and welfare costs, and heightened likelihood of criminal behavior.[11] During the next 10 years, dropouts will cost the nation nearly $3 trillion if the rate remains unchanged.[12] If dropouts from the class of 2007 had graduated, the U.S. economy would see an additional $329 billion in income during these students' lifetimes.[13] And the cost to communities, states, and the nation is not only economic: Dropouts are less likely than high school graduates to vote, volunteer, and contribute to their communities.[14]

The Role of ELOs in Reducing Dropout Rates

Although in-school supports are necessary to keep students from falling behind and ultimately dropping out, youth spend 80 percent of their time outside the traditional school day.[15] A lack of structured out-of-school activities may help explain why students fall behind academically, thereby increasing their likelihood of dropping out of school. Nearly 30 percent of middle school students take care of themselves after school at least once a week.[16] Students who fall behind in reading and math in middle school are more likely to fail ninth grade, and ninth-grade failure is one of the strongest indicators that a student will ultimately drop out.[17] In addition, students who fall behind in acquiring credits for graduation are at a higher risk for dropping out. Only 19 percent of New York City students who are over-age and under-credited graduate with a high school diploma or GED.[18]

Not surprisingly, students who have access to rigorous, engaging ELOs in the nonschool hours are less likely to drop out. For example, at-risk ninth-grade students who participated in the Quantum Opportunities Program in seven cities were 20 percent more likely to graduate from high school than their peers who did not participate.[19] In Baltimore City public schools, low-income students' lack of consistent access to summer learning opportunities in elementary school explains nearly two-thirds of the achievement gap between low-income and upper-income ninth graders.[20] This achievement gap fuels a graduation gap: 36 percent of the low-income ninth graders in this study eventually dropped out of high school, compared with only 3 percent of the upper-income students.[21]

ELOs should be a critical component of a comprehensive state approach to tackling the dropout problem. The NGA Center for Best Practices presents the broad range of strategies governors can take to address the dropout challenge in the report *Achieving Graduation for All: A Governor's Guide to Dropout Prevention and Recovery*.[22] ELOs are a key part of this broader agenda because they:

- Support rigor in the classroom;
- Increase the relevance of academic content to students; and
- Establish supportive relationships between students and caring adults.

ELOs Help Students Meet Rigorous Academic Standards

By keeping youth engaged and learning beyond regular school hours, ELOs can provide the academic rigor students need to succeed in increasingly demanding academic environments. Students who have fallen behind in school face a greater risk of dropping out. In fact, 35 percent of dropouts cite failing in school as their primary reason for dropping out.[23] A recent national survey of afterschool programs for older youth found that 16 percent of these programs offer students credit for graduation. These programs give students a second chance at mastering difficult material, which is particularly helpful for students who have struggled in a traditional classroom.[24] As academic expectations rise, states must ensure that these higher demands do not push struggling students to drop out of school.

ELOs give students the extra time, help, and instruction they need to meet the demands of their academic coursework in reading, mathematics, and other subjects. For example, a study of high-quality ELOs found that the average math score for program participants was higher than that of 70 percent of their peers who did not participate.[25] Elementary school students who participated in the James Irvine Foundation's CORAL (Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning) initiative gained, on average, nearly half a grade's worth of reading.[26]

ELOs Make School Relevant and Engaging

ELOs can help students by connecting learning to real-world expectations. Apprenticeships and internships offered in conjunction with high-quality ELOs can help students connect what they learn in school to the skills they will need in the workforce.[27] In a high school job training program, for example, students might learn programming languages for Web design and gain an understanding of proper workplace behavior.

Many ELOs also include educational activities such as debate, hands-on activities, one-on-one tutoring, and project-based learning. These approaches may not fit into the regular school day, but they can engage many types of students. According to a recent national survey of high school dropouts, nearly half said the main reason they left school was because their classes were not interesting.[28] More than 80 percent said their chances of staying in school would have increased if classes were more interesting and provided more opportunities to develop skills they could use in their careers and in life.[29]

Even students who perform well academically are at risk of dropping out if what they learn in the classroom is not engaging or relevant to their lives. ELOs help connect students to school by showing how academic content applies to the real world. For example, an evaluation of Los Angeles' Better Educated Students for Tomorrow (LA's BEST), an afterschool program serving children in kindergarten through grade five, found that 83 percent of students liked school more since participating in the program, with more than half indicating they liked school "a lot more."[30]

LA's BEST operates from the end of the school day until 6:00 p.m., offering homework assistance, library activities, field trips, and performing arts activities.

ELOs Provide At-Risk Students with Supportive Relationships

High-quality ELOs can help participants forge connections with caring adults. Students with just one supportive relationship with a caring adult early in high school are more likely to be doing well in terms of health, economic security, and community involvement at the end of high school.[31] Qualified ELO program staff can help motivate students who may feel isolated, disconnected, and unsuccessful during the regular school day.

ELO staff also can give students the support they may not be receiving outside school. Youth who drop out of school may do so, in part, because their parents or guardians do not focus on their academic success.[32] A national survey found that nearly a quarter of dropouts said their parents were not at all involved in their education.[33] Only 56 percent of dropouts said they could go to an adult in school for help with problems.[34] ELO staff can thus provide students with additional academic support by serving as mentors and role models. For example, in **New York**, the Brooklyn College Community Partnership connects high school students to local college students and faculty who serve as mentors and tutors. These qualified adults also provide students with assistance in the college application process.[35]

Challenges to Using ELOs to Reduce Dropout Rates

Despite the promise of ELOs for reducing dropout rates, challenges arise in using these programs for this purpose. These challenges include:

- Schools and communities lack the capacity to identify and target students at risk of dropping out;
- At-risk youth often lack access to ELOs and are difficult to engage when programs are available; and
- States too often fail to ensure that ELOs are effective and focused on dropout prevention.

Schools and Communities Lack the Capacity to Identify and Target At-Risk Youth

To prevent students from dropping out, schools must identify and engage at-risk youth early and follow up with the appropriate supports, including ELOs. Research has shown that basic data on student attendance, grades, behavior, and age can be used to accurately identify students likely to drop out. Most states, however, have no early warning data systems or staff in place to identify students using this information.

Even when schools can identify at-risk students, they may lack the capacity to target effective assistance to them because these students face many challenges outside the school doors. For example, most schools are unequipped to provide the necessary health and social services, such as individual counselors and healthy meals, that can help ensure that at-risk students are mentally and physically prepared to learn. At-risk students who do not receive needed interventions through ELOs and other supports face a greater risk of dropping out over time.

Availability, Access, and Participation Are Limited for At-Risk Youth

States cannot realize the promise of ELOs to reduce dropout rates if programs are not available to students who need them most. Low-income and minority families often have the greatest difficulty accessing high-quality programs in their communities.[36] Nationally, two-thirds of low-income and minority parents report finding it difficult to find high-quality ELOs.[37]

Older youth are particularly underserved when it comes to ELO access. Certain high-quality ELOs for older youth have demonstrated success in preventing students from dropping out of high school. A recent study found that while attending a high-quality preschool alone boosts the graduation rate for disadvantaged students from 41 percent to 66 percent, investing in additional supports as these children age can raise the graduation rate from 66 percent to 91 percent.[38] Steady investments throughout a child's life, not just in the early years, pay the greatest dividends for states.[39] Furthermore, middle school and high school are simply the last chances to successfully intervene in children's lives and keep them on track for graduation.

Despite these findings, few states allocate funding specifically for ELOs for older youth. The two primary sources of federal funding for ELOs are also largely out of reach for programs serving older youth. At $1.1 billion for fiscal 2008, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21CCLC) program is the largest dedicated funding source for ELOs. However, this program is required to give "competitive priority" to Title I schools, which are primarily elementary schools.[40] The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is a nondedicated funding stream with estimated federal expenditures of $1 billion in fiscal 2005 for school-age youth attending child care centers.[41] Yet only children below age 13 are eligible for CCDF funding.[42]

ELOs May Be Ineffective or Lack a Focus on Dropout Prevention

Many states do not yet have a good way to ensure ELO effectiveness, and most ELOs do not focus solely on dropout prevention. Although high-quality ELOs have been shown to improve youth outcomes, low-quality ELOs have failed to show positive effects and can even have negative effects on children.[43] High-quality ELOs typically share certain features, including:[44]

- A clear programmatic mission, focused goals, and frequent evaluations;
- Engaging, content-rich programming that builds academic and nonacademic skills;
- Positive, constructive relationships between staff and participants;
- Strong connections with schools, families, and communities;
- A qualified, well-supported program staff;
- Low participant-to-staff ratio and an appropriate total enrollment; and
- Sufficient and sustainable program resources.

Program effectiveness is particularly important for older youth because they can "vote with their feet" and leave programs that are not engaging and relevant.[45] Apprenticeships and other opportunities to earn stipends have proven successful in programs for older youth. Many low-income students would otherwise be unable to participate in ELOs due to an obligation to work outside the home. However, stipend programs can be more costly than other ELOs, potentially limiting the number of students who can participate. These programs may not be a sustainable investment for states with significant budget constraints.

Furthermore, states cannot expect ELOs to lower dropout rates if dropout prevention is not a stated and measurable program goal. Many of the available funding streams for ELOs at the federal, state, and foundation levels do not articulate dropout prevention as a goal, so many existing programs fail to strive for or measure this outcome.

State Strategies for Effective ELOs

State leaders can take action to reduce dropout rates through ELOs in three important ways:

- Identify likely dropouts early and provide targeted intervention through ELOs;
- Increase access to and the availability of ELOs for students at risk of dropping out; and
- Establish systems to ensure ELOs are effective and are tied to dropout reduction goals.

Identify Potential Dropouts Early and Use ELOs to Provide Targeted Interventions

Governors can support the development of an early warning data system at the state or local level to help schools identify likely dropouts and intervene early. **Louisiana** pioneered the use of early warning data through a system that flags ninth-grade students as at risk of dropping out if they are absent 10 percent of the days they have been enrolled, their discipline count is 7 percent of days or greater, their current GPA is 1.00 or less, their GPA has dropped by at least 0.50, or they are overage for grade.[46] Students that are flagged in the system may receive targeted intervention through an ELO as one way to keep them on track for graduation.

If states or communities have a system to identify likely dropouts, governors can encourage schools to provide ELOs to these students. This can be done by requiring individual intervention plans for any student identified as a likely dropout. ELOs can be one of many supports available to these students under individual intervention plans.

In **Georgia,** Governor Sonny Perdue has been a champion of graduation coaches, providing funding for a graduation coach in each of the state's high schools and middle schools. Graduation coaches identify students at risk of dropping out and connect the students with resources such as ELOs to put them on track for graduation. Some of the ELOs provided through this program include tutoring, enrichment, life skills, and service learning programs.[47] The state's considerable investment in student success—$40,000 per year per graduation coach—has shown impressive results. In the two years since Georgia launched the initiative, the state's graduation rate improved by nearly 5 percentage points, surpassing 75 percent for the first time. The number of dropouts per year fell from 23,372 to 18,859 during this period, even as high school enrollment increased.[48]

Increase Access to and Availability of ELOs

Improving access to and the availability of ELOs will ensure that at-risk students have a stronger safety net to keep them in school and on track for graduation. To do this, states can target ELO investments to communities or students most in need, increase awareness of ELOs in communities, and foster access to ELOs for a greater number of students through extended day and extended year initiatives.

The amount of funding individual ELOs receive has a direct effect on the number of students they can reach. In tight budget times, states must direct education dollars to high-quality programs that will help prevent students from dropping out and support their academic achievement. Governors can do this by maximizing federal funds for older youth, targeting state-level investments toward dropout prevention for at-risk youth, and leveraging public-private partnerships to support ELOs.

Governors who want to ensure that federal ELO funding reaches youth of all ages should set aside federal funds for older youth. **California** is the first state to have targeted funds within the federal 21CCLC program for older youth. Since 2003, the California Department of Education has awarded 43 grants to support afterschool activities at 57 high schools under the After School Safety and Enrichment for Teens program. This considerable investment has brought impressive results. Students who participated in the program passed the mathematics and English language arts portions of the California High School Exit Exam at significantly higher rates than similar students who did not participate.[49] By allocating these funds, California has increased the availability of ELOs for older youth.

Governors can also target state funds to ELOs that specifically address the reasons why students drop out. For example, **Illinois** directed $22 million in state funds in 2007 to the Summer Bridges Program, a summer reading and writing program for students in prekindergarten through grade six. This program serves students who do not meet state reading standards and who attend school in a chronically low-performing district (i.e., one where 50 percent or more of students fail to meet reading standards).[50] As part of **New Hampshire's** high school redesign initiative, students can now earn academic credit for participation in ELOs. By leveraging funding from the Supporting Student Success initiative (a joint project of the NGA Center, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National Conference of State Legislatures), the state piloted a credit-recovery program at four high schools that have 21st Century Community Learning Centers. At these sites, students earned credit for out-of-school time activities in social studies. Approximately 340 students participated in the pilot program, nearly 40 percent of whom were considered underserved learners and among the most likely to eventually drop out without additional academic support.

In addition, governors can leverage public-private partnerships to support dropout prevention through ELOs. Under the **North Carolina** public-private partnership Support Our Students, state funds—totaling $8.4 million in 2007–2008—are used for grants to neighborhood and community-based organizations.[51] These organizations provide comprehensive out-of-school time programs for more than 20,000 middle school students across the state. An evaluation of the program found that the percentage of participating students who scored at grade-level proficiency on state reading and math exams increased.[52]

Parents need to be made aware of the availability of ELOs in their communities. One way to do so is to use Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Networks, which currently exist in 38 states. The **Minnesota** CCR&R Network, for example, helps match families with high-quality ELOs and informs state residents of the importance of high-quality ELOs through various outreach and communication mechanisms.[53]

Finally, governors should consider implementing extended school day and extended year initiatives in communities with high dropout rates to ensure that *all* students are engaged and learning beyond the traditional school hours. In low-performing schools, extending the day or year may be the only way to reach the students who are most at risk of dropping out. Well-designed extended day and year initiatives do not simply provide increased time for core academics—although improving outcomes in these subjects is often a goal. These initiatives also offer increased time for enrichment activities such as the arts, music, theater, and physical education that are so often cut out of the regular school day as schools struggle to meet the demands of state standards and assessments.

Massachusetts launched a pilot extended learning time (ELT) initiative in 2005. Since then, the program has grown to reach 26 public schools and more than 13,500 students in 12 districts. A 2008 evaluation found that ELT schools reduced the achievement gap in English and math for middle school students by as much as 50 percent in some schools.[54] These schools have added 300 additional hours of learning by adding time to the school day or year. Participating schools commit to a complete school redesign, partnerships with community-based organizations, and additional time for both core academics and enrichment.[55] In fiscal 2009, the state legislature and Governor Deval Patrick allocated $17.5 million for the initiative.[56] This substantial investment in extended learning time followed the state's 2008 appropriation of $2 million for Afterschool and Out-of-School Time Quality grants to programs in 48 public school districts.[57]

Ensure ELOs Are Effective and Geared Toward Dropout Prevention

Governors should develop a statewide ELO quality system to ensure ELOs are of high quality.[58] An ELO quality system provides state-level infrastructure to ensure all ELOs are based on research and best practices. To learn more about how states can systematically improve ELO quality, see *The Quality Imperative: A State Guide to Achieving the Promise of Extended Learning Opportunities*, a joint report from the NGA Center and the Council of Chief State School Officers. With an ELO quality system in place, governors can take these additional actions to ensure ELOs serving at-risk youth are geared toward dropout prevention:

- Appoint state leaders responsible for dropout prevention to an ELO "quality team" of key stakeholders. A successful ELO quality team will include individuals from different sectors, agencies, departments, and levels of government. A leader in state dropout prevention efforts can ensure that reducing dropout rates is built into the team's shared vision of high-quality ELOs.

- Reward programs that are effective in dropout prevention. States can do this by requiring programs to collect data on a variety of factors tied to dropout rates, such as student engagement and attendance. In tough fiscal environments, it is more important than ever for programs receiving state funds to demonstrate positive impacts on youth.

  For example, in **Illinois**, the After School Matters (ASM) program has survived statewide budget cuts largely because of strong evaluations demonstrating the program's effectiveness. ASM offers paid internships and apprenticeships in sports, technology, communications, and the arts for more than 22,000 Chicago high school students in struggling schools.[59] Students who participated in Afterschool Matters had lower dropout rates, missed fewer days of school, and failed fewer courses than those who did not participate, even after controlling for students who might have been more motivated and academically successful before entering the program.[60] By tying state funding to program effectiveness, ELOs have an incentive to continuously improve their services and search for the best strategies to attract and retain at-risk youth.

- Set research-based ELO standards that include dropout prevention. ELOs cannot be expected to reduce dropout rates unless dropout prevention is a measurable program goal. For example, the Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP) targeted schools with dropout rates of 40 percent or higher and articulated increasing high school graduation rates as a primary program goal.[61] An evaluation found QOP was successful in increasing graduation rates among some ninth-grade students.[62]

  Programs such as QOP can be used to inform the development of model standards. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network provides a database of model afterschool programs that have been highly effective in dropout prevention and could also be used for this purpose.[63] Ultimately, the more effective and engaging an ELO, the more attractive such a program will be to parents and students alike. Such interest will increase demand for high-quality programs throughout the state.

A Look Ahead

School-based reform efforts alone cannot solve the dropout crisis. Governors must couple these efforts with initiatives to increase access to high-quality ELOs among at-risk youth. Students who are at risk of dropping out may need more than a typical school day to succeed. Governors who

make a strong commitment to provide these students with high-quality ELOs can expect to achieve long-term savings in state expenditures for education, health care, juvenile justice, and social services.

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